

2014

Spectrum, 2014

Northwestern College

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Spectrum

Northwestern College's
Literary Arts Magazine 2014

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2014 Editorial Staff

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Notes

Editor's Notes

I love the English language. It's always exciting, always surprising. I love finding new ways to arrange words, to build ideas and emotions in refreshing lines. Further, I love reading, which allows exploration of others' language structures. Reading also offers the ability to see the world from someone else's vantage point.

You are holding in your hands several views of the way things are, as closely as Spectrum's authors and artists can shape them. Spectrum serves as a canvas for students to display their world through words and art mediums. When all these views combine, it creates something unique and valuable to the culture of Northwestern. Welcome to our printed symphony, where we each play our own part on our own instrument. I hope you'll embrace it with openness, enthusiasm, compassion, and wonder.

-Deborah Admire, 2014 Editor

My other editors were surely tired of hearing the word "vulnerability" come out of my mouth when referencing the writing that compounds Spectrum. Vulnerability, the ability to let other see (or at least, make them think they see) what is truly happening inside the author's head at the time of writing, is what separates good writing from great. Of course, a writer can be vulnerable, but not really say anything. My diaries are vulnerable, but no reader would really get anything out of them. No, writing must be more than just vulnerable, though that is certainly important. Writing must be personal and unique and yet still universal. There must be a connection to humanity within the vulnerability. That is what makes writing of any kind worth publishing, worth reading, and, quite honestly, worth writing.

I am grateful for the opportunity to connect so closely with the words in these pages. I am grateful that the authors and poets were brave enough to pen themselves onto these pages. I am grateful that this Spectrum exists, and that I get to be reminded that I am not alone in my humanity. So, thank you writers for writing, and thank you readers for experiencing this journey along with me.

-Abbie Amiotte, 2014 Assistant Editor

Judge's Note

We turn to art for reality.

This phrase popped into my head again and again as, with great enthusiasm and pleasure, I read through the poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction that compose this excellent issue of Spectrum. "We turn to art for reality" might seem like a strange thing to think considering this issue includes, among other unusual forms and figures, philosophical fish, murderous ghosts, and second-person premonitions. However, the work in these pages reminds us how, in two very important ways, art brings us closer to reality, and, in turn, why art is so crucial to us as individuals and as members of a community.

If we were to base our understanding of the current state of literature and, really, literacy, on advertising, newspaper headlines, and twenty-four hour news network talking heads, we would think we lived in a world of robots capable only of communicating in garbled text speak, social media pokes, and app game high scores. Luckily for us, there are other sources of information and experience—like this very issue of Spectrum—that remind us we live in a time rich in literary imagination, deeply fascinated by language, and alive with people who believe in the power of the well-crafted line and the well told tale. This is the first way that, reading this work, I understood how art brings us closer to reality; in this case, the reality art turns us to is the fact that changing mediums of creation and communication may transform how we craft and tell but they do not diminish our dedication to literature or the quality of our work.

This connects to the second way we turn to art for reality. When we read a literary journal, we turn to the reality of a living community—local or far away—formed by individuals working to preserve the experiences and struggles that define and obsess them. This is the fullness of reality we could never reach with our five senses, imagination, or memory alone, no matter how hard we tried. It is the reality of art giving shape to the self and the community, and to the world beyond the self and the community, and to the selves who, as readers, can experience this shaping firsthand. It is the reality of the vast multiplicity of our world and the reality of the forms of expression, emotion, and searching we share.

The assertion that "we turn to art for reality," then, is a more succinct way of saying that we turn to art for the reality of the multiplicity of the realities that not only surround us but demand we bring greater attention, compassion, and care to our acts of reading and writing: in other words, to how we live.

-Daniel Scott Tysdal, 2014 Off-Campus Judge

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Poetry

First Place - Trevor Delamater

"Reflections on Trees from the Young Philosopher
Goldfish: After M.C. Escher's "Three Worlds"

Second Place - Hana Spangler

"Settle"

Third Place - Sarah Morren

"Painting a Tea Cup"

Honorable Mention - Deborah Admire

"Whited Sepulcher"

Honorable Mention - Jacob Christiansen

"On Boyhood, In Reflection"

FIRST PLACE

Judge's Notes:

M. C. Escher's multi-layered "Three Worlds" serves as the springboard for Trevor Delamater's "Reflections on Trees from the Young Philosopher Goldfish." Like Escher, Delamater artfully crafts the complex interaction of worlds, and through this work he immerses us deeply in our senses with splendid imagery, in language with spot on diction, and in thought with a genuine persona and dynamic meditation. Delamater draws us into this fully realized and unique view on both the fish and the print, a humorous and thought-provoking world complete with crazy uncle fish and trees rich in materiality and symbolism. He also moves us to reflect on the philosopher fish in ourselves, to see our own lives through this life and question our grasp of where the roots and limbs of the sensory and the metaphysical, the known and the believed, converge.

Reflections on Trees from the Young Philosopher Goldfish

After M. C. Escher's "Three Worlds"

By Trevor Delamater, Writing and Rhetoric/Business Management

Sinking silhouettes of trees root
 themselves into the mirror-wetness
 of my pond, their world hidden
 by the shimmering of waters
 and floating clouds of leaves,
 but my pond is all I see

This pond, my koi-kingdom,
 Scummy smelling and blanketed in algae.
 I feel my way through foggy waters,
 through twisting tendrils, the pike-ribbed
 skeletal roots springing
 from the dead, squirming
 into water, but
 not, I think, from trees

My uncle saw a tree once,
 or so he says, when he ate a worm

so delicious God took him up
in a holy, torturous vision
and hung him by the lip,
pronouncing: "You are too small!"
making him now both carpishly fat
and crazy

They say I leach into this otherworld living
water-blood in excretion,
that after my belly turns up
on my passing day and pinching
crawfish nip my corpse,
my fine fish bones will transform into nutrients
and I will be
a tree!

But I don't taste or smell
the leafing shrouded trees,
and while misfortune may
get me eaten up in a gull's gut,
a fish is not a fir.
So you'll forgive my misgivings.
I don't believe in trees,
but I'll let you know,
I do believe in leaves

SECOND PLACE

Settle

By Hana Spangler, Theatre/History

I know you like
ups and downs
ins
crinkling bits:
to stare at and pounce

Sit still awhile on my lap,
Little One.
I'll tell you of somewhere
no one else knows

Discover this place in autumn night
sheltered between outside walls.
Maternal lee covers us from wind,
hidden like a rabbit's shallow warren
behind and beneath the shuffling
bush branches and tangling trees.
More than human companions
you hear the trees' eyrie:
wind-whisperers flutter,
and fallen minions
still conspire in stuttering piles,
quick veins tempting
your carnivore's prowl.

Veins reach up to show you stars:
firefly echoes of your bright eyes, pulsing
down to the resting earth, shining
between your clawing toes, feeling
that we're alone with company
like albatrosses on vacant air
alone but for stars at sea.

Settle with me in this bench's embrace,
one perforating paw extended,
beneath and behind the smooth clicking
pebbles, their huddling grey backs crawling
out from under our corners.

Last of all
wall raises a voice,
a purring hum to keep us here:
sleepy beehive just smoked,
exhaling tendrils to curl
between and beyond
the stars.

THIRD PLACE

Painting a Tea Cup

By Sarah Morren, English Teaching

Glossy white glistens like sunshine on sea
Delicate flowers bloom on the surface like a garden
portrayed by a glazed print

Unlike fine china, it's not one of a kind
yet, it holds my heart like an expensive Prince Albert
like sentimental value with no sentiment

The joy found in the phrase "Made in China"
is like a new discovery
like a joke untold but still grinned at

Yellows radiant as the sun and dark as the harvest moon paint two
delicate roses
amid larger ones of lavender and amethyst hues
along with splashes of sage and moss green leaves which envelop cup and
saucer

They fill the spaces between flowers like fresh rain on a sidewalk
save for a white space like a new canvas awaiting detail
and a golden line encircling the lip and base of the cup

The curve of the handle thin and delicate
as if made solely for slender fingers to caress
complements the mouth of the cup arching elegantly up and down like
waves in the sea

Within the perfection lies a single flaw
a small black line dark as midnight streaks the inner chambers
revealing the cup's cheap charm



Abstract Feather Dry Point

By Emilee Berry, Art and Graphic Design

HONORABLE MENTION

Whited Sepulcher

By Deborah Admire, Writing and Rhetoric

Shimmering smooth, soft solid white.

The thinnest of cracks trickles across the surface, pushing its fingers through the veneer, opening the contents to light. Gravity pries the protection away, pressure of the very air forcing the gap to grow.

I curl inside the shell I've made to encircle me, guarding the gold of myself like a dragon. But light will have its way.

The pieces are falling away now, chipping and flaking and dropping with fragile clicks. The light is penetrating, piercing, and I raise my head to roar, shake the crust from my shoulders. Blinking, I stand, resigned and shamed.

I have been opened to be seen again.

HONORABLE MENTION

On Boyhood, In Reflection

By Jacob Christianson, Theatre

i am a brainiac
a boy
an imprint made of every football my Dad watched me

drop

He smiled and we tried again and again and again
but i don't play football
an imprint of my Mother's hugs
satiated in the smell of "it's gonna be ok"
i read like a map of the lunchroom
where i sit with the Teacher in the back
but that's ok
because on my map we're our own little island
and Everyone Else is the Sea
and the Sea can try all it wants
but nothing's gonna overwhelm my island
and on my island there's no name-calling
because my name isn't "Nerd"
and it's not "Suck-Up" either
my name is located somewhere between
Tom Sawyer and Batman
and if you really want to know what it is,
check your history books in 50 years
it will be right next to Einstein
i am small
sometimes so small that i slip
between the pages of textbooks and trapper keepers
like i am the thing they were meant to contain
like they could contain me anyway
i am small and i wish i was bigger
big enough to outgrow the inch-thick glasses
i've worn since the 4th grade
they may as well have printed

"4-EYES"
 across my forehead
 and a bulls-eye on my back for Big Billy the Bully
 to kick in every time he felt inadequate
 and i felt inadequate
 and i guess we all feel inadequate sometimes
 i am small and People don't look down
 and People don't look down because They spend so much time looking
 up
 They forget that more exists beneath Their noses than dirt
 i am not dirt
 i am the living history of Boys like me
 Boys who spend too many hours building starships with legos
 so They can explore every galaxy
 and still sleep with Mom next door
 because Mom chases away nightmares with hot chocolate
 and i love hot chocolate
 don't think i don't hear the whispers
 i do
 but i chase them away with reruns of Bill Nye
 and stuffed-animal slumber parties
 Your whispers can't touch me
 beneath my bed sheets
 where i hide a flashlight and a comic book
 because even though i don't play football
 i do read comics and so does my Dad
 i am the one who won't ask You to prom
 because i s-
 s-
 stutter when You look at me
 but in my head i am smooth
 i am not small
 i say, "Baby let's go to the dance."
 because this is high school
 and we've got nothing ahead but promise
 and i might not be prom king
 but Darling, You're the Most Beautiful Queen i've ever known"
 and yes i do spend a lot of time in the library
 but that's only because in books the underdog wins
 and the small guy doesn't disappear in a crowd

and in books People can be different
and in books being different makes me the hero
and maybe if You read more books You'd understand
why i wear clothes with holes in them
and why my glasses have tape around the bridge
Aladdin didn't grow up in a palace
All i'm missing is my genie
i am picked last for kick-ball
and baseball
and soccer
and sometimes i kick the ball in the wrong goal
and sometimes i trip on rabbit holes
i am just the right size for lockers and toilets

I am the child of a Beggar King and He doesn't pick me last.

Untitled

By Jenna Kitchenmaster, Psychology/Biology Health Professions

A blank page,
white,
empty,
undefined.

Without words,
color, form, shape.

No hidden meaning
to be found or unfound,
no image
to be called beautiful or ugly,
no story
to be remembered or forgotten.

A poem without words,
a sketch without lines,
a song without music,
a chance left untaken.

Longing for definition,
begging for a purpose unknown,
unseen.

Defined by nothing
so as not to be.

An empty page,
nothing permanent,
nothing unacceptable.

Nothing at all.

Soft Charm

By Sarah Odom, Vocal Performance/Writing and Rhetoric

Love comes with a soft charm.

Like delicate snowflakes dancing around you

swirling and twirling about your head

and flirting with your fuzzy pink boots
meandering amiably to solid ground.

Tiny flakes blanket the frostbitten earth—
shining like glitter you s

p
l
i
e
d

o
n

t
h
e

linen sheets...

...or the diamonds Mommy wore special for Daddy.

For you, every first snow was a joy:
inviting, fluffy, easy to mold.
You felt in contrd

But as the wind picks up
the snow, though wonderfully abundant,
creates stormy conditions.

Each winter you watch the flurries descend
like fairies:

kissing
the bodies of passersby
the way they
once kissed you.

Snow hardens with time:
cold, dry, and difficult to mold
with your unsteady arthritic hands.

heaven seem
to
arass you with gusts of biting
wind

so you
contine
yourself
indoors
and hide
in
scratchy
wool
sweaters.

But outside the snow mounds itself in heaps and drifts
against your door-
begging for your attention

This whimsy-wizard creates something
ing and lovely
and life-giving. Something that will liquefy then
sate the thirsty ground to revive it.

Show, Not Tell

By Emily Wohlers, Theatre/Music

I had my first kiss when I was 15 years.....old.
 I was in my marching band outfit in the back hallways of the music hall.
 Sweaty and gross after a night of marching around a field blaring off-key
 versions of 80's tunes, my FIRST boyfriend put his mouth on my mouth,
 And I thought MAN, THIS IS AWESOME.
 This is definitely what love is.
 Six years later I have encountered heart break, new surroundings, and
 Taylor Swift.
 All three have left me questioning what love actually is.
 And frankly, I don't give a shit.
 Love isn't just something I feel,
 Sorry T-Swift, maybe you're doing it wrong
 Love is a verb that halts your surroundings,
 And forces that person to turn to you in time to hear your mind scream,
 "Look, love! I did this for you because you matter."
 And your heart to finish by whispering,
 "So kiss me damn it."
 I held my tongue because I know you're feeling down today,
 I made dark roast instead of vanilla because you drink coffee for purpose,
 not fun,
 I wore this dress because it makes my breasts look beautiful and you are
 fond of them,
 And you?
 You come to my shows,
 You hold me when I can't keep control,
 You wear that shirt.
 We forgive,
 We plan,
 We do love.
 And at 21, I like putting my mouth on your mouth.

By the Grace of God

By Kelly Burds, Literature

Today, someone looked at me
Not through me
Or past me
or away from me,
as they rushed past,
avoiding my crutches and legs and rotted-out shoes
or as they dropped a few coins out of pity.
Not that I'm not grateful,
Mother Mary knows I am,
but how would you feel if,
day after day,
tourists, strangers, even neighbors threw money at you
but didn't have the grace to meet your eye
to say "you are a person, a child of God
you matter"

Sixteen Ounces

By Deborah Admire, Writing and Rhetoric

Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone.

They took a pound of my flesh today,
Took her from my body and lay her on a table.

One pound.

She can fit inside a coffee can, and wake us up every morning;
Rest inside her plastic lunchbox, the one I'll buy her in six years;
Curl up in her father's cupped palms, her own hands barely visible.

One pound.

My temples burn, a squeezing pulse, despite the medication.
My husband strokes my hand, because he knows words have no meaning.
My father's cough explodes from his chest like a bullet, and I hurt with
why we must love.
The doctor's footsteps strike the floor as he nears my room, and we all
breathe as if for the last time—

One pound.

My daughter's heart pounds without me now. Each precious beat is light
and tenuous—
Like a beetle on the very tip of a leaf—
Like the top block of a happy child's tower—
Like a raindrop trembling on the eave—
Like the last breathless note of an angel choir—

One pound.

The Sacrament of Snow

By Trevor Delamater, Writing and Rhetoric/Business Management

Snow comes falling,
like curtains sinking after a show,
like the dreams of a child when she grows up

I used to play in the snow
but now the snow means ice, and signifies that this,
this is a bad day:

to drive to work
to visit friends
or to be free

When I spy the frosty trees, dusted
in a sugar-white gleaming glaze
my memory sings a lullaby
and my regret hums a dirge

I peek out my
window at the boys chucking
snowballs in the street and feel gnawing
separation, miles thicker than the pane of glass

But someday when I watch the dancing
flakes, swaying in the air
like maple seeds
I will change,
I will grow younger
and leap from my ivory tower –
fling myself flailing through my window –
and call the plummet holy

Snow comes falling,
sinking like breaths in deep sleep,
like the melting bars of my presupposing prison



Drops of Snow

By Abigail Stoscher, Theatre

The Cedar

By Trevor Delamater, Writing and Rhetoric/Business Management

His limbs are thick as elephant legs,
roots clenching the earth like rigor mortis.
He rises from the dark, green swamps
like a primordial monster, grinning,
out of death sprung
like fairy-ring mushrooms
And when he dies, he'll fade
into the corpse of a long-dead pharaoh
But now his veins run sappy green
his sinewy flesh wrapped
in ridge-lined skin like wrinkled,
suds-soaked fingers

When humid summer gales heave
his bones creak and crackle
like a cackling family of chuckling ghosts
He shakes his arms in daring defiance
like a giddy child, mocking
the bough-busting wind,
standing solo like a polar bear guarding
a caribou carcass from wily arctic wolves

When the storm subsides he slows
his panting like a play-tired puppy dog.
Green, burnt umber, and sienna:
oil paint curing on a canvas,
his trunk twisting, branches curling as he pitches
forward like a running four-year-old child;
reaching like a mountaineer
climbing a snow-capped peak

His body is like a climaxing ballad built
of hopeful sunshine, sorry storms
and nightmares of the axe
He's an elder recounting deep wisdoms

His voice speaks in silence,
 "I remember my fall
 from the sky like a common raindrop,
 landing unseen with no one to shelter me
 like a homeless stranger slumbering in the alley
 A thought planted as a whisper in the mind,
 growing like the rush of nearing rapids,
 thrashing higher and higher,
 like the leaping salmon struggling
 steadily upstream in autumn"

And in his story—
as in the acid-etched lives of human hearts—
is heard the melody of presence
a night when countless shooting stars
trail fire across the sky
bright as a child's face
when she shares a silly pun

This music revives a heart's arthritic valves
and tunes its tired strings
Like fire scourges a forest,
renewing the soil, giving many green things
the chance to not be lost
like a drop of dye in the sea



Crowned

By Lyric Morris, Art and Graphic Design

The Counting Game

By Emily Wohlers, Theatre/Music

I ate seven things today.

I know it was seven.

Not eight.

I counted.

I count every time.

They say you learn numbers when you are small.

You don't.

You learn numbers when you are big,

When you are big enough for someone to tell you you're big.

Boundaries

By Madeline Booher, Psychology

I learned how to love from my mother.

Oh, that's nice.

My mother, who spends much of her time outside of reality.

Needy.

Dependent.

Selfish.

But "means well."

Is love responsible?

Responsible for a mental illness, that is.

Responsible for a mother's stability.

Responsible for a mother's "happiness."

I grew up believing it to be.

A checklist.

A demand.

Dear Mom,

I love you.

But I can't fix you.

Winter Cycle

By Hana Spangler, Theatre/History

I

Sudden breathing snow
Appears from every corner
Unruly drifters

II

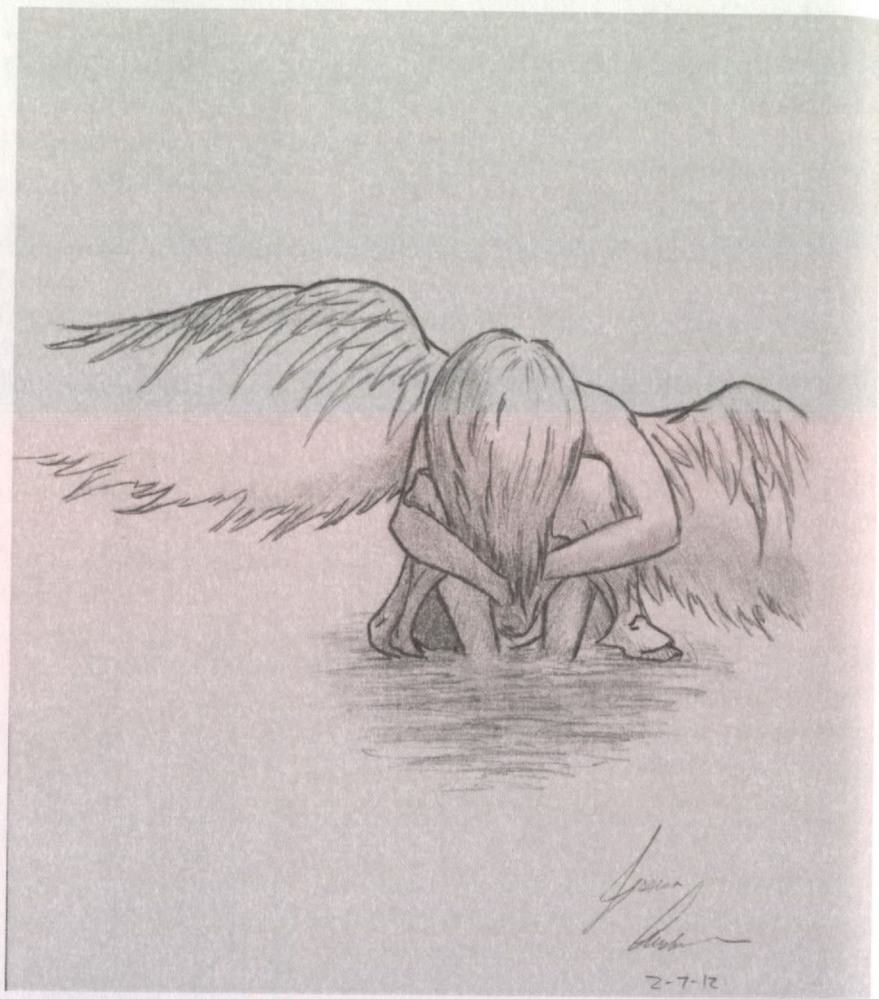
Ground already filled
The snowflakes drift back upwards
To cover the sky

III

Fog envelopes trees
Curling up through the branches
Dying breath of snow

IV

Droplets fall from twigs
Puddling over stiffened grass
Deep down, ice forms thin



Shyrael

By Jessica Ausborn, Ancient History

Fishbowl

By Trevor Delamater, Writing and Rhetoric/Business Management

We are each a fish swimming laps in a bowl
encircled by a suffocating structure of expectations

Time is the variable and society the equation
that plots our destinies: life's matrix

We are like a second-grade Van Gogh remonstrated
for not keeping within the lines of our coloring books

We swim, we circle, wriggling and squirming, again, and again, circling
until we glimpse our reflection and rage – flaring like beta fish
guarding our bowls – protecting the bars that box us in because they're
all we have

We are children with cancerous blood
given dreams for a day,
funny clown faces and hope-filled helium balloons
but not dreams that can last

Life is an ocean if we bust the glass and burst beyond
the comfortable confines of our stenciled lives,
our designer aquariums,
into adventure's frightening freedom

Snark

By Emily Wohlers, Theatre/Music

I am a vampire,
I suck the fun out of everything,
And when I'm done with fun,
I move on to mystery,
Then value,
Until all you're left with is time and space.
I might have confused you back there with the word vampire.
What I really meant is that I am a snarky bitch.
The world I have placed myself in has left me bone dry of wonder.
Overexposure to ranting feminist blogs,
News blogs,
Social justice blogs,
Depression blogs,
Blog blogs,
Have given me the power to decide to call bullshit on life.
And even though I am proud of my views,
My life,
I wish I could find that compartment in my heart,
That allows love,
Compassion,
And the world to embrace me.
My middle finger has grown frail.

To the Lover of Beauty

By Brianne Hassman, Theatre

Have you ever wanted to wear the sky?

The crisp blue of a clear spring morning gently brushed with purple and flecked with light highlighting the casual stroll of a white airplane

The blue-gray of an approaching storm, dusty edges rapidly overtaking the glowing silver lining

The dying embers of a setting sun, a peach ring surrounding a golden ball attempting to escape violet clouds weighed down by grapefruit pink billows

The deep black of finally night, a sprinkle of silver stars and a radiant moon reaching down to kiss the lover of beauty

Fiction

First Place - Theresa Larrabee

"The Lunch Date"

Second Place - Kali Wolkow

"The Great Seaweed"

Third Place - Lane Shaikoski

"Coma"

Honorable Mention - Allison Mulder

"Haunting an Empty House"

FIRST PLACE

Judge's Notes:

Theresa Larrabee's "The Lunch Date" is smart, entertaining, and laugh out loud hilarious. You will either want to read this story in private or in public circumstances where you feel comfortable sharing the insight, situation, or detail that cracks you up. There are a number of excellent qualities that make the humor and intelligence work so perfectly: the fully realized individual that is the protagonist, Alexandria "Andi" Grayson, the believably unbelievable scenario into which she is cast, and the surprising turns the story takes. Just as impressively, Larrabee works expertly at both the level of the striking, significant detail and at the level of the larger, complicated social horizon that underpins this funny and quite touching tale of modern (potential) love.

The Lunch Date

By Theresa Larrabee, English Teaching

Andi stared down the concrete stairs, wishing that they would disappear. She shivered as the cold autumn wind whipped her skirt around her goose-bumped legs. *I'm going to get hypothermia if I stay out here much longer. But if I got hypothermia, then I might not have to go on this date.* She sighed as she began her descent, *Mum would probably just bring him to the hospital.*

The sleek red door at the bottom of the stairs silently swung open as she reached the last step.

Just like in a horror movie...except this is real.

"Hello ma'am, may I have the name of your reservation?" Her attention was drawn to the impossibly peppy brunette perched behind a podium.

"Grayson. I think," she relied, mildly distracted by the click of the brunette's fake fingernails as she flipped through her book.

"Okeydokey then, Jacque will show you to your table," she cooed as a tall blond appeared at her elbow. "Enjoy your meal!"

"Oh I will!" Andi replied with mock enthusiasm, rolling her eyes as she began to walk away. She glanced around the cozy restaurant, taking in the way the designers had mixed the faux rundown look with royal red and gold.

Fake. Just like this date.

All too soon, her massive guide stopped at a two-person table and pulled out her seat. "Thanks, Jake," she said flippantly, plopping down in the plush, burgundy chair and yanking it closer to the table.

"Your waiter will be with you shortly. Is there anything that I can get you in the meantime?" His deep voice was politely distant, causing Andi to feel a pang of guilt at her rudeness.

"Just a glass of water for now, please," she replied sheepishly. It wasn't until Jacque had walked away that she finally turned her attention to her dinner partner. He was cute, but in an awkward way; all cheekbones with dark brown hair, thoughtlessly mussed, falling into his hazel eyes – which were currently looking anywhere but her face.

There was a brief, awkward silence before Andi became bored with waiting. "Well. You must be Thomas," she said dryly, forcing him to look at her.

He gave her a weak, embarrassed smile. "And you must be Alexandria. I've – my father has told me a lot about you." He juted his hand across the table, his elbow catching the rim of his wineglass. The glass fell sideways, the wine splashing over the edge of the table and down the front of Jacque's pants. Jacque froze, then slowly looked down at the dark red stain rapidly blooming down the leg of his white pants.

"I – I'm so sorry," Thomas gasped, half-standing as if he was about to leap forward and dry Jacque's pants with his napkin.

That would be awkward, Andi thought with a small smile.

Jacque silently set Andi's water down in front of her, righted Thomas' wineglass and refilled it with the wine from their ice bucket, daubed the wine from the table cloth, and, with a slight nod of his head, walked stiffly away.

Thomas waited until Jacque was a few tables away before slowly sinking into his chair.

"We should leave him a big tip," Andi said offhandedly. Thomas only nodded faintly. "Are you going to be okay? Maybe you should breathe." Thomas let out a heavy gust of air, his red face slowly losing its color.

"Please don't mention that to anybody," he said breathlessly, shakily taking a gulp from his newly filled wineglass.

"Of course not. Except," Andi continued thoughtfully, "this would be an excellent story to tell at our wedding."

Wine spurted out of Thomas' mouth, splattering across the table.

"No, really. The table cloth wasn't complete without a few more splatters. Now it's truly a work of art," Andi said blandly, her lips quirked

in amusement at his reaction. "At least I know how you really feel about our impending wedding."

"No," he sputtered quickly. "No. I just...wasn't expecting you to bring it up. Like that. It's not that I don't want to marry you. I'm sure that you're a lovely person—"

"No, not really. I'm actually quite a jerk," she interjected offhandedly. "And I'm spoiled. Honestly, this marriage is the first thing that I haven't been able to talk my parents out of. But you know, family doesn't come before politics." Thomas nodded knowingly.

Silence stretched out between them, Andi fidgeting with her napkin and Thomas staring at the stained table cloth. Neither knew what to say next.

It was Thomas who finally broke the silence. "Look, I don't really want to be here. I don't think that you really want to be here. Let's just call it a night, say we tried, and I'll see you some other time."

"As much as I like that idea, my parents are expecting a full report of this date, and I can't lie to save my life. I'm a completely open book. It's actually quite unfortunate."

He considered this, then sighed. "You can just tell them that I walked out. I'm sure my parents won't be surprised to hear that I messed this up." Realizing how revealing what he had just said was, he quickly continued, "Let's just call for the waiter."

"Excellent idea, Kemosabe," she replied, wincing inwardly at how dumb it sounded. In her embarrassment, she threw her arm up with more fervor than was necessary. However, she didn't see a waiter coming behind her with a tray of dessert. Her hand caught the underside of his tray and tipped the plates of pie and pudding over her head. The pies smeared down her head and neck, dripping off her shoulders, while the bowl of banana pudding splattered across the lap of her skirt.

Andi pursed her lips against the cold cherries that slugged down the side of her face. When she slowly opened her eyes, she caught a glimpse of horrified laughter cross Thomas' face before he masked it with concern.

"Are you okay?" he asked, barely concealing a smirk.

"Oh, you think this is funny?" she snapped, scooping the pudding off her lap and flinging it at his head. It missed by a large margin and instead splattered across the stomach of Jacque's black button-up. Stunned, Andi couldn't find her voice while Jacque forcefully dropped their bill on the table and stormed away.

Thomas wasn't even bothering to pretend to be concerned. His

face was full of delight as he tried to muffle a chuckle. "Well, at least I'm not the only one making a mess here."

Without a word, Andi stood up and stormed toward the door. "Shit," Thomas hissed, yanking a wad of bills out of his wallet and throwing them on the table as he chased Andi through the restaurant.

"Wait!" he yelled as the porter quickly yanked the door open. He finally caught her as she stepped off the curb and onto the crosswalk. His hand snaked around her upper arm, spinning her around to face him. He resisted the urge to wipe the cherry goo off his hand.

"What do you *want*?" she hissed, her voice barely above a growl as she swiped at her eyes.

Deciding that it would be best to not mention that she had just smeared whip cream across her cheek, he diplomatically replied, "I wanted to make sure that you're okay." He glanced around before continuing, "Where were you planning on going, anyway?"

"I was—" she began hotly, but deflated slightly as she scanned the street. "I have no idea. I just wanted to get out of," with a gesture behind them, "there."

"Yeah, it was a bit stuffy, wasn't it?" he replied lightheartedly, sticking his hands into his pockets. Encouraged by her watery smile, he continued, "I think that I know where we are. If I'm not mistaken, there's a convenience store around the corner; they might have some clothes. Yours look...cold."

Andi choked out a small laugh as they began walking. "Yes. Come to think of it, they are a bit chilly." The wind picked up as she spoke, eliciting a real shiver.

Noticing the sudden shudder, Thomas quickly slipped out of his jacket and placed it around her shoulders. The charcoal-gray coat, which was thigh-length on Thomas, came down to her knees. His body heat lingered in the lining, slowly slipping past the chill that had set into her sticky skin.

She hesitated before sticking her arms into the sleeves. "Are you sure?" she asked, gingerly plucking at the lapel. "It looks really expensive and I'm...you know."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "you've already kind of ruined it, so you might as well."

Guilt rose in Andi's stomach until she saw Thomas' mischievous smile. "You're a jerk, you know that?" She replied with a smile.

"At least I'm not spoiled as well," he rejoined, glancing up at the signs above the shops. "This is it up here."

The thick plate glass that made up the front of the convenience store was plastered with advertisements for the cigarettes, beer, lottery tickets, and greasy food that they sold within. The sign running across the top of the building proclaimed that Gas Mans was "classy yet gassy."

Twenty minutes later they walked out of the store, shoving stale, rubbery hotdogs into their mouths. Andi wore an oversized, pea green sweatshirt with the Gas Mans unfortunate slogan printed across the back. Thomas had bargained with the cashier for the extra pair of work pants that had been sitting in the back room, paying extra for him to hand over his belt as well. Even so, they had had to cuff the pant legs a few times, and Andi was continuously pulling the pants back onto her hips.

"Well. This has been an excellent date if I do say so myself," Thomas boasted, sticking his hands in his pockets and puffing his chest out.

Andi elbowed his stomach good-naturedly: "Yeah, and if our marriage goes half as well, we'll probably be dead in a week."

"I can deal with that as long as you don't die in socks and flip-flops." He glanced meaningfully at her feet.

"It's too cold to just wear flip-flops and they didn't have any real shoes!" she justified fervently.

"I can see the headlines now," he continued, as if she hadn't said anything, "Alexandria Grayson, heiress to both the Latimer and Grayson fortunes, found dead. And you'll never guess what she's wearing!"

"People call me Andi," she corrected.

"Oh... that sounds much better than Alexandria," he commented, blushing as he realized how it sounded.

"Exactly! Alexandria is a stupid name." They paused as they reached the curb, unsure of what to do next.

"Do you want me to take you home?" Thomas asked, silently praying that she would say no.

"Not really. I don't feel like dealing with my parents right now, but I don't really want to stay in public either. I think I got all the pie off in the bathroom, but I still feel gross," she replied, self-consciously running a hand over her hair.

"My family owns a cabin outside town. We could take a cab out there," Thomas suggested, already hailing a cab.

"Why, sir! We've only just met and you're already trying to get me alone in your cabin." Andi dramatically brought her hand to her chest. "How scandalous!"

Thomas raised an eyebrow as the cab pulled up to the curb. "You have no idea. I have quite the reputation," he said as he opened the cab door for her.

"Yeah," she said, eying the way he held the door, "I'm sure you're a real rebel."

The cabbie wound his way back down the driveway as Andi took in the cabin. It was cozy-looking, with huge bay windows covering the front and a deck jutting out over the lake to the left.

"Wow," was all she could say as he led her onto the front porch. She trailed behind him into the cabin, taking in the rustic antlers and hunting portraits lining the walls.

Thomas turned and smiled at her awed look. "Have you never been in a cabin before?"

Andi shook her head: "No, we aren't really the outdoorsy type. The closest I've come to a cabin is the log ride at Disney World."

"Well then, what would you like to do on your first trip to—"

"Are those guns!" She interrupted, running over to the rack mounted on the wall.

"That's usually what you keep on a gun rack," he replied dryly.

"I know that, stupid," she shot back, the smile never leaving her face. "But I've never..." she trailed off as she turned back to the guns.

"You've never seen a gun?" he finished with disbelief. She nodded, reverently running her hand over the barrel of the gun. "Would you like to shoot one?"

The excitement on her face when she whipped around was answer enough, and, with a mock sigh, he walked to the closet by the front door. "You don't get to use any of those guns though. You can use the BB gun my dad gave me when I was younger."

"Do you not trust me?" Andi pouted.

"Not a bit," he replied glibly, holding the door open for her to exit.

She pretended to storm past him, but all pretenses were dropped as he began to show her the different parts of the gun. Once he was satisfied that she understood how to use it properly, he set a few empty pop cans on a log behind the cabin.

"Okay, are you ready?"

She nodded, swinging the gun up and nestling it into her shoulder. She aimed and, after a pause, pulled the trigger. The BB zinged past the cans and into the woods.

Twelve shots later they were finally rewarded by the sound of metal on metal.

"Did I hit it?" Andi squeaked, trying to restrain her excitement. Thomas jogged to the cans, dramatically hoisting the center one into the air with a grin. Andi shouted excitedly, jumping up and down and waving the gun over her head.

"Hey, woah there," Thomas gingerly took the gun from her hands and flipped the safety on.

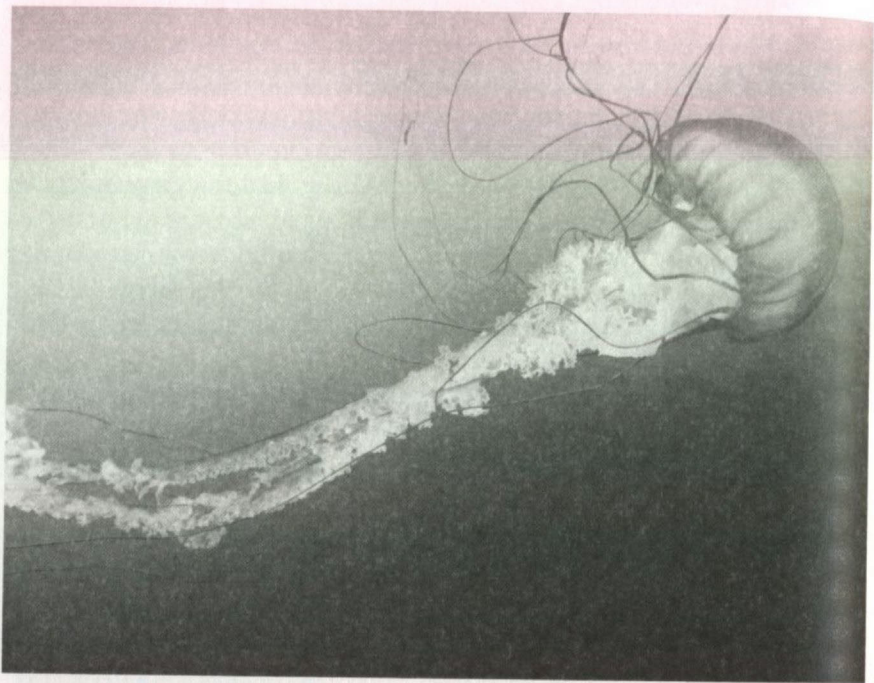
"Sorry," Andi blushed with a sheepish smile. She took the can from his hands and inspected the hole toward the top. "I'm keeping this forever."

"You're keeping a pop can forever? Simply because you shot it," he said disbelievingly.

"It's the first thing I've ever shot. And if you don't watch it, I'll shoot you too." She replied, threateningly poking his chest with her index finger. As she spoke, the wind picked up, swirling dead leaves into the air.

"Maybe we should get inside," Thomas said with a shiver. "If I let you get hypothermia on our first date my parents would never let me hear the end of it."

"Yeah," she replied as they started toward the cabin, "I don't really feel like getting hypothermia today."



Suspended

By Renee Hurley, Spanish

SECOND PLACE

The Great Seaweed

By Kali Wolkow, Journalism/Art and Graphic Design

Blog: The Great Seaweed
August 20, 2013

On June 3, 1996, a squalling, wrinkled, pink-splotched she-beast was born to Gerald and Janice Braxton at 4:47 a.m. And for three days, she remained “Baby B.”

The fact that 72 hours had passed between the birth of this mini-Braxton and her ceremonious naming is misleading; it implies that much time and forethought was given to selecting the perfect label for the new member of the Braxton line.

However, the poor gene pool that created a baby with a forehead doubling the size of her face, large bug eyes the color of moldy moss (if moss could mold), and ears on the verge of taking flight, wasn’t the only unfortunate side effect of the accountant-plus-hairstylist combo.

Gerald and Janice didn’t consult the grandparents, baby books or even one of the 1,237 free baby name websites that pop up as instant results to a Google search of “girl baby names.”

And unfortunately for their bald, gangly baby girl on the verge of being submitted into the “Homeliest Baby Club,” the joining of their brain waves proved to be an even more catastrophic result of their “together as one” marriage vows than even the baby’s physical appearance.

Maxine Coralline Braxton, seven pounds, eight ounces, at twenty inches long was cursed by genetics and phonetics within three days of each other. And to top it off, when traced back to its Latin and Greek origins, her name could be literally translated as “the greatest” (Maxine) “seaweed” (Coralline).

So, as life would have it or luck, as the real saying goes (Life seems more accurate though—the disastrous misnaming of a child can hardly be chalked off as a flimsy consequence of chance), I was named this infernal and completely mortifying name.

I’d like to say that I overcame this disastrous label. Seventeen years seems long enough to earn a redeemable replacement. And it wasn’t as though I didn’t try. Unfortunately, the timetable for receiving nicknames

often includes the middle school era of acne, braces, unbalanced limb-to-body mass ratios, and the drama that comes with classmates realizing that the opposite sex might no longer have cooties. Needless to say, the shortened version of Maxine isn't a title that any pubescent pre-teen wants to claim.

And thus, I was stuck. Middle school was a blur of cliques, quacks, and outcasts. I was too handicapped in all things feminine to be in the "Shannon" group of girls who'd already discovered how to make perfect, Shirley Temple ringlets with a curling iron. Plus, if my track record with handling anything above room temperature was any indication, a 300-degree curling iron was never going to be my best friend. In fact, just the minor burns I've gotten from the toaster are enough to ensure me that I'll have mousy, stringy hair for the rest of life, which is an incredible low in itself.

For one thing, it indicates that bagels, toast and English muffins are yet another obstacle to add to my daily morning regiment of trying to avoid spilling toothpaste on myself as I brush my teeth while searching for my ever-missing hairbrush.

Apparently, I am doomed to starve, look like a disheveled wooly mammoth, and walk around with dragon breath that can kill a troll with a simple hello.

(Don't worry, I brush my teeth—I just brush them with my back bent at such an acute angle that I look like I'm the "don't try this at home, kids" result of a yoga session gone haywire.)

Secondly, this tentative relationship with heated metal and its moppy-hair results causes my mother, the manicured, pedicured, everything-cured, hair stylist much unrest.

This week she is blonde, her color of the day is aqua, and her business card reads, "Janice Pearl, the owner of the best salon and curl."

Cute, right? You should've seen her the day she came home with the idea for that slogan. She half-ran, half-skipped around the hallways of our house wearing a head-to-toe floral print with three-inch wedges while singing, "I am brilliant. I am so briiilllllliaaannntttt! So, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, SOOOOOOOOOO brilliant."

Needless to say, she's not the most popular participant of the Leaning Tavern's Tuesday night Mic Night.

Everyday, right before I go to school she says, "Honeeeeeeey, can't I just tweak your hair a little bit? Maybe add some volume, tease it a bit. I could make you into a young Meryl Streep in no time."

Oh goody, she's like fifty and doesn't have a single physical

characteristic like me. What a tempting offer.

Plus, this is coming from the woman who tried to style our dog's hair for the local dog show, and even though it's been two years, Mr. Toodles is still afraid of mirrors. I call him just plain "Mister" to allow him some dignity, especially considering he's a German shepherd, which in itself bodes for a blatant mockery of anything even in the same hemisphere as "Toodles."

Even though it's my dad's dog, he doesn't seem to mind. Though he tends to refer to him as "Buster," but mostly I think that's because he seems to gain instant "macho" points with himself when he gets the opportunity to say, "Move it, Buster" with an overly masculine gusto.

And considering my dad fits every stereotype of a numbers-lover that is sequestered for eight hours every day in a cubicle and is married to a woman who idolizes Lucille Ball and puts his pop cans on doilies instead of coasters, I'm thinking he's earned the right to obtain manly men points wherever he sees fit.

I ALMOST FORGOT.

This is a blog for my senior English class at Heckert High School. It's supposed to help us find our voice for when we get thrown out into the real world. It's worth 30% of our grade, and I was supposed to go all business interview style and tell you the basics of my life.

The boring, noncommittal basics like: Name, age, family, etc. (How the heck do they expect you to have a voice when they ask you questions like you are interviewing for a job at the local grocery store? Next thing you know I'll have to tell you my social security number and greatest strengths and weaknesses.)

Oh, and my favorite color is turnip purple. ◀

Until tomorrow then, and the next assignment.

-MCB

August 21, 2013

"What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses and how have you learned to nurture and/or overcome them?"

You've got to be kidding me. Apparently, the one unique skill that I somehow came to possess as a Braxton offspring is of a psychic nature. Perfect, now I just have to move to California so I can be a consultant at the Los Angeles Psychic hotline. (On the bright side, that answers tomorrow's topic about that infamous question of "What are you going to do when you leave this God-forsaken place?" I'm paraphrasing

of course.)

Weaknesses. Weaknesses. Yikes. For the sake of brevity, I'll put it into a list format.

1. Whistling—can't do it. At all. On the bright side, I've overcome it by convincing myself that I do indeed whistle; it's just too high-pitched for anyone but dogs to hear.

2. Walking—my feet have never known what a rainbow arch is. Counter procedure: Dr. Scholls and I are besties.

3. Talking—Enough said. Solution: I avoid people, have begun to learn sign language, and am fluent in the outdated art of Morse code (thus the new need for a knowledge of sign language).

4. Organization—Piles, piles, piles, stacks, towers, piles. Resolution: Sticky notes labeling the piles, stacks, towers, and piles.

5. Everything domestic—cooking, painting nails, giggling. Result: Peanut butter and banana sandwiches, a convenient allergy to nail polish, and a dry and cynical sense of humor that doesn't lend itself to giggling.

Strengths:

I've eaten an entire Subway sub in less than two minutes.

I'm pretty proud of that. I didn't even get heartburn.

How did I "nurture" that? I practiced every day for about a week. Meredith, the middle-aged woman who works the noon shift (and wears a different color bow in her hair every day), knows my order by heart now.

Assignment two. Check.

Until tomorrow then.

-MCB

P.S. Her bow today had Siamese cats on it.

August 22, 2013

I can't believe we have to do these almost every day and about such bland, uninspiring, I'd-rather-read-a-cereal-box kind of topics. It's like eating nachos without any cheese. Or riding a bike without screaming, "No hands!"

(I honestly haven't done that since I was, like, twelve. It's just an analogy for the younger readers of this blog. Although I doubt anyone other than my teacher will read this. And if they do, I have a message for them.)

GO READ A BOOK. It's bound to be better written, more coherent, AND the author probably won't be writing it as a result of the

depressing expectations of his or her peers and/or teacher. Unless you read Poe. Poor Edgar was roughing it for quite a while. (I mean, he had to be, I'm pretty sure he married his 13-year-old cousin or some horrible equivalent of that. I mean, you have to be pretty miserable to think that a freshman-aged girl—aka catty, dramatic, and prone to tantrums, exaggeration, and jealousy—is going to solve all your problems.) Poor, poor guy. No wonder his favorite words were weary, dreary, and nevermore.

On a similar note, the topic for today is my future career.

I have no idea. Maybe I'll be a librarian. I have the glasses for it. I could even buy the little chain to attach to the sides to make myself more official-looking.

Or I could work at Walmart. I'm betting I could get some free smiley-face stickers and maybe a few pens or something—depending on how bad they want me.

Or, if I was one hundred percent serious and didn't care that it may or may not prove to just be the pipe dream of a wistful senior on the threshold of a scary new world, I'd really, really love to try my hand at being a psychologist.

Scary, right? I can't even understand my own brain. Plus, it sounds like a lot of people time, doesn't it?

But no worries, I have a solution:

I'll do more of the lab research end of things. You know, pick apart people's brains without having to actually have personal interaction with them. I've already decided it probably wouldn't be the best idea to unleash myself onto people who are already struggling to cope with life. It would be like taking a coulrophobic—a person who is afraid of clowns—to Cirque du Soleil. Or as we American English speakers incorrectly pronounce it, "Circus Olay."

I hope that makes sense.

Another day down, only way too many to go.

-MCB

August 23, 2013

The first week is over. Awkward happy dances all around—you have to say that with a bouncy Gangnam style voice. I'm serious. Do it. (See? It makes it better.)

I totally just did a completely failed attempt at the moonwalk—the Youtube practice videos are obviously not quite up to par.

Our prompt today was to share something with an insightful,

"Moral of the story."

So, welcome to the tale of The Ogre and Madame Fair:

Once upon a time there was a really slow ogre and a really fast ogress. She was an All-conference sprinter or something record-worthy like that.

They raced, and she was so far ahead that she took a detour to buy a fragrance sale at Macy's, and wound up losing to the large, high-maintenance, fictitious creature.

Lesson to learn: It's hard to win a race and smell pretty at the end of it.

(And it's really hard to be "insightful" on a Friday.)

Happy Weekend, folks. You've earned it.

Until next time.

Yours truly,

-MCB, the Great Seaweed.

THIRD PLACE

Coma

By Lane Shaikoski, Biology

It will happen just after your seventeenth birthday. You'll be driving home from school, summer vacation is just around the corner. You heard there were supposed to be thunderstorms this afternoon, but the sky's clear. The weatherman was probably wrong again. Besides, you're in the middle of a drought. It hasn't rained since the snow melted. It will be the first week the city pool's been open that year and you'll decide to go. When you get there, you'll find friends tossing water bombs, "preparing for football season," they'll call it. You'll join them, passing the time.

Suddenly, the lifeguards' whistles sound. Someone will spot lightning on the horizon. You'll go towel off, hoping there won't be any more lightning and you can go back in the pool. Instead, after half an hour, the pool closes because the lightning is getting closer.

Your friend will invite you home to play the newest *Call of Duty*. It's finally the weekend so you'll be unwilling to spend your Friday night at home. After racking up two hundred kills, your friend will ask if you want to get some chow at Taco Johns in town. The two of you will head back into town.

It will look as if the storms have passed, so you'll decide to go to the lake. Your friend has those jet skis and a quick run on the lake will be just what you need after an afternoon of swimming and shooting those nasty Nazis. You'll have a blast racing by the old people fishing on the docks, but soon they'll leave. The other boats and jet skis will disappear. You'll see clouds billowing to the west, but you'll be able to ride for a few more minutes, or at least that's what your friend will estimate. The clouds will get closer you'll catch a flash of lightning from the corner of your eye. You will tell your friend you should head back, but the dock will be a good distance away. It will take you at least ten minutes to get back. The clouds will quickly encroach, and you'll see more lightning behind you, but it'll still take another five minutes to get back. You open up the throttle on the jet ski, hoping to beat the storm, but the wind will whip from the east, slowing you down. Two minutes out, the rain will start, an annoying mist at first, but soon it'll become a downpour. You'll have to slow down just to see ahead. Your relative inexperience on a jet ski will

slow you down more. Soon, you won't be able to see your friend in
of you through the rain. Lightning will crack through the sky above
You'll keep riding...no choice but to get back to the dock.

Then...nothing.

You'll feel nothing.

See nothing.

Hear nothing.

No rain.

No wind.

Like sleeping.

But with no dreams.

No alarm clock.

No sun.

No moon.

No stars.

Just quiet, tasteless, sightless darkness.

Then...light.

Bright light.

And you will feel something.

Fabrics on your skin.

A mattress under your back.

A pillow under your head.

And hear something.

The steady pulsing of an EKG.

You'll wake up in a hospital, tubes in your arm, and sensors on your head and chest. You'll be alone in the room, but there will be people on the other side of the glass wall. At first they won't notice, but as you try to sit yourself up, a nurse walking by looks in and sees you struggling. She'll run to the nurses' station and call the head nurse and the doctor, and some specialists and...all this attention for someone who fell off a jet ski. The nurse will come back to your room and start taking notes from your charts and the machines. She'll question you intently, but won't take the time to tell you what happened. Then, she will ask you what year it is.

"Twenty-fourteen," you'll answer. The nurse's smile will disappear from her face. She'll look at you in disbelief. Then the doctor will enter. The nurse will whisper something in his ear before he has the chance to introduce himself. The doctor's eyes will change from warm and inviting to cold as he nods his head at what the nurse will tell him. He'll step forward and introduce himself.

"Mr. Tanner, I'm Doctor Walsh. How are you feeling?" he'll query.

"Fine, I guess," you'll say, a little confused. "What's going on, what happened?"

"Well," the doctor will begin, "do you remember the day you were on the jet ski and the thunderstorm rolled in?"

You'll nod your head. "Well, as you were riding back, you were struck by lightning. After the storm had passed, search teams found you floating by your life-vest. Somehow, you were still alive. They brought you to the local hospital, but they didn't know how to deal with your... condition...properly." Your heart will skip a beat as you mentally check for your legs, arms, fingers, and toes. "So, they transferred you here to Mayo. I have one last question for you; what month and year is it?" The same question the nurse will have asked. You'll have to stop and think for a moment.

"May of twenty-fourteen... right?"

The doctor and nurse look at each other again; the doctor turns back to you.

"Son, it's December," the doctor states, "of twenty-thirty." Your eyes will grow wide as you try to comprehend what you're hearing.

"You've been in a coma for sixteen years."

"No, that can't be... that only happens in movies."

"I'm afraid not, son. You're thirty-one now, a year older than me." You'll look at your hands, which will look more like an adult's than the last time you remember. You'll see yourself in the mirror in the corner of the room. You'll look like an adult rather than a teenager. "I'll call your family. They'll be happy to know you're awake."

The doctor will leave and the nurse will offer to get you anything you need. You'll shake your head, as she tells you that they're going to keep you in the glass room for a while to keep you under observation.

You spend a great deal of time trying to comprehend being in a coma for sixteen years. You'll look like you're thirty. Biologically, you will be thirty, but your mind will be telling you you're a teenager.

After a few hours, a couple nurses will take you to a more private room with real walls. You'll try to walk, but your legs will be too weak from resting for sixteen years, so they will wheel you there in your bed. As you start to settle into the new room, the first visitors you will get are reporters and journalists who want to be the first to report on the kid who's been in a coma for sixteen years. After only a few minutes, you'll grow irritated by their persistence and questions like "How do you feel?" and "Could you hear anything while comatose?" Finally, you'll have a couple nurses escort the journalists out. You'll still find it difficult to comprehend this new reality you've been dropped into.

The next visitor that will arrive is your little sister, Amy, now twenty-eight. She'll ask you the same questions as the reporters. You'll do your best to answer them, but you don't know most of the answers.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" you'll eventually ask. Her smile and joy will disappear. She'll take a deep breath and utter, "Mom and Dad died in a car crash a couple years ago."

Your head will start to spin.

Your heartbeat will get faster.

You'll need to lie down.

You'll be unable to keep from crying as this news sets in. You'll roll your face into the pillow, sobbing at the loss of your parents. You will keep wishing this was only a bad dream, but everything will tell you this is real. You'll eventually calm down and continue talking to your sister.

She'll introduce you to her fiancé, Lance. She'll try to tell you everything that's happened the past sixteen years, but right now, all you'll want to do is sleep.

But, you won't be able to sleep yet. You'll have one more visitor; a teenage girl, fifteen, maybe sixteen years old.

She'll arrive just after your sister leaves to go to work; your sister will have moved to Rochester to be near you once she was on her own. The teenage girl introduces herself as Jade. She'll look familiar, but you won't be able to figure out why. You and she will talk for a while, more of the same questions, then she will ask something new.

"Do you know who I am?" You'll look at her harder now, trying to figure out why she seems so familiar, but to no avail. You'll shrug. "I'm your daughter."

Your mind won't spin this time. Rather, it will be blank, completely blank, as blank as it was while you were comatose. How could this girl be your daughter? Then it will hit you. Cynthia Nolan. A girl you had the hots for in high school. You and she let your libidos get the better of you one night, only shortly before you went jet skiing.

"Cynthia Nolan?" you'll question.

"Yeah, I'm Jade Nolan." You'll stare into the wall for a while, like a madman staring into the abyss. You'll want this to be over, but reality doesn't just end like that.

"Where's Cynthia?" you'll finally ask as you regain your composure from the mental shock you'll experience.

"She...well..." Jade will begin, "She died during childbirth. She told the doctors that you were the father, and with how the laws work, I grew up in foster care, waiting for you to wake up."

Now, you'll really need to rest. Your head will be pounding as your teenage brain trapped in a daddy's body tries to comprehend what's happening. You'll tell Jade you need some time, time to rest and time to think. She'll leave and as she's walking out the door, something buried deep in your mind will take over for just a second.

"Be careful and do your homework," you'll say. You'll have no idea where that came from and you'll cover your mouth in embarrassment. Jade will look back at you and smile before walking out. You'll lay back, and try to rest from the stress of the day. You won't understand how you can be so tired after being asleep for sixteen years.

You will wake up the next morning. The first thing you'll do is ask a nurse what the date is. She'll tell you it's December seventh of

twenty-thirty. The day after you woke up. You'll breath a sigh of relief that you hadn't slept another sixteen years. The nurse will bring you some food, the first real food you'll have had in sixteen years. The nurse will tell you to eat slowly because your stomach won't be used to solid food, but you'll scarf it down anyway. It will be a Saturday, and Jade will show up to tell you everything. She will want to get to know you. After all, she's never met the real you, her real dad, but just an incoherent body. She'll have a backpack full of pictures and scrapbooks.

At first, you will be happy to see her, glad for the company. You'll enjoy seeing the pictures of her friends and foster family, the trips she's gone on. She'll want to tell you everything. You'll be able to see the excitement in her eyes. Your adolescent brain, however, won't be so interested. You'll want to go back to killing Nazis or racing jet skis like you were that one day. Jade will start to notice your disinterest. After a short while, she'll offer to leave. She'll try to hide it, but you'll be able to tell she's upset. You'll try to explain that you're just stressed, but she won't buy it. You and she will start to argue.

"I just wanted to get to know my dad," she'll cry.

"Look, Jade, I'm really stressed right now, the last thing I remember is jet skiing on the lake trying to outrun a thunderstorm. Then, I wake up in the hospital, thirty years old, my parents and girlfriend are dead, and I'm a father? Please, tell me how bad your day has been!" Jade will start to cry. She'll pack up her things and head toward the door while you stare at the wall. Nearing the door, she'll stop and turn.

"All I wanted to do was get to know my dad," she'll fume, "the one that's been in a coma as long as I've been alive. I thought you'd like to see me... I thought you...I thought you would be my dad. I guess I was wrong." She'll turn and leave the room, slamming the door. You'll realize how much of a douche you will have been. You'll quickly grab the phone off the end table and dial the nurses' station.

"Listen, there should be an upset teenage girl walking to the elevators or stairs. I need you to stop her and send her back here. It's really important."

"I can keep an eye out... there she is, hold on a moment." The line will go dead for a moment. "Sir? She's on her way back, but she's none too happy." You will thank the nurse before hanging up the phone. After a moment, Jade will come back into the room.

"What?" she'll demand.

"I'm sorry, I was a douche," you'll confess, "I was only thinking about myself and how miserable I was. I wasn't thinking about you,

growing up with no mom, never meeting your dad because he was in a coma. I'm sorry."

Jade will walk to your bedside as you sit yourself up.

"It's okay..." she'll start, but you will cut her off as you reach up and wrap your arms around her. It will take all your strength just to reach her.

At first, she'll seem shocked, then she'll wrap her arms around you and you'll say,

"Jade, I may only really be seventeen, but you're my daughter, and nothing will change that. I love you."

Bright light.

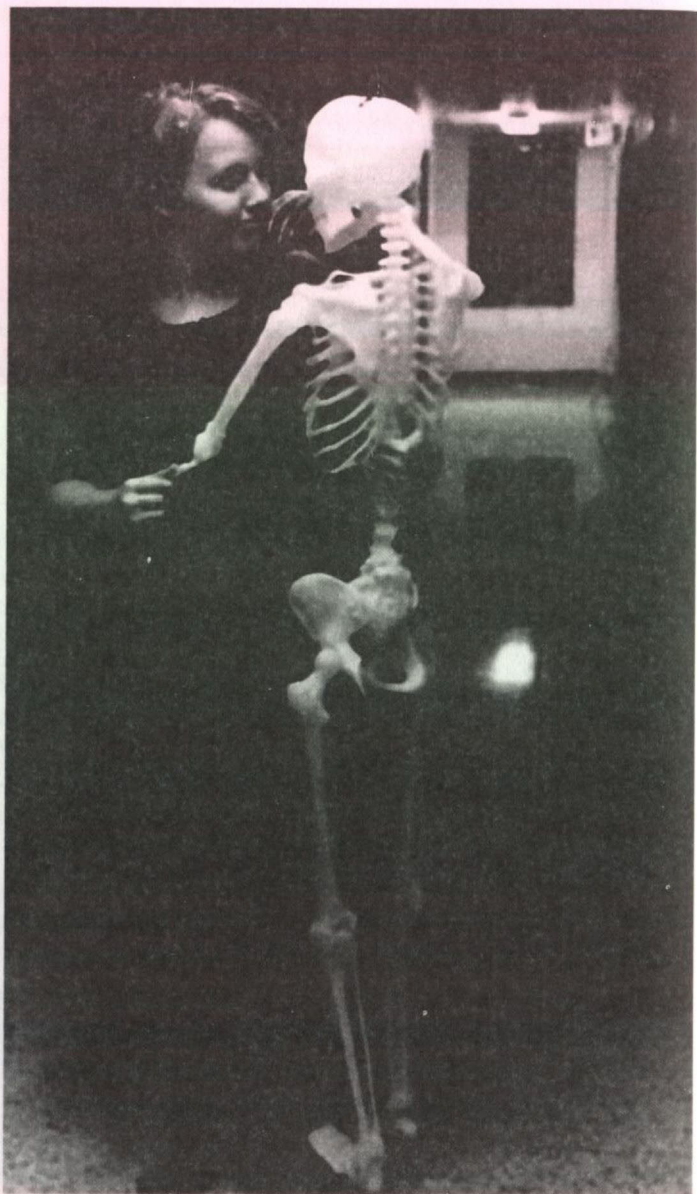
Darkness.

Something buzzing on your leg.

You lift your head off...your textbook? You were sleeping in study hall, again. But, man, what a strange dream. You realize your cellphone is buzzing. You wait for the librarian to look away then read the text: "Rent's got the jskis reg'ed, wanna ride 'em aft skool?"

It's Friday, why wouldn't you want to go jet skiing? You ask Siri how the weather will be. She says there will be thunderstorms. Yeah, right... you're in the middle of a drought. There won't be any thunderstorms. You type a message back.

"Sounds like a plan, c u then."



Waltz of the Fading Rose

By Rebekah Stofer, Music Performance

HONORABLE MENTION

Haunting an Empty House

By Allison Mulder, Writing and Rhetoric

There was a ghost in our house even before I died.

When I was little I'd sometimes smell her perfume around the house—some spicy, flowery scent stronger than anything Mom wore—there and then gone. Unavoidable, then absent. I'd catch glimpses of something at the corner of my eye, and all the dangling mirrors in my spinning mobile would turn toward the same place at once.

When I died just before starting eighth grade, I found out her name was Guadalupe, and I wondered how I ever could have missed her. She swirled around the empty house, into all the corners, cha-cha-ing through chandeliers and sliding through cracks in the floorboards. She told the best stories, flamboyant and scandalous and somehow believable, even when they were obviously made up.

The day they hammered the *For Sale* sign into the ground at the end of the driveway, she turned to me, outraged, and said, "He's finally leaving you and your mother completely." She fumed, and threw curses at my father right alongside me—throwing in curses I didn't even know. Then she grinned and said, "I know how you can get his attention."

That night, she helped me shake the house. We shattered the windows, burst the floorboards, shuddered the porch stairs loose. We wrenched one of the porch railings out of place and heaved it against the side of the house, where it leaned like a spread arm motioning passers-by to come in. We chucked glass figurines off the roof until we ran out, and then we ripped up the shingles and heaved those off, too. We pulled bricks from the chimney and hurled them at bathroom mirrors. We cracked the pipes and yanked out wiring and I half-hoped the whole thing would burn down.

Then I went to the end of the driveway—the boundary where everything left of me began to stretch and lose its shape—and I tipped the *For Sale* sign into the grass.

"That'll do it," Guadalupe sneered wearily, hovering near the living room ceiling. She was an old ghost, and our spectral vandalism had left her faded and transparent, like streaky, faded watercolors painted across the plaster. But her shape brightened as an idea came to her. "No, no. We're not done yet. Not at *all* done."

"What more is there to do?" I asked, scratching my name into some of the floorboards.

"Well, it's always bothered me that no one ever knew where I ended up." She drifted to my side and put her arm around my shoulders, smiling. "Lately, I've been thinking I might want to be found. No one's seen me in so long..."

Following her directions, I sank to the depths of the house and tried to move Guadalupe's body. It was buried too deep, and I was exhausted, so I settled for a finger bone and brought it up through the floorboards, working little holes through each layer between her resting place and the living room.

"I always had such *beautiful* fingers," Guadalupe moaned, staring at the knobbly yellowed bone. We placed it prominently on the now-crooked mantel, where someone was bound to find it eventually. From there, they would find the rest of her.

Guadalupe beamed at the bone, forgetting to pout, but her shape was more faded than ever.

"I'll just rest a while," she said. "Good luck. Come find me when the fun starts."

She squeezed my shoulder, then dissipated into a tendril of mist that curled around the bone on the mantel.

I waited on the front porch with my back to the wall, watching the sunrise through my translucent hands.

My father showed up late that afternoon, wearing a dark blue suit and a tie the same bright red as his car. He parked at the bottom of the hill, not in the driveway. The first thing he did was put the *For Sale* sign upright. Trembling with anger, I jerked the edges of the sign as he maneuvered it into the ground. By the time he managed to drive the signpost back into the soil, he was sweating. Dark stains bloomed under his armpits as he stared up at the house.

There was nothing special about the house. But he'd still loved it. He'd kept it looking pristine, like new, and he'd filled it with fragile things Mom and I weren't allowed to touch. He'd put up little gates when I was a sticky-fingered toddler, to keep me in the playroom.

They stayed up until I turned seven.

He let us live there, even after he left us for a woman named Sandy. His letter to Mom said he felt bad. He wanted us to keep thinking of it as our home. He'd pay all the bills—pay for anything we needed. And he asked us to not contact him, because it would bother Sandy. He sent

store-bought birthday cards every year, unsigned. Two years in a row, they congratulated me on turning ten. When I died and met Guadalupe, she told me her husband had killed her long before Dad moved in. The whole time he scolded me for scuffing the floorboards, a rotten body had been decomposing far below his feet.

I liked Guadalupe immediately.

She was worlds different than Mom, who'd haunted the house even when she was alive.

The night Dad left for the last time, Mom went looking for him. She looked for a whole day—went to friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and asked if they'd seen him. If he'd said anything. If they knew when he might be back. She came home, slept a few hours, then went looking again, and again.

For three days she did this.

After that, she left the house less and less. Eventually, everything came by delivery. Groceries. News. She worked from home at her computer, tapping away with a fluffy blanket heaped around her shoulders. When she got tired—whether that was at noon or at four in the morning—she ducked her head down into the blanket like a bird, and slept in her chair.

I went to school, and didn't talk much. Came home, and said even less. I did homework. Read lots of books. Watched lots of TV. Eventually I just slept a lot, curling up in my bed, on the couch, on the floor in front of the front door where I listened to people drop things off.

I didn't really think about anything. I didn't think about my dad. But I also thought about him all the time.

Mom and I lived in my father's perfect house until carbon monoxide from the old, imperfect furnace smothered us in our sleep.

When we died, Mom drifted above her chair, hanging on just long enough to see that I had died too, and there was nothing left to cling to in life. Then she slid into the next world with a glimmer of color, then nothing.

I might have followed her. But then the smell of Guadalupe's perfume flooded the room, followed by Guadalupe herself. I could see her for the first time—the gaudy floral patterns on her flowing dress and scarf, the curly hair that waved around her face, the crows-feet that crinkled sympathetically as she smiled and said, "First of all, I can finally tell you what a bastard I think your father is."

The delivery people figured out something was wrong when

newspapers and grocery bags piled up on the front stoop.

There was a lot of confusion when they first found us, a lot of running around and stopping the carbon monoxide, and a lot of long phone calls made out on the street, too far away to eavesdrop on. Guadalupe added to the chaos by flaring the scent of her perfume and draping herself over people in the house, laughing musically as they brushed off their sudden goosebumps.

They carried the bodies out with sheets thrown over them. I thought about going with mine, wondering whether Dad would show up at my funeral. Guadalupe stopped me at the door.

"You want to get trapped in a hole in the ground, in some crowded cemetery?" she asked, tapping her long painted fingernails against the doorframe. "Stay here with me. Your father's bound to come eventually."

"What do I do if he does?" I asked numbly.

She threw her head back and laughed. "You give him a piece of your mind."

Haunting an empty house wasn't terribly different from living in one, except I had Guadalupe after I died.

I talked with her all the time. About her life, which had been so much longer than mine. About things I wished I could have done, and things she wished she hadn't done. We talked about my dad. We cursed, and ranted, and made plans for revenge. And I waited.

I figured that someday, he'd walk through the door and *feel* me there. Maybe even see me. Recognize me, somehow, though he hadn't seen me since years before I died. *Then* I'd get to ask him all my questions. *Then* I'd get to accuse him, get to make him suffer, get to *hurt* him and make him understand.

But he never came.

And then the *For Sale* sign went up.

I'd worried that he'd died too. And if he was dead, what would happen to me?

He was not dead. But he was older. Much older than I remembered, his posture bent and his face wrinkled. He looked up at the house, unsmiling.

He didn't go inside.

I hovered behind him, not wanting to scare him away—not until he went inside. I tugged his tie during a gust of wind, and when I realized his hair was a toupee, I tugged that, too. It flew off his head and he

scrambled forward after it, and those few steps pushed him over whatever barrier had held him back.

He kept moving forward, hairpiece clenched between his hands. He scuffed his shoes getting up the broken front stairs. I followed, whirling around his balding head and whispering into his ears. "You finally came back...too late."

He didn't hear me.

I followed him into the living room, where Guadalupe shimmered into her usual form, drawn and strengthened by the attention of a newcomer.

"You deserve to rot," she shouted into my father's face, her cheeks flushed with righteous anger.

He didn't react. Just glanced around the living room, brows scrunched together, clinging to his hairpiece like a string of rosary beads.

"He's as old as my husband was," Guadalupe muttered, swirling from one side of the room to the other impatiently.

When he saw my name scratched into the floor, he swallowed hard and knelt to touch the letters. He didn't look scared. Just...sad.

I stared at him as Guadalupe hovered beside me.

"You've been waiting for this," she said. "He *deserves* this."

When I still didn't move, she gathered her strength and threw herself into the floorboards. They warped under the force of her will, and splintered and split under my father's scuffed shoes.

He fell through layer after layer, each surface weakened by Guadalupe until he landed *hard* in a deep, dirt-walled pit.

"Wait," I shouted, dropping to Guadalupe's resting place, trying to touch my father's face as he cried out and shrank away from the bones that had scattered beneath him. "That wasn't the plan. That could've killed him."

"He *deserves* it, doesn't he?" Guadalupe said calmly, settling onto the ground among her shattered skeleton. "We've *always* been planning for *this*."

"I changed my mind," I whispered. "I just want him to go away. I want to go away."

"Not before I do," Guadalupe said softly. My father pressed himself against the wall of the pit and shouted for help. There were rips in his suit, and a bloody gash on his cheek. "I won't be alone again...Now that they'll find me, I think I'll be able to leave...soon."

"Please," I said, not sure what I was even asking for.

She really looked at me then, and shot up to fold me into her arms. "Oh, sweetheart...You were so good to me, always listening to my stories. You were the only one who ever paid attention to me, for such a long time." She sighed. "You even kept me from fading, which I'll always be grateful for. If you hadn't died when you had, I might have vanished then and there."

I didn't return her hug. I just watched my father fumble with his cellphone, trying to find a signal. It all felt so distant, just as it had when I died.

"It was your idea to wreck the house," I said quietly. "Did you...wreck the furnace, back then?"

Guadalupe stiffened and pulled away from me, pressing a hand to her chest, affronted. "You'd accuse me of something like that? One of your dearest friends? I watched you grow up, darling. I could *never* have done something like that."

Her denial was long, and passionate, and it sounded a lot like the stories she'd always told me.

I hovered on the other side of the pit, close to my father—but not close enough to make him uncomfortable—and I stopped listening to her.

She kept talking anyway. She talked until the sirens of an ambulance blared far above us, and people lowered ropes to pull my father out of the pit. She preened as they examined her bones, and she draped herself over them the same way she'd draped herself over those who came to remove me and Mom's bodies from the empty house.

I stayed close to my father as they patched him up in the back of an ambulance. I held onto the sleeve of his ripped suit and rethought everything. Guadalupe had always egged me on, fed my anger, called for blood. She was an old ghost. An angry ghost, though the subject of her anger had passed away long ago. Her fury and her need for attention were all that kept her from fading. How long before I turned into that?

Then, when a plump woman in a purple sweater and jeans ran up and threw her arms around my dad, sobbing, I realized that I didn't want to end up like Guadalupe.

There was only one way to make sure that didn't happen.

As my father tried to reassure Sandy, I drifted back into the house, past the damage we'd done, past the hole in the floor and the bone on the mantel, to the place on the floor where I'd died in my sleep.

I sat down and crossed my legs, and I thought about the look that had been in my father's eyes when he saw my name on the floorboards.

He hasn't forgotten me. That's enough.

I watched my fingers begin to shimmer and disappear, and I let myself slide into another world.

Dark Waters

By Joshua Klope, Elementary Education

Peter watched from across the living room.

He sat on an old couch in a shadowy corner, legs crossed, idly holding a glass of water. The air was thick with the odor of cheap beer. The lights were dim. The bass of the drumbeat pulsed, drowning out the music, though it was nearly equaled by the occasional piercing, uncontrolled, intoxicated outburst of laughter. Peter did not laugh. He merely sat, perfectly calm, watching. As he watched, he smiled, just a little. Joylessly. Emptily. Knowingly. The one who was once his friend. He had yet to cast a single glance in Peter's direction.

Peter hadn't expected he would, of course. The one who was once his friend had made it perfectly clear, in his own ways, that he, like all the others, had had enough. Peter didn't blame him. He himself would have done the same thing. No need to hope for the hopeless.

Jen Hawthorne walked by, clumsily carrying three cans of beer. She was in his Calculus class. She glanced once at him, said nothing, and continued on.

He hadn't come here expecting anything, in fact. Tonight was an experiment. A last chance for anyone to try. He had never liked parties, with their loud music, laughing, and ethanol-infused drinks. But this was high school. This was life. He would give it one more chance.

Micah Fuller, laughing and shouting, emerged from the basement. Peter had talked to him at lunch a few times. As he led his friends into the light of the kitchen, he glanced once at Peter. He said nothing, and was gone.

Peter, his mouth dry, eyed his glass of water indifferently. He hadn't taken a sip. He set it on the floor and forgot about it.

Edison High had been a good place to learn, he thought. If he loved to do anything, he loved to learn. And as a sophomore taking senior classes, he had pursued truth with eagerness and wonder. When he finished the simple assignments, he fell to his own studies. Fractals and primes, black holes and quarks. The complexities had invaded his soul and the elegance turned his dreams to the mysteries of the stars. His studies had opened his eyes.

Too bad there was nothing to see.

Tara Heil came in with a cooler full of cans. She tossed one to each of the nine others in the living room. A few caught them, the others

didn't. They all laughed. Tara had some cans left. She glanced once at Peter, said nothing, and went to sit with the others.

That was number fourteen. Of the twenty-seven at this party, fourteen had already ignored him. He had calculated, based on probability and attendance, that he would wait for a three-quarters majority, or until one hundred sixteen minutes were up.

His heart quickened a little. He was getting closer. Closer to the decision. He hadn't expected to be this nervous. He had thought about it for a long time, considered all his options, and he had chosen his most reasonable one. So why was he so tense in anticipating it?

Peter sat on the couch for another thirty-nine minutes as the party continued. More people ignored him. He watched the mindless frivolities somewhat wistfully. He had sometimes wondered if it would be better to be like the others, pursuing the absence of thought with such reckless abandon. Maybe. He would never know.

Someone burst from the basement, giggling. "Hey, everyone! Mike's try sing...tryin' to sing! Come on!" Two followed him downstairs. A few others swore at him, but eventually followed, too. The room got a bit quieter.

Peter blinked. That made a two-thirds majority. More than two-thirds. It was time. He picked up his unused glass of water, stood, and went to the kitchen.

In the doorway he stopped. A couple was up against the fridge. They were kissing furiously. Peter closed his eyes. Felt the old pain in his gut. He walked directly to the sink, dumped the water glass in, and left quickly, trying not to think.

He proceeded to the front door. With his hand on the doorknob, he smiled knowingly over at the one who was once his friend, now passed out on the floor beside a vomit stain.

Goodbye, Peter said silently. And you're welcome.

And he stepped out into the cold night.

The stars weren't out tonight. He regretted that as he walked down the street. He admired the stars. So enormous, yet so small, so peaceful in their distant, burning ferocity. A star does not worry, or think, or feel. It simply is. Peter admired such an existence. Longed for it. Yet here he was, brimming with cells, nerves, arteries, neurons. He stared up at the thick clouds covering the stars. He wished he could see the beauty, one last time.

His heart was still going fast. He was nervous. It was a good kind of nervous, though. This would be the best decision he had ever made, for

everyone involved. And afterward, everything would be all right, forever. He was filled with a glorious peace just thinking about it.

He turned left, heading for the 12th Avenue bridge. It was the perfect place. He had crossed it countless times before. It had a beautiful view of the river, and it was isolated. Just what he needed. His decision was a private matter.

And it was a long time coming, too. Peter rarely did anything without thinking it through first, and this, the best decision of his life, was no exception. There were few negatives. When his father had left, he had taken his family's financial stability with him. Ever since, Peter's mother had struggled to support Peter and his sister, and by now, she had sacrificed far too much for him. Two mouths to feed would be better than three. In that sense, his decision would help both of them. She might miss him, of course, but feelings like that had been explained by attachment theory long ago. He was reasonably sure they wouldn't be permanent. She would probably get over it soon.

No one else would miss him, though. He had learned quickly in high school that friends were a waste of time. They come and they go, if they decide they don't like you. His friends from middle school were gone as soon as he started changing. The one who was once his friend had been a little persistent, but soon, he, too, was gone.

And she was gone.

He clenched his fists and closed his eyes. *Don't think about her.*

He didn't need that pain this night.

At long last, he arrived at the bridge. He walked slowly along its sidewalk for a time, gazing out across the dark expanse of the river. The city glowed, and the night was calm. His favorite kind of night. He leaned against the bridge's cement railing, staring out at the sight, admiring it. The city by the river at night. It was one more of the few beauties he enjoyed in the world. He had wanted to see it once more, before the end. If only the stars were out, too.

He drew in a deep breath, let it out, and gazed down into the inky blackness of the river. He could barely see the current moving, but he knew it was there, knew it was strong enough. He had calculated the distance he would travel before anyone could find him. He had even thought about his exact trajectory and rotation on the way down. If he hit just right, he might lose consciousness first, and meet the end without pain. That was his plan.

His heart was pounding. He was trembling again. *Why* was he nervous? The sun would rise tomorrow, and people everywhere would

greet the day as always, but with one less little trouble in the world. Nothing to lose, for anyone. Everyone was gone. His mother was still there, but she would be fine. His friends were gone, they wouldn't care.

And she was gone.

He clenched his fists, shaking uncontrollably. He squeezed his eyes shut. *Stop, stop, stop.* She had made her choice, and with good reason. He didn't blame her. She was special, and she deserved someone special. Love was for the special. For those who deserved it. For them. Them only. Not for him. Not for him.

The anger brought his fists down on the railing with titanic force. They made a futile smacking sound on the indifferent cement. He was shaking harder. Breathing fast. Slowly, slowly, he unclenched his fists. Pushed the feelings down, like always. Cleared his mind.

It was only him and the river. And the best decision of his life.

The best decision...

The best decision...

He gripped the railing. It was time. He looked left. No one coming. He looked right. No one...

His arms dropped to his sides. A head bobbed, far at the other end of the bridge. Someone coming. He sighed. He would have to wait.

A clacking noise was approaching. He stole another glance and saw she was on crutches. A bit puzzled, he leaned against the railing and stared at the city, trying to look casual. The noise got closer until it was behind him. She passed him, said nothing, and continued on. Peter smiled knowingly. Now to wait until she was gone....

The clacking stopped. There was silence. The clacking resumed, getting louder again. Peter frowned, glanced over covertly. She was coming back. He stared ahead, motionless, pretending he didn't notice.

She set her crutches against the railing and leaned next to them, two feet away. All was quiet for a while. Then, she spoke.

"Hi."

Reluctantly, he glanced over. She smiled calmly at him. He had never seen her before in his life. "Hi," he muttered.

She looked out over the river. "You like it here?"

He followed her gaze. "Yeah," he managed.

"It's beautiful," she said, the smile in her voice.

Silence.

"The city, though," she amended. "Not the river. I don't like rivers."

Silence.

"I'm Sidney," she said, looking back at him. She presented her hand. "What's your name?"

He stared at her, then finally shook the hand. "Uh, Peter."

She smiled again. Why did she keep doing that? "I'm very glad to meet you, Peter."

He held back a laugh. "Same." He hesitated, then decided to voice his puzzlement. "Why are you out here? On crutches, I mean."

"Why not?"

He shrugged, still puzzled.

"I do what I want, go where I want," she said. "I don't let the leg stop me."

He nodded lamely and looked back out at the river.

Long silence.

"You know," she said, deathly calm, "my brother jumped."

He nearly staggered in shock. *How did she...?* But he kept his face calm.

"A little over a year ago now," she continued. "We never saw it coming. One night he goes for a walk, and then three o'clock the next morning, we're in the hospital. He was gone by then, of course."

He could hear the old pain in her voice. "I'm sorry," he said. He almost winced at the irony.

She shrugged. "My dad blamed himself, of course. He hasn't been off the bottle since. My mom...well, we had to hide the knives from my mom."

He felt genuinely sorry for her. And confused. "I'm...sorry."

Silence. "Sometimes, though," she said at last, "I wonder if he had it right. My brother."

He stared. "You have to be joking."

She glared at him. Her young eyes looked old. "Oh, you think?"

He looked away. "Sorry. That's...not what I meant."

"I mean, why not?" She gazed at the river, almost whispering. "Why stay for the pain? There's not much else. Not anymore. I've been thinking about it more and more lately. Just...leaving." Her eyes were lost in the black waters. "I just want to leave."

His mind raced. He felt a desperate urgency. He had to say something, to stop this, but he couldn't. It didn't make any sense. But he forced it out anyway. "You...can't."

She looked at him, her face dull. "Oh?"

"You can't," he said again. "Don't...don't you think they've been through enough?"

Her gaze drifted. "They've done it once. They can do it again."

"No!" He was getting angry. "No! They can't! You can't do that to them. Or...to yourself."

"And why not?" Her eyes returned the anger. "Why can't I? Maybe I want to. What do you know?"

Fury rose within him. *What do I know?* But he pushed it down again, like always. "If you do that," he said, his voice shaking, "you will destroy them."

She looked down, shaking her head.

"No," he insisted. His chest heaved. "No, look at me. You can't do that. Do you hear me?"

She still didn't look.

"Look at me!"

Finally, she complied.

"You cannot do that!" His voice was ragged. "They need you! There are people here who need you!"

"Why?" she whispered. "Why me?"

"Because." It was his turn to look away. His eyes hurt. "You're... special. You don't...walk away. And people need someone like you."

When he looked up again, he saw she was staring at him. Seeming embarrassed, she averted her eyes again. "Maybe you're right."

In the long silence that followed, Peter leaned back against the railing. His mind was reeling. His emotions warred within him. Anger. Empathy. Confusion. The urgency of helping her, and the urgency of disobeying his own advice. And the infuriating sense that he had just been tricked.

"Maybe," she said at last, "not tonight." She took up her crutches and fit them under each arm. "Maybe I'll wait. But if you're wrong, I'll blame you."

It might have been a joke. Peter didn't laugh.

"I should head home." She smiled cryptically. "Goodbye, Peter."

"Bye," he said hoarsely. He wasn't sure if she heard him.

She clacked slowly away, but stopped again, looking back. "And... thank you. I'm glad you were here tonight."

His eyes were lost in the cement of the railing as she departed. He tried to understand what had just happened. He couldn't. He couldn't understand why he had said those things, this night of all nights. And he couldn't imagine not saying them.

He glanced once at the dark waters of the river. He nearly vomited. He clenched his eyes shut against the decision he had nearly made. The

worst decision of his life.

All at once, his strength, his perfect resolve, failed him. He
down to his knees. Curled up sideways against the railing. Tucked
head. And Peter cried. He cried for his mother, for his sister. He cried
the friends who had not understood him.

And he cried for her. For Grace. The girl who tried.

Tomorrow, or soon, he would find them all. And he would find
All of it. He didn't know how, but he would.

But for now, tonight, he would cry.

He sank
eked his
ried for

ld fix it.



King of Shovels

By Kali Wolkow, Art and Graphic Design/Journalism

Sleeping

By Tyler Farr, English Teaching

I got into the bad habit when I was younger to pretend that I was asleep at sleepovers. Today, I just do it to eavesdrop; bad habit I know, but you always find out the deepest of secrets when people think you are out cold. That night as I lay there, I wasn't expecting to hear anything special. Heck, I wasn't expecting to hear anything at all. For once I just couldn't sleep.

I had just gotten back from a long day of wedding shopping with my mom. The big day was only a few weeks away, and we decided to spend the day tying up loose ends. I was supposed to stay at her house for the night, but she was tired and I thought that I could surprise my fiancé, Tyler, by coming home early. Instead, when I arrived back at my apartment I found that no one was home and neither my roommate Megan, nor Tyler were picking up their phones.

I probably would have actually gotten a decent night's sleep if Megan hadn't come home. I had fallen asleep on the couch watching some old wedding specials, too lazy to get up and go to my room. Sometime after midnight, she came bursting through the door, drunk, and with yet another guy. I didn't move because I knew that I would be able to avoid an awkward situation if I just pretended that I was in some kind of deep sleep.

As I lay there, covered by a ginormous afghan, I could hear them rolling around down the hall. I tried hard not to squirm, and gripped the soft corners of the blanket, pulling it closer. I could feel the corner of my engagement ring snag against the soft fabric. I knew I was curled up with my back toward the television because I could smell the old beer soaked into the back cushion. I tried hard not to laugh and gag at the same time.

I assumed that Megan would fall into her room after a quick and heated make-out session involving the awkward removal of clothes. I listened as they thumped against the wall by the door, slammed the door shut, and fumbled with their shoes. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were making quite a ruckus down the hall. *Stay completely still*, I told myself, hoping she wouldn't see me. There is nothing more awkward than realizing that you did the nasty in front of your "sleeping" roommate.

I don't think they saw me in the heat of the moment because I listened as they threw each other down the hall like some over-energetic

dogs playing tug-o-war, and into the sitting room. *Oh no...*

"Kristen is at her Mom's until tomorrow, right?" I heard the male voice ask. My body stiffens. The voice was as familiar as my own.

"Yes," I heard Megan huff.

"She'll never know," he said. "This can be our little secret. Your wedding gift to me."

I touched the cool gold of my engagement ring, spinning it. My body went cold.

Wet Pavement

By Kaitlin Floerchinger, Public Relations

I grew up just outside a small town, about fifteen minutes from the borders of a small metropolis. Living in the country means a few things, with one of them being an abundance of lonely roads with few signs and even fewer houses. Growing up, parents were always warning their kids about driving on those roads. The quality of the asphalt was poor. The numerous hills and valleys made for limited visibility, especially in the rain, snow, or fog. The fields on either side ensured several animals met their doom as they ventured across (or tried to). All of these factors meant that the threat of an accident was held over the heads of all the young drivers.

The threats were well-placed, for the town had its fair share of cemetery plots filled with accident victims. In the past thirty years, seventeen people had met their Maker on the roads around the town. One road in particular had claimed nine, with seven of them under the age of 21. Countless more people had flipped, blown tires, struck animals, or stalled late at night on that stretch of crumbled pavement. 310th Street became grimly known as Death's Drive.

There were many stories about Death's Drive, tales of haunted land plots and ravaged souls hovering in the deep ditches. But one legend seemed to have more root in truth. Several people who had crashed on the road all recalled the same sight – an old silver Oldsmobile creeping down the road past the scene. Never going over 45, the car was driven by a quiet old man with a faded red ball cap and white button-up shirt, no matter the season. He never stopped to help, just continued past the scene with hands at ten and two, eyes glued to the horizon. No one knew who he was or where he lived, but he was a regular whenever someone had car trouble or had animal bodies smeared across their cracked windshield. People didn't talk too much about it though – they just waved it off as chance, as a curious driver checking out the scene. But it still made people uncomfortable, the thought of that old gray Oldsmobile and the even older driver.

I had never been in an accident, and my record of getting pulled over was just as clean. I drove safely, although not always with the law in mind. My father had blessed me with his old Pinto, and damn did I love that car. To see a girl in an '83 Pinto was a rare sight, and I relished the looks that "car guys" flashed when I roared past (the muffler was gone,

and had been since my dad bought it in '98). Even though it was much older than me, I could coax that baby up to 95 on a clear day with no wind, and I always did when the weather allowed it. I stayed off Death's Drive on days like that – the hills and valleys made me too nervous to get the old engine going. But I used the road for other occasions, like going to work and visiting my boyfriend's house, three miles past the intersection of Death's Drive and the main highway.

It had been nine months since someone had been towed into town thanks to an incident on Death's Drive, which was a record. Early spring usually brought a couple deer-strikers or hydro-planers into the old body shop, but the slate so far had been clean. There had been reports of deer herds moving through the fields, but I didn't think of them on that May afternoon.

I was late for work – I knew that even before I checked the clock on the dash. Coming from soccer practice, I had stopped to talk to the coach about a line-up change. The meeting had gone long, and I now had fifteen minutes to go the 25 miles to the grocery store in the metropolitan suburbs. It was raining, a soft, seemingly never-ending spring rain with dark clouds but no threat of a thunderstorm; my favorite type of rain.

The boy and I had been dating for a year, that day exactly. We were going out after I got off work to celebrate. My birthday was the following week, and I relished no longer being a child, but a legal adult. The school year was ending the week after, which meant the end of four years in the same place. So many things were coming up, and all of them happy. I cruised out of town at a good clip, my mind dwelling on the richness of life.

I don't remember why I looked down. I may have gotten a text message, the radio station may have had a commercial, or I may have wanted a drink from the water bottle lying next to me. But I remember the expression on the deer's face when I looked up. Eyes calm, teeth grinding a piece of grass, the doe wasn't scared – she stood like a painting, a sharp tan contrast to the damp charcoal of the road behind her. Without thinking, I violated the code of Driver's Ed instructors everywhere and veered from the deer, towards the other lane. I at least had the sense to check for oncoming traffic.

The Pinto resisted my yank with his tires, hydroplaning me across the center line and spinning back end first into the soft gravel shoulder. This time, I resisted, jerking the wheel the other way to try to counteract the ditch's pull. It almost worked; I felt the front tires grip the pavement before physics ripped the back wheels off the shoulder and into the air.

The ditch was low enough that when the back tires slipped off the shoulder, the drop-off was eight feet of wet grass and sucking mud. Gravity showed up then, tipping the car backward, like a real Pinto rears when the reins are pulled taut in the mouth. An object in motion tends to stay in motion, and my object was in motion at a solid 70 miles per hour. When the tail end struck the dirt at the bottom of the ditch, the entire car went airborne, like a freaky bouncy ball. I remember the silence as the car drifted through the air. It seemed to take minutes, but couldn't have been more than a second. Then the screaming started.

No, I wasn't screaming. I was too busy blacking out. But the wreckage of my dear Pinto told the story. The front end smashed into the banks of the ditch, shearing the metal off the frame. It groaned and shrieked as it was ripped backwards and up, for the car was determined to somersault like the tumbleweeds that lay rotting in the ditch. End over end, the Pinto flipped, like a child showing off at a gymnastics lesson. Each flip brought about more screaming of metal and groaning of earth, for the grasses and mud were violently uprooted and smeared like paint. After five turns, my dear Pinto came to rest on his top, emitting one final wheeze before settling into the quagmire. I remember seeing that final wheeze, for I was ten feet away, my neck cranked back and the world upside down.

I was hot. Hot and wet. Remarkably, I felt fine, except for the kink in my neck and the heat spreading across my torso. So much adrenaline. My torn seatbelt lay across my chest, and to this moment I have no idea how it stayed with me. The shattered glass of the windshield lay like a poorly made trail between me and my precious Pinto; the shards lay in what appeared to be the path of my high-velocity, albeit short, slide through the dense grass. I wasn't panicked or delirious – I just wanted to get up and call someone for help, but my cell phone was ten feet behind me, slowly sinking into a puddle of mud. The screen was shattered, but it was a new phone; I wasn't worried because I had a warranty. I'd get a new one tomorrow.

When I went to stand up, it took me a minute. It was almost like the ground was tugging me back, keeping me entombed in the soggy earth. When I managed to pull myself free, I looked up the embankment to see if I could climb out without covering myself in mud. Using the grass as levers, I wriggled myself up the side of the ditch and onto the shoulder, feeling swell considering I had just performed a circus-worthy acrobatics session with my car. I couldn't believe I was fine, but I wasn't going to complain. I stopped short of a celebration jig when I saw the car

sitting on the road.

The gray Oldsmobile was facing the opposite direction of the way I was headed before the crash. Therefore, it sat idle right in front of me, windshield wipers ticking away the rain. The old man was sitting just as the stories told: hands at ten and two, eyes on the horizon. I watched him slowly take his hand to his door, and the click of the lock allowed the passenger door to swing open without a sound. He turned to me and smiled, a soft smile, one reserved for a loved one.

“Want a ride, dearest?”

I heard sirens echoing in the distance, and I turned to the ditch while preparing myself to say, “Maybe I’ll wait here for the ambulance, just in case.” My breath caught in my chest as I looked at the accident from above. The Pinto was ruined, rain washing the mud off and revealing the ugly tears and gashes in the dark blue paint. The glass shards traced a path longer than the ten feet I had thought. The trail raced more than thirty feet away, stopping at a tattered something in the grass. I gawked at the blood in the grass, at the ravaged body of the doe. Why was she so close to where I had been laying? Had I hit her after all?

I slid down the embankment, aware of the flashing lights rushing down the road about three miles away. When I got to the deer, I realized I had made a terrible mistake. A human hand laid outstretched above the body of a person – a girl wearing khaki pants, a red polo, and a gray jacket. A fresh blood stain stretched across my torso, my neck at an almost comical angle, eyes staring into the rain-darkened sky. The hundreds of lacerations on my face and hands had stopped bleeding, leaving a pock-marked appearance against my once clear skin. I stood over myself, staring at my face for what seemed hours as rain fell around me – us. There was no deer. Even when the sirens arrived, tires skidding to a stop on the road, I didn’t move. Even when the firemen and EMTs blundered down the slope, I didn’t move. Even when the fire chief, my uncle, dropped to his knees and wailed, grasping my bloodied head in his hands and against his chest, I didn’t move. Even when I realized I was gone, I didn’t move.

When they finally gathered my tortured body into a black bag and onto the gurney, I moved. I followed the progress of that bag out of the ditch and into the ambulance. I watched as firemen and EMTs clapped each other on the shoulders, tears mingling with the rain on their muddy faces. My parents’ vehicle screeched up, and they flew from the car into the arms of two firemen who stopped their stumbling. My mother screamed my name, over and over again, but I didn’t have the will

to go to her; it would do no good. I watched my father collapse onto the pavement, and my mother crumble beside him. Amazingly, no one had noticed the old man and his gray Oldsmobile, who still sat in the lane closest to the carnage. Then I realized why he was there. Why he always was around. Why he had stopped today.

With a final glance at the living bodies surrounding my own desecrated one, I walked to the passenger side of the Oldsmobile and slipped into the seat, not caring about my wet pants or muddy feet. The old man smiled at me again, this time a sad smile of understanding. He patted my hand once and shifted the car into drive. We silently pulled away from the scene, until all that was left in the mirror was the flashing of the red and blue against the wet pavement.



Hope

By Jenna Kitchenmaster, Psychology/Biology Health Professions

If Wishes Were Free

By Jessica Ausborn, Ancient History

Elina practically grew up on the streets. Even though she had a home and a mother, she tried to avoid the area. Her drug addict mother always wondered when Elina was coming home, and called almost every day to ask why she wasn't at the house. Elina glanced at her cell phone—one new voice mail. She powered down her phone, sliding it back into her jeans' pocket. *Go home*, Elina thought contemptuously, *so that your new boyfriend can look at me like I'm some kind of dessert? Not likely.* It wasn't unusual for Elina to slip out when her mother became too high to protect her from the leeches her mother brought home almost every night.

Elina had put up with this for almost eighteen years. Once she hit eighteen, she'd be gone. That was what she kept telling herself. No longer would she have to hear her mother's complaints. She had tried to talk her mother into going somewhere to get help for her meth addiction, but her mom refused to listen to her. Her mom couldn't admit that her addiction was out of control and causing problems.

But Elina could see that it was killing her mom. And as much as she hated to admit it, it frightened her. Watching her mom grow thin because she wouldn't eat when she was high made Elina wonder if the next time her mom was high would be the day that she collapsed from malnutrition. When her mother wasn't high; either an incessant, anxious drumming of her mother's fingers would fill the house, or utter silence when she was sleeping for hours on end recorded her mother's crash.

If Elina believed that zombies could exist; her mother was one. Her mother's blood-shot eyes were almost overwhelmed by the puffy skin of too many sleepless nights. The smell of rotting teeth was ever-present when Elina would come in close contact with her mother. Overall, her mother just sat there, her bones protruding from her sallow skin. Sometimes, her mother would be restless before disappearing to cater to her addiction. It was during these times that Elina never knew if she would see her mother again.

One evening, like many other evenings, Elina wandered around the streets of her city until early morning. On these typical nights when she wandered, she'd climb the fire escape of an empty brick building that was just a few blocks from her house to wait out the rest of the night on the roof, staring at stars until she fell asleep. Except tonight it was raining. There were no stars, and certainly no covering on the roof for her

to sleep under. So, she found a spot under an awning of a grocery store on Main Street.

It was probably the farthest she had wandered in a while. Mostly she slowly wandered her way to the old brick building that had been a lot of things during its time of use. She estimated that she was probably a mile or more away from her home.

A yawn tensed her jaw and she ran her hand through her dripping light-brown hair, pulling her jacket more tightly about her as if tidying her appearance would make her feel any less tired. She kicked a crushed can at the gutter. It missed.

"I wish I didn't live with her," Elina muttered, crossing her arms across her chest in an attempt to retain body heat. Trickles of rain water coated the pavement of the sidewalk, so sitting down wasn't really an option. She settled for leaning her back against the store front. The awning protected her from most of the rain, but every now and then a gust of wind would sweep the rain under it. Was it really too much to ask to be able to stay dry for one night, she wondered. Was it too much to sleep in her own bed?

"You should be careful what you wish for."

Elina jumped and squeaked in surprise. She hadn't noticed that a young girl had joined her under the awning. She wasn't sure if she had nodded off or if she simply wasn't paying enough attention to her surroundings. Elina tried to gauge the age of the girl, but she found she was unable because it was too hard to make out the face by the dim glow of a distant street light.

"What are you doing out here?" Elina asked once she'd recovered her voice. She shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her saturated jacket to try to warm them up and bounced slightly on her heels. She'd been in one place too long and was starting to become cold.

"I'm watching the rain," the girl said, with a strange, breathy and dreamy tone as she spoke. "Don't they look like stars falling?" The young girl stepped closer and sat against the wall like Elina.

"Uh—sure," Elina admitted slowly, "I guess they do kinda look like stars." She glanced out at the rain dripping from the awning. "Your parents must be worried about you."

Elina watched the girl's shoulders rise and fall in a shrug.

"I bet they are. Let's get you home and out of the wet." Elina said as she pushed herself off of the wall and removed her hands from her pockets. She wrung out water from her bangs and tucked them behind her ear.

"Do we have to?" the girl whined. "Why can't we stay here for a while?"

"Nope." Elina said, not bothering to say anything further but motioning for the girl to show the way to her home.

The young girl sighed, but complied. She started down the street—in the opposite direction that Elina had come from. "It's just over here," she said, pointing out a house at the corner of the street. Elina walked with her up to the porch. As they reached the stairs, the porch light turned on automatically.

"Thanks..." The girl said, rotating slightly to face Elina. She only looked to be eight at the most, with pale hair, and two different colored eyes that seemed too bright to be real. One eye was a very light blue, almost as if she were blind, while the second was a dark, vibrant green. Elina inadvertently took a step back. The girl opened the front door, but before she went in, she leaned forward to Elina and whispered, "I like you...so I'm going to warn you: wishes are very dangerous. You might regret it—your wish. There's always a price, Elina."

Elina was about to ask how the girl knew her name but the door closed and the girl didn't open it again. Elina sighed, turned to the street and began her slow wander back home. She had had enough of the rain and was willing to put up with her mother and her mother's boyfriend if it meant a change of dry clothes.

When she turned onto her street, she found glaring red and white lights. An ambulance was parked in front of her house. She ran up to the small crowd and elbowed her way through.

"What happened?" she screamed, running up to a paramedic.

The paramedic looked at her with gentle understanding, and Elina hated the calmness of the man's eyes.

"There was an overdose," he said simply.

Elina felt all of the air leave her lungs, and the paramedic grabbed her by the elbow. "M-m-m-my mom?" She stuttered and the man nodded. She shoved him away. "No!" she screamed refusing to believe what he said. Even though she hated that her mom was a drug addict, she had never wished for her mother to have an overdose.

A figure on a gurney was being rolled out of her front door. As it rolled by her, Elina unzipped the bag so she could see the victim's face. It hardly looked like her mother... her pale and bloated lips were blue-tinted. She looked like nothing more than a skeleton; just an empty shell now. Elina could think of nothing to say. She couldn't say good-bye... because she couldn't accept that her mother was truly dead. She felt like

she was choking, and then she began to sob.

Oh, mom... I tried to get you help. You were supposed to get better. I was supposed to get you better.

A few hours later, Elina sat on swing-set at a nearby park. She didn't move; only stared at the wood chips beneath her black, Airwalk shoes.

Elina jumped at a familiar pensive voice behind her. "Wishes aren't all they seem to be, are they?" It was the same girl that she had met yesterday.

"Why do you say that?" Elina asked, studying the girl's blue and green eyes. In broad daylight, she could clearly see the girl's white blonde hair and pale skin that made her seem almost ghost-like. However, the girl's pink jacket with a frilly, light green dress underneath and "Dora the explorer" tennis shoes didn't add to the possibility of her being a ghost.

"You didn't want to live with your mother," the girl said unhurriedly. "Now, you don't. But you're still not happy."

Elina sprang from the swing. "How do you know that?" she growled, stalking towards the young girl, who didn't seem the least bit afraid of her angry approach.

"It was your wish," the girl said unpretentiously. "That's what I do."

Elina stopped. "You...you killed her?" she asked, trying to make sense of what the little girl had said. "I didn't wish that."

"It was... a solution."

"Take it back!" She grabbed the girl by her light pink jacket, but the girl vaporized and Elina was left holding the jacket. The girl reformed a few feet away, in exactly the same outfit she had been wearing, minus the jacket.

"I don't *un*-grant my wishes," she said. "I *only* grant them." Her face seemed much, much older than an eight-year-old girl's. Her green and her blue eyes glowed, flashing with sparks of something Elina couldn't identify.

"Then I wish that my mother didn't die," Elina said desperately. Any pride left in her disappeared as she fell to her knees. Her view of the girl blurred as tears stung the backs of her eyes. "In fact, I...I wish that she was alive and well. And...And I wish she wasn't a drug addict."

The girl paused for a moment, the expression on her face almost appearing to be...regret? Pity? "Are you sure that you want these wishes to come true? Your mother died paying the price of your last wish." The girl had stopped sounding like she was only half-awake. Instead, her

voice was low; lower than it should have been for an eight-year-old girl. Instead, she sounded much, much older as the temperature surrounding the two seemed to drop to match the girl's voice. "What are you willing to give in return for these two wishes?"

"...Anything..." Elina breathed.

Immediately she felt herself yanked backwards as the sky suddenly darkened. The playground disappeared, replaced by the straight walls of the stores on Main Street. Rain poured down, dizzying in her tear-distorted vision, until she blinked and found herself leaning against the wall of the grocery store. An awning above her umbrellaed the rain, but Elina didn't notice. She ran back to her house and stormed into the kitchen.

"Elina!" her mom cried. "Where have you been?" Her mother admonished her lovingly but Elina didn't even hear her mother's scolding. She stared at the woman standing before her that looked completely unlike her mother. She was trim, but not undernourished. Her brown hair was tucked neatly into a French braid. Elina couldn't remember the last time her mother had bothered to even brush her hair, much less style it. Her mother's eyes were clear and bright, although the make-up around them looked slightly smeared as if she'd wiped her eyes recently. Elina couldn't believe this woman before her could be the meth-addicted mother she had lost just a few hours ago.

Elina blinked her eyes and her mother circled her with her arms.

"I was so worried," her mom whispered, before pressing her lips against the side of Elina's head. "I didn't know where you had gone!" She held Elina at arm's length. "We were going to watch movies because tomorrow is my day off." She offered the barest of smiles and Elina nodded, trying not to cry. She couldn't remember the last time her mom had shown affection for anything other than her addiction.

"Yeah." Elina's voice broke and she quickly tried to rub the tears from her eyes. "Sorry," she said after she felt like she could speak again without crying, "I forgot."

The next day, she ran to the store to pick up a few things for her mom. As she walked out of the house, she noticed how much neater everything seemed. The carpets didn't smell musty and weren't stained. The walls no longer had holes in them. And even the couch wasn't dirty or so worn that it was falling apart. Apparently her mother had never become a drug-addict and instead worked most of her days in a bookstore and coffee shop. They actually had money to buy the things that they needed and Elina finally slept in her own bed again.

Elina was just about to cross the street when a sharp pain cut through her torso. She tried to take a breath but no air entered her lungs. Her knees ground into the pavement; she felt the rocks digging into her skin through her jeans. She felt a stinging pain that brought tears to her eyes. Her vision wavered. Her heart pounded erratically as a wave of extreme heat flashed through her.

What's happening? she screamed in her mind, feeling the beats of her heart quicken and then slow only to increase in speed again. That was when the young girl appeared in front of her. Elina squinted through the searing pain and glimpsed the little girl's expression of pity or regret. "There's a price," the girl whispered, shaking her head slowly. "There's always a price.... I told you that."

Wh-what's the price? Nausea settled deep in her stomach as pinpricks flashed across her legs, arms, and along the sides of her jaw. Her legs and arms grew numb and she watched helplessly as the pavement rushed towards her face. Unable to break her fall, she felt her head rebound slightly against the concrete as her vision turned to multicolored dots of light before being consumed by darkness. Even then her body fought frantically to stay conscious. She knew that as soon as she lost consciousness it would be over. It couldn't be over. She finally had someone that cared about her.

"Each wish I grant comes at the expense of the life of another, Elina. First, it was your mother's. Now..."

Now...It's mine.

Nonfiction

First Place - Sarah Odom
"Tears, Love, and Music"

Second Place - Amber McCoy
"Simple Words"

Third Place - Eryn Schlote
"The Language of Art"

Honorable Mention - Deborah Admire
"Rachel's Children"

FIRST PLACE

Judge's Notes:

In her heartbreaking and heart-lifting remembrance of her grandfather, "Tears, Love, and Music," Sarah Odom bookends her tribute with an expansion of her title, observing, "Life is nothing but tears, love, and music." This is a wonderfully effective and deeply affecting strategy. At the start, this line sounds the opening bars of a theme Odom successfully animates and varies throughout, doing so through the fullness and authenticity of the loving relationships she crafts, the particularity and originality of her detail, and the absorbing structure she shapes. At the end of the story, her assertion about tears, love, and music sounds like applause celebrating all that is best in this life, an ovation that, after wiping tears from your own eyes, you will want to join, cheering.

Tears, Love, and Music

By Sarah Odom, Vocal Performance/Writing and Rhetoric

Life is nothing but tears, love, and music.

"He really wants to see you sing, you know?" Gramma murmurs with a soft voice and watery eyes.

That's Papa. He is not worried about losing his hair or his strength. He is not worried about the amount of pain to come his way. He is worried about missing out on my recital. He is worried about missing out on things that make him happy. My grandpa is worried about missing out on life.

As bad as it sounds, I feel loved knowing that Papa is so devastated. He appreciates my musicianship exponentially more than anyone I know. My performances all end in the same way: I waltz up to him on light feet, give him a soft smile, and ask, "Did you like it, Papa?"

At first, he tries to remain casual with a shrug and a small nod. "Pretty good," he'll say. However, within a moment his expression will go from deadpan to a distorted pucker: pressing his lips together, giving a small frown, and twisting his furry brow. I will feel him wrap his long burly arms around me and his body will convulse in a sob. Through gasps of air he'll whisper, "We're real proud of you, Uncle Sarah."

"Uncle Sarah," Papa whispers as I hold his hand by the hospital bed. "Uncle Sarah Lee."

Papa gave me the nickname "Uncle Sarah Lee" when I was a

baby. It's strange that I don't find it strange to be called "uncle." Not even Papa knows where the name came from. "You just look like an uncle. Right, Sarah Lee?"

I have always found the name sort of catchy though—it has a likeable rhythm to it. Papa takes full advantage of that rhythm and will wander around his house and sing my name as if it is a number from a musical: "Uncle Sarah Leeeeeee. Uncle Sarah Leeeeeeeeee." Sometimes he will even add my sister's lovely nickname to the mix: "Uncle Sarah Leeee and Cousin Aaaaaamy." My sister got the long end of the stick in Papa's nomenclature.

Lee is in no way a part of my name, by the way. My name is Sarah Renee, but Papa thought it would be funny to call me Sarah Lee—like the bread.

Bread is something Papa adores—not so much eating it, but baking it. He hates when Gramma bakes bread before he does. Though Gramma was the one who taught him how to bake bread in their early years of marriage, Papa claims bread-making as his job. However, when given the opportunity to make bread-making a social event, he doesn't hesitate to jump upon it. I can literally see his entire being gleaming like a Christmas tree when I ask if I can spend the day baking with him.

For him, dough is a living and breathing organism: "Really beat 'em up," he'll say as I help him knead the dough. "The yeast in there likes that. It wakes 'em up. It makes 'em say 'Weeee!'"

"They like being beat up?" I ask.

"Yeah, don't you?" he'll ask as he gently socks my upper arm. I can tell he is amused with himself. "It makes them feel alive."

Alive. He's alive. The doctors told me on Thursday morning that the night before looked unpromising and that he was *still* hanging by a thread. I knew better—he's too stubborn. His stubbornness is what made him win this battle. Tonight, Friday, April 19, I am spending my time in the E.R. next to his bedside. Gah! He's so stubborn. He doesn't want to go to sleep because he might miss out on something.

"Is it morning?" he asks in a complete daze from being so heavily sedated.

"Nope. It's one o'clock in the morning. You should go back to sleep. Get some rest."

He nods and then awkwardly closes his eyes, feigning slumber. I can tell he is uncomfortable, but he would never let me know that. He's

too proud.

As I examine his body, I notice that if it weren't for the excessive amount of tubes jutting from his arms and for the miserable expression on his face, he would look completely healthy. He is nothing but solid body (a redwood tree for a torso; pillars for arms and legs), which could be attributed to years spent farming and doing handiwork. Still, though his body is strong, stronger yet is his enthusiasm.

His enthusiasm causes him to overflow with love. He still gets excited about my sister and me coming over to visit. Even if we had seen him the day before, he acts like he has not seen us in months. There have been entire weeks where I have slept over at my grandparents' house, yet he is still thrilled to serve us homemade bread and cinnamon rolls for breakfast, give us ice water before we go to sleep, and tell us stories of when we were little. "You were supposed to stay little," he'll joke. "But that's alright. You're always going to be my sweetie-pies."

His enthusiasm is also what makes me want to nail his limbs to the bedroom mattress so he will be forced to rest awhile. It doesn't matter how extreme the situation is, he will always insist he is okay. Back when he had a stroke, he claimed there was no need to take him to a doctor. When he had a seizure, he swore there was no reason to worry. Now, we can see his belly swelling up like a watermelon—he looks nine months pregnant. Papa tells us that he has a belly ache, but we know better. He needs to see a doctor.

I see an incoming call from Gramma after the hospital visit and answer apprehensively.

"We think he might have cancer," she murmurs softly.

"Crap." I hang my head and press my palms to my forehead.

Papa hung his head and pressed his palms to his forehead as I got in his truck to go home from the candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

I went to the candlelight service to see Papa get excited about it. He explained how thrilled he was to see the church pews filled with people holding candles. "It's magical," he reminded me.

When we walked into the sanctuary, I saw that the accumulation of people was hardly enough to fill four pews. "It used to get so full in here," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders—his eyes glued to the floor. "But now...nothing."

The singing warbled by the members of the congregation was, to put it lightly, disappointing. The compositions themselves were nice, of

course. After all, it *was* a Christmas celebration. But hardly anyone sang, and the jaded and dejected tendencies given off by the congregation members caused them to sound like weary alley cats fighting for their lives in a lonely alley.

When we got into his truck to ride home, he hung his head, pressed his palms to his forehead, and began to cry. Given the recent upset of the experience prior, I knew exactly why he was crying, but I decided to ask anyway, "What's the matter, Papa?"

His sobbing grew even stronger and through loud gasps of air he said, "I don't know, Uncle Sarah. I just—I just don't know. I nev—never used to be like this before that stroke, but now—I cry—about everything."

"It's okay, Papa. I'm sure people will..."

"Anymore, I hear a pretty song and I cry. That was beautiful," he sighs. "What's wrong with me?"

"What's wrong with me?" I ask myself as I look at my blurred and misshapen reflection in the mirror through the tears in my eyes. "Sarah, Papa's doing fine," I assure myself. "Just because he won't make it to your recital doesn't mean he isn't okay. It doesn't mean things aren't going to be okay. Remember that poem?"

"Cancer is so limited...

It cannot cripple love.

It cannot shatter hope.

It cannot corrode faith.

It cannot eat away peace.

It cannot destroy confidence.

It cannot kill friendship.

It cannot shut out memories.

It cannot reduce eternal life.

[It. Can. Not. Reduce. Eternal. Life]

It cannot quench the spirit."

-Bernice Chambers

It's Sunday evening and I have just returned from visiting Papa in the hospital. I know that he is doing okay, but it is hard for me to convince myself that everything is alright. I wipe the smeared mascara from my eyelids and cheeks, and with the most encouraging upbeat voice I can muster, I remind myself, "Music is medicinal. You have been using music to help yourself through this all month. If you don't allow it to heal you now, it will become an annoyance. Just start singing."

As soon as I open my mouth and release that first note, relief

takes over my entire body. I get lost for a while in the music and time becomes nonexistent. I feel utter joy as a happy teardrop falls onto my forearm.

A happy teardrop falls onto my forearm as I watch a couple whose love continued to flourish throughout their entire marriage.

It is not uncommon for me to walk into my grandparents' house unannounced. I don't even find it necessary to use the front door anymore; usually I just open the garage door by entering a code into their security system.

The summer before my freshman year of college I decided to pop in to ask Gramma some questions about financial aid. I usually yell hello when I walk in, but for some reason I decided to be quiet (besides, sometimes it's fun to give Gramma a good scare). But as I inched my way through the house, I heard slow music playing on the stereo and saw a shadow move about the living room floor: the silhouette of two people dancing. I left unannounced. I wonder if music is medicinal for them too.

I wonder if music is medicinal for my family too. Everyone is gathered around the hospital bed, each taking turns holding Papa's hand. Mom's eyes are swollen and bloodshot, Gramma is dripping liquid from both her tear ducts and her nose. Amy seems paralyzed, but leaves to sit in the hallway every time she feels the urge to cry—her boyfriend comforting her as she holds her knees and rocks back and forth. Uncle Steve wraps his arm around my shoulder. Bob (my stepdad) looks me in the eye and mutters, "Glad you could make it, Tara." He hasn't called me Tara since I was a little girl.

Papa has never looked so weak. I hardly recognize him. He's wearing some sort of oxygen mask over his face, which, I guess, is better than the tube two inches in diameter they shoved down his throat earlier this week. His skin is sagging in new places. His breathing is heavy and shallow. His body is splayed out like a ragdoll. This is not Papa I see. This is cancer.

"It's hard to tell how long he will live once he's off life support," the nurse says gently. "It could be almost immediate though, so if there is anything you want to say, say it now. He can hear you, but he won't talk back."

I kneel by the bed and take his warm hand in mine, "Hey, Papa. It's Sarah."

"Uncle Sarah," Gramma corrects me. "She just came from her

choir concert to see you. That's three hours' drive, you know."

"She's got her choir dress on and everything," Mom joined in.

"Maybe you could sing him a song, Sarah?" Gramma insisted. "How about *I'll Fly Away*?"

"Gramma, shhh. I want to say something," I snap. She looks hurt, so I correct myself saying, "Just let me say one thing. We can all sing together."

She nods.

"Hey Papa," I say, "I know you were bummed about not getting to watch me sing. But, hey, you won't have to miss it anymore, right? Right. You are always going to get to see me sing now—even in the practice room. You don't have to miss me or Amy or Mom or Gramma or anyone, because you will be with us always."

I am not sure if I am saying these things for Papa or myself to believe. Maybe I want to comfort myself. Maybe I want to comfort the family. Maybe I want relief from the stress of making my last words good. I am not sure. Whatever the matter, these words feel empty: like echoes in a dark hallway.

"Sing, Sarah," Gramma demanded.

"Will you all join in?" I said looking back to everyone.

"You start, and we'll join in," Mom said.

I started singing:

One glad morning when this life is over
I'll fly away.
To a home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away."

I finish the entire song without anyone joining in, but it doesn't matter. Those words in that overdone old gospel hymn feel more true to me than any words I could come up with on my own.

Papa was taken off life support shortly after I was through singing around 1 a.m. and he didn't pass away until about 9 a.m. That stubbornness. I'm going to miss it.

I know that I have done my fair share of crying this month, but equivalent to the amount of tears I have shed is the amount of beautiful moments I have spent finding love while feeling the music. Tears come with hurt, yes, but when brave enough to make music, love is found. Life is nothing but tears, love, and music.



On a Street Corner in London

By Caitlin Porter, Art and Graphic Design

SECOND PLACE

Simple Words

By Amber McCoy, Writing and Rhetoric

Dragon. Bag. Wagon. Tag. Agriculture. Wag. Magazine.

Once, these words flew smoothly from my brain to my mouth and out to the rest of the world. Now, these words frequently produce amused smirks and gleaming eyes when I say them.

“So,” I say as I walk into a room full of my friends, “can anybody draw me a dragon?”

“A draygon, huh?” Deborah asks.

“Yes,” I grin back at her, “a DRAYgon.”

These interactions have grown more and more common over the past three years. Growing up in Minnesota, I had never encountered the idea that my long-a pronunciation of “-ag” words was incorrect. Then I came to college and made friends from all across the nation. I remember one particularly vehement discussion my freshman year with my friends who grew up in Washington, California, and New Jersey. I was adamant that I was not pronouncing anything incorrectly; rather, they were the ones with the wrong pronunciation. When we arrived back in our dorm, we went straight to the source that can resolve any and all college conflicts: Google.

Unfortunately for me, Google proved me wrong. I conceded that my friends were indeed right, but in a final act of self-preservation, I declared that I would never change the way I spoke, even though I knew I was wrong.

My declaration had several layers hidden within it. Superficially, my competitive side had emerged during our conversation and I was refusing to allow myself to be completely defeated. They were religion and history majors, after all, while I was a lofty English major. I was supposed to have the final say in all things word-related. Through most of my pre-college life I was the word person among my family, friends, and classmates. And now my friends were calling me out on a word. I wasn't used to this type of treatment.

At the heart of my pronouncement, though, was the deep desire to recognize and hold fast to my roots. My speech patterns developed from the people around me as I grew up. The way I talk has been directly affected by my family, my neighbors, and my teachers. Who am I to

throw away their lingering language legacy? My long-a's are a very verbal non-verbal way to acknowledge and respect them.

However, my friends have had an impact on my speech as well. Every time I say a word with an -ag in it, my mind has a quick mini-discussion with itself as to how the word should be pronounced. Even though these discussions occasionally confuse my tongue and cause me to mutter and stumble, that's not the worst part. I often stumble while speaking as it is. The worst part is the lack of confidence my brain now has in itself.

I spent the summer helping run a reading program for elementary students in an effort to prevent summer slide and improve their reading. I worked with the younger age group and had several students who had not yet learned all of their letter sounds. Often, especially during group activities, I would step back and leave my co-tutor to explain the letter "a" or word families, especially the "-ag" family. The moral part of me was unwilling to offer the children my incorrect pronunciation because it was different than they had been taught and could confuse them. But a significant contributing factor was the wrestling within my brain with all the little voices of my friends reminding me of my incorrect pronunciation; I wasn't able to confidently step forward and teach some of the simplest concepts of reading.

Annoyingly enough, these mini mind-debates accomplish nothing. I have tried several times, often mockingly, to use the "correct" short-a pronunciation and have failed; I get a strange middle-ground-sounding-a that neither side of the argument likes, and my brain and my tongue get all jumbled yet again. Even the little reading voice in my brain gets tired and confused.

Is preserving my language legacy worth the weariness and the seemingly incessant teasing? Some days, I don't know if it is. Some days, I wonder if I cling to this language legacy idea out of sheer stubbornness or a fear of being made fun of if I do change. Then, I remember the several times I have heard pronunciations similar to mine and felt almost immediately at ease. Often it is only for a few moments as I meet someone walking along the sidewalk, but the familiar tones soothe the slight homesickness I'm sure I will always feel when I'm away from my childhood home. If this happens to me, then I'm sure it happens to others as well. And if the legacy of my home can someday bring somebody comfort through my simple words, then the slight suffering I sometimes feel is worth it. I shall continue to allow my draygons to read maygazines while they play tayg with baygs in their waygons.

THIRD PLACE

The Language of Art

By Eryn Schlote, Philosophy

For a span of three months in high school, I thought about being an interpreter. The combination of challenging foreign languages and my love of connecting cultures drew me to the idea. Years later, my story continued on and I followed other paths that led down some unexpected roads. I found myself on the rough and poverty-trodden “streets” of rural Haiti with my sketchbook and a Creole vocabulary that wouldn’t get me through a week on my own.

Thankfully, I wasn’t on my own. I traveled there to serve with a growing ministry rooted in community development. I had high aspirations of bringing hope to the lives I’d touch through a love of art. But all of my expectations fled the moment our pastels hit the paper and the reality of the situation hit my heart: “I am one person. I have grown up comfortably with three meals a day and shoes on my feet. I go to college where my dorm room is larger than a Haitian home for ten. I have electricity and running water available whenever I feel like it. My childhood was nothing like theirs – how could I possibly have thought I could fly down here and bring them hope when all that exists in this place is hopelessness?”

Suddenly I felt very alone in that foreign land and didn’t know how I was going to reach out to the lives sitting in front of me. It was a little late for hesitation though, so I pushed my doubts aside and continued with the activity I had spent many thoughtful hours preparing.

With each stroke of pastel, my anxiety was replaced with amazement.

These young men, who had never even seen pastels before, started with timid lines and a held-back ability. Within minutes, they were using their fingers to blend the chalk and their minds to create in ways they never had. Art in an undeveloped nation is a trade. It’s a means of survival. I asked them to draw for understanding; to express their thoughts and dreams rather than recreate an object. Not only were they using new material, they were creating new material. After each stage of the drawing, we gathered in a circle and held our work out for everyone to see.

This is where the beauty happened.

My pleasure at the transformation while they were drawing was nothing compared to the awe of this instant.

Different life experiences. Different stories. Different languages. One circle. Silence. Connection.

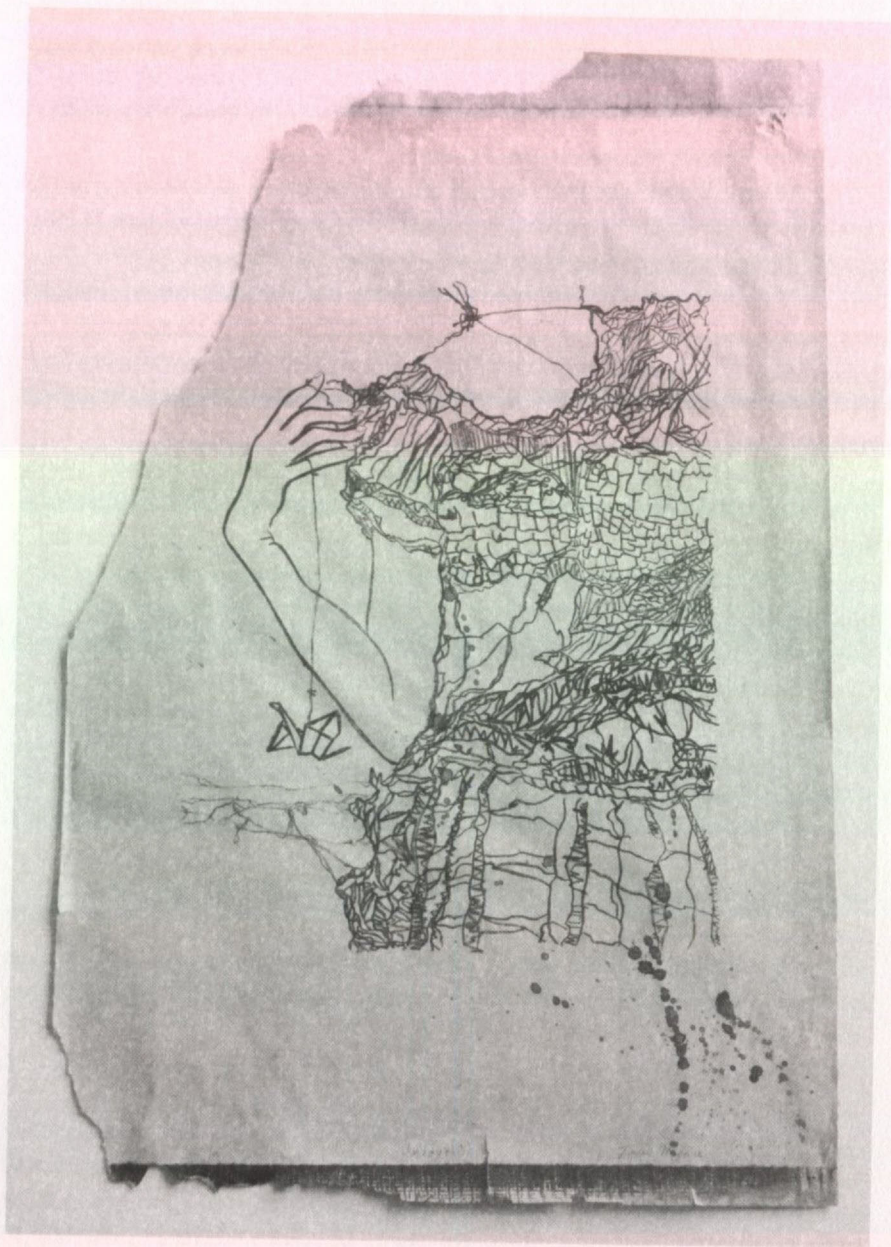
We took a moment to just sit and understand. We didn't need a translator to explain. Stumbled words from either language would not have expressed more clearly our dreams in our drawings.

My attraction to interpretation was the connection of people across cultures. In Haiti, I discovered a way to connect without speaking at all. Art is a language of its own. It has the ability to communicate and to connect people whose only similarity is the room they are sitting in together.

...Or the painting they are admiring in a popular museum.

...Or the weather-worn mural decorating the abandoned building they pass on the city bus.

The image speaks for itself, no matter who is looking.



Weaving

By Lyric Morris, Art and Graphic Design

HONORABLE MENTION

Rachel's Children

By Deborah Admire, Writing and Rhetoric

In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted because they are not. Matthew 2:18

When I visualize the church of my childhood, I see it through a child's eyes. There are no big picture images; instead I have small glimpses, like red bricks that snagged lace on little girls' church dresses, long hallways with doors opening and closing before me, closets that were locked to all but the janitorial staff, which made them glamorously mysterious. Church, when I was younger, was not a Sunday-only kind of place. I and my friends played there, did homework there, worked there, socialized there, and frequently ate there. Church was a second home, the other space in our lives that provided security, familiarity, and comfort.

I was a child in my first church. Children see everything, because they are small and have very wide eyes. What they don't see, they feel, as rippling winds of emotional signals wrap themselves around the child's sensitive soul. Ironically, much of the information gathered by children is useless, because they lack the context and understanding to frame it in their minds. Further, they soon forget, because children's minds don't linger in one moment unless severely traumatized. In these things, they're quite different from adults, who can comprehend, judge, and condescend all in a matter of minutes, but only if they were paying attention in the first place.

Each room in my childhood church was a land of itself. The pastor's office came first in the long hallway. I can't remember what it looked like with the overhead lights on. Pastor John, as we children called him, preferred the soft light of two green glass lamps. This rich light combined well with his bookshelf-lined walls, highlighting the older books with their timeworn leather covers and gold titles. At his desk was a Mac computer, the first computer I ever used to get on the Internet. That the church would budget to pay for an Internet connection for the pastor was outrageous to some of the "church ladies" when I was very

small, because no one could comprehend what Pastor John needed it for anyway.

I was allowed to play in Pastor John's office as long as I was with one of his children. Since I had no use for his older children, I was usually there with his youngest daughter, Katie. Katie, a brunette terror whose constant reading and adult-like mind served her no good, was a year older than me, and a beloved companion. We fought endlessly, cold, ruthless, heartbreaking fights, but no one was quite like her when we got along, so we always made up. Our play sessions usually also included a younger girl named Autumn. Her whole name was Autumn Scarlet, because her parents met on a beautiful fall day—we all found this terribly romantic. Autumn was an undersized child with a large but very pretty head which featured big blue eyes and fine, curling blonde hair. She looked something like a petulant doll all the time. Her mother was a fiend, overprotective and nagging, but her father was a big-chested, big-bearded man that we all loved, which made up for it. The final player of our quartet was a small girl named Lindsey, who was feisty and explosive, a self-propelled cannonball who loved climbing trees, getting dirty, and breaking rules to see if there actually were any consequences. Together, the four of us effectively ruled the churchyard scene, at least that which included "the little kids."

We had at least a dozen favorite haunts throughout the church buildings and grounds, each location useful in its time. Miss Jo's office was across from Pastor John's, and it was the place to go for lifting printer paper, staples, copies, and other such illicitly-obtained goods. Miss Jo was the church secretary, and she ruled with an iron fist, allowing no small child to slip past her all-seeing gaze to sneak office supplies from her precious stash. Thus, all pilfering had to be done when she was away, which wasn't often. When she was there, we would sometimes go in and sit for a while, enjoying the sunshine and being quiet as long as we could.

The church nursery was a favored hangout location when we were very young. With its baby-swings and light blue walls, it obviously wasn't the right place for a bunch of pre-pubescent girls, but we were drawn there by the stock of tattered children's books and the ever-present tub of goldfish crackers. Also, it had soft carpets for the sake of toddling elbows and knees, which we older children would sprawl on, our too-long limbs angling out from our stick-straight bodies. It smelled like clean babies, and was usually unoccupied except for Sunday mornings. It also connected immediately to the ladies' room, which created a very good passageway or escape route while playing hide and seek or tag. However,

on Sunday mornings, one did not run through the nursery, because Miss Maggie, an African-American woman about eight hundred years old, guarded the babies then. Older children were seen as too irresponsible to be frolicking around the little ones, stepping on their tiny fragile fingers and trying to pick them up by lifting them from their armpits. Finally, Miss Maggie banned the “big kids” from the nursery entirely, on the grounds that we were breaking toys and eating all the goldfish.

Our first attempt to find a new playground failed miserably, because we tried what was known as “Annex C” or simply, “The Youth Room.” The Youth Room was a place of excitement, mystery, and foreboding. It was the dwelling place of our older, teenage siblings, who disappeared into its void and never revealed its secrets. Everything associated with The Youth Room was cool, though we tried to be disdainful. In The Youth Room, the teenagers played ping pong, drank ginger ale, and ate from a limitless supply of Warheads. The Youth (a hearty cadre of 15-20 year olds) guarded the premises with great care, actually going to the extent of throwing us out bodily when we tried to intrude. We tried to argue our way in, saying that ten years of age technically qualified as teenage, but were constantly rebuffed. At one point, I was being carried out by one of my brother’s friends, who made the unwise choice of clamping his hand over my mouth. I bit him, and we never had a good relationship afterward.

After fighting a losing battle on both the nursery and The Youth Room fronts, I and my friends knew there was only one thing left to do: form a committee. We called ourselves the “Children’s Rights Committee,” and drew up a proposal that we presented to our fathers, who were the pastor, two elders, and a deacon. The proposal, written in crayon, used sometimes forceful language, but it communicated our need for our own space. We requested consideration from the church leaders of our delicate situation, balanced precariously between childhood and our teen years. Our fathers surprised us by taking us seriously, and mentioning our proposal at the next leadership meeting. They decided that a room should be ours, and therefore declared an old Sunday school room now officially the “Tweens’ Room.”

Furnishing the Tweens’ Room was wild fun. Many of the older people in our church were interested in our cause (and likely amused by the way we addressed the leadership) and provided lots of things for us to play with. One of the best items given to us was an old manual typewriter that actually worked, for a little while anyway. It was on that typewriter that I learned most of my early bad words, mainly from Katie,

the pastor's daughter. It was also in that room and through Katie that I had my first lessons in sex education, during which I learned very little except that sex was somehow, uncertainly, connected with kissing and babies. Katie had older sisters, so she knew these things. For some reason, the leadership also deemed it necessary to place the Christmas pageant wardrobe in the Tweens' Room closet, which was fine by us, because we loved donning the heavy Kings' robes and prancing about the room, pretending to be princesses. The robes smelled of old women's powder and perfume, but we didn't particularly care. Finally, one of the most important features of the Tween's Room was the box of old printer paper that someone donated. It was the green lined paper that was bigger than the printer paper made now, and it had long strips along the sides with holes punched at neat intervals. I, to this day, have no idea how it was originally used, but we loved it, burrowing deep into the box's stores to create pictures and stories. Our pictures were mainly a combination of religious and fashion art, usually of beautiful young princesses with crowns that featured very large and prominent crosses. The stories, on the other hand, mirrored American Girl tales and Boxcar Children mysteries more than anything else.

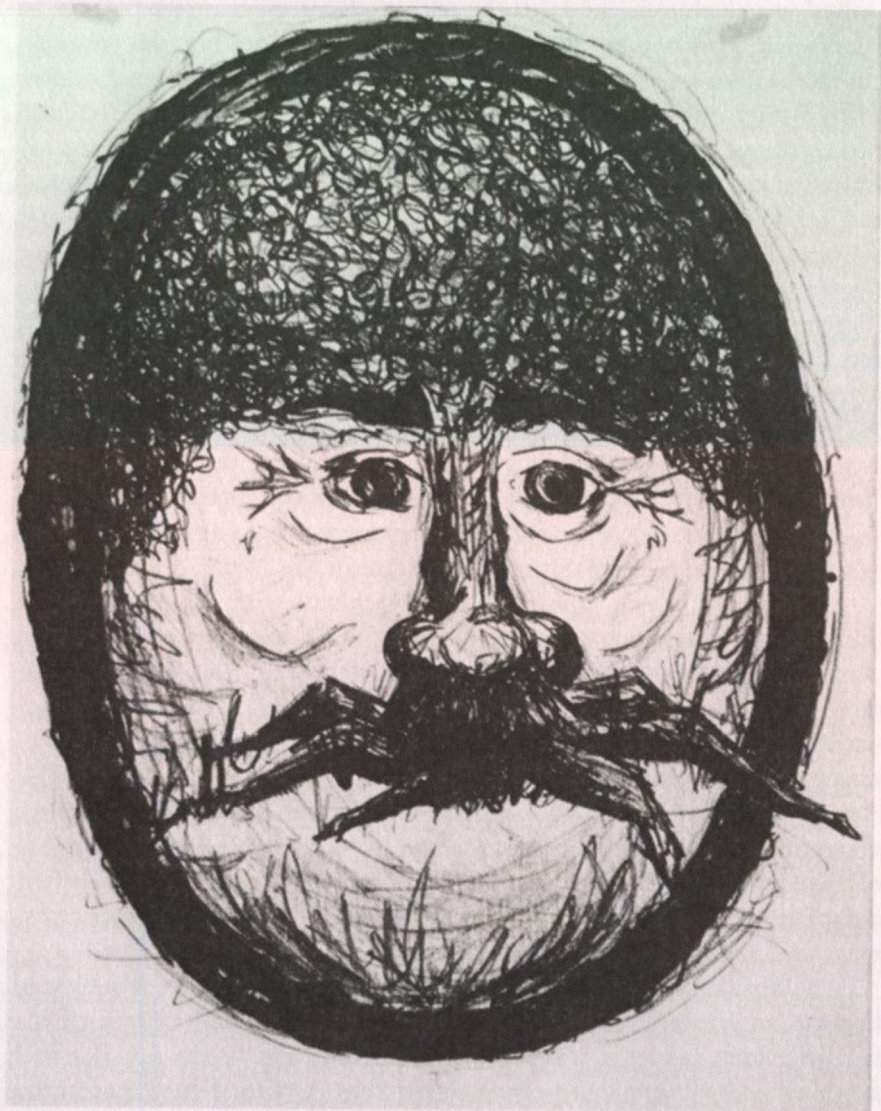
For the most part, though, my friends and I played outside. I can't remember my childhood without remembering the taut rubber saddle of a playset swing. Our swings were our make-believe horses, and we "rode" them for hours on end, exploring foreign lands in our minds. We must have had the most muscular legs in the entire world. Our playground was small and simple, with only two sets of three swings and a boring slide, but we were all imaginative enough that it didn't truly matter how much we had. The groan of a protesting swing chain was, in reality, the squeak of saddle leather, and a five-second scuffle up the slide was in fact equivalent to a two-week trek up a mountain. When we tired of the playground, we would roam the grounds of the church. There were a few good climbing trees, one of which had our names written on it in pen. There were also a few mounds of discarded filler soil, left behind during a long-ago construction project. These were now covered in grass, and they provided a touch of wilderness for the brave. The cowardly, such as myself, avoided them, because I had once seen a coral snake weave its beautiful red-yellow-black curves through the weeds there. Even as a child, I was wise enough to recognize a snake in the garden as a very real threat.

When I think about my and my friends' childhood, the phrase

“raised in the church” leaps to the tongue. How much more “raised in the church” can one be, than to actually grow up within the church’s four walls? We learned so many things there: ideally, we learned to live well, through our Sunday School classes, sermons, AWANAS. We learned darker things there too, though, and that is not what people expect of “raised in the church” children. We learned what things are both exposed and hidden from children; we knew as children that Autumn’s dad, with the beautiful beard, was no longer teaching Sunday School or attending services, for instance. It wasn’t until after my family left the church that I learned it was because he was having an affair with Lindsey’s mother, and that they had been found out. As a child, we knew that Katie got what she wanted from her friends, but it wasn’t until later that I realized she’d learned manipulation from her father, who chose his elders and deacons on their potential as yes-men. As children, we knew that our older brothers and sisters “liked” each other, and that eventually we would “like” each other too, but we never knew what complications and heartbreak those relationships add to the adult life.

I think of our childhood in the church, and I remember our religious drawings, our constant nearness to the presence of God, and wonder why it is that I’m the only one of our circle who still shows an active interest in the Christian faith. Katie attended a Christian school until she dropped out to have her child, later marrying a non-Christian man twenty years older than herself, the father of her second child. Autumn didn’t go to college at all, barely finishing high school before marrying her boyfriend “because she had to,” as our mothers say. Neither of them still believes in the Christianity of our childhood. Lindsey drifted out of my life earlier than that, during the unraveling of her parents’ marriage, and I don’t know where she is or what she’s doing now.

My family left the church of my childhood when I was eleven, because we moved. On the occasional return trip, the church seems smaller, older, sadder. I was a child when the church was a child, still a young and vibrant congregation that was untainted by the coming years of scandal and heartache. The same families are represented, but instead of busy young parents struggling to keep their children quiet, the pews are filled those same parents, older now, their faces heavy with the realization that wiggling in church was the least of their children’s vices. I love that church, but it hurts me to see it now, because I can hear in the corridors and the classrooms, the offices and the sanctuary, the question of the parents being echoed by the church building itself: “Where have my children gone?”



Roots

By Eryn Schlote, Philosophy

This is Home

By Abigail Stoscher, Theatre

This is home.

Nestled at the base of Albania's Gramozi Mountains, the town sleeps under a thick white blanket. Trees line the narrow streets, their branches laced with fragile strings of crystal ice. Brick houses, old stone walls, and small apartment buildings settle contentedly in neat rows with smoke curling drowsily from their chimneys. And the snow, a silent white bird, alights to rest upon the shingled roofs.

It is exceptionally quiet. Our voices and our footsteps crunching the soft snow are the loudest sounds around. Ignoring the sidewalks, my mom and I stroll straight down the middle of the paved streets. Mom always tells the story of how one of our neighbors saw Mom walking fast one day and asked her why she was so angry. Mom hadn't been angry; she'd just been speed-walking because she was late. No one speed-walks in Erseka – we stroll. We stroll even if we're late. After all, coming half an hour later than you said you'd come is standard procedure here.

For the most part, the houses we pass are timeworn, with chipped bricks or cracked stones, encircled by precariously erected wooden fences. Other houses, however, have a newer look to them, glowing with bright colors, flaunting red roofs and stone walls. Whether stone, wood, or concrete, the walls are all waist high, making it easy to converse with neighbors while still keeping the chickens inside the yard. Come spring, these yards will be lush green gardens, bursting with fresh vegetables and colorful flowers. Later, women will sit on their doorsteps, talking together as they spin wool in the shade cast by the leaves of the far-reaching grape arbors. But now the town is silent, hibernating under the deep snow.

Dispersed amidst the private houses stand the tall apartment buildings that were built during communism. Here, people are packed in like sardines. This is where most of the people in Erseka live – in tiny three-room apartments that consist of a living room/kitchen, one bedroom, and a bathroom. The parents get the bedroom and the children sleep on the living room couches. Some might call it crowded; we call it community.

A community. At its core, that is what Erseka is. And if you ever happen to stumble upon this town, it will welcome you into this

community with open arms. Albanians are known for their hospitality. You don't schedule visits here; you just drop by. And if you drop by someone's house, your hosts will drop everything they're doing – no matter how important it is – so that they can sit and visit with you. They will offer you everything edible that they have in their house and when you say, "I'd better leave now," they'll insist that you stay longer. If it starts getting dark out, they'll invite you to spend the night. And of course, since they don't have a guest room, the parents will cheerfully give you their bedroom and sleep on the living room floor. And no one complains – because the moment you step inside their door, you become a part of the family.

Now before I go on, I have to make one thing clear: Erseka is by no means a perfect community. It's a small town: everyone knows everyone else's business. There is a lot of gossip; there is prejudice against the gypsies; there are some families that won't speak to other families. There are elderly men who have to keep working until their joints crack in order to put bread on the table, elderly women who wear black every day and live all alone. There are men who get drunk regularly, women who offend easily and take offense even easier, boys who start smoking cigarettes in middle school, girls who wear too much makeup and too little clothing, and young children with learning disabilities who are ill-treated and unloved.

Some people, who come to see Erseka for a short time, call it an ideal town, a perfect home. They see the friendliness and the quiet and the love in this place, and they call it perfect. They see it from the outside and they think it's flawless. Well it's not. There is pain here. There is tension here. There are problems in this community.

Erseka is not a perfect community, but it *is* a community. We help each other, defend each other, support each other. We know each other – we know that so-and-so is struggling financially; we know that so-and-so has lost their brother; we know that so-and-so's daughter has just graduated from college with honors. We mourn together; we celebrate together. Whatever happens, we all pitch in and support each other. When my "grandma" Linda lost her husband, the ladies in town took turns staying with her, making sure she wasn't left alone and that she had everything she needed. When my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer last fall, *everyone* came to visit her, bringing flowers and tears and love. The last few days before I left home to come to school, people were at our house all day, filling my suitcase with things to take with me – little things: a bookmark, a t-shirt, a hand-knitted pair of

socks... anything they had or could make. And all of them wished me "Suksesedhegjihtëmirat!" – success and all things good.

This is home. I stroll down the middle of the street with my mom, soaking in the mountains, the buildings, the snow-clad gardens, and the people we meet who greet us with a friendly "Mirëmëngjes!" – Albanian for "Good morning." They all stop to ask me about my school and what I'm studying and if I'm homesick and if I'm making good friends. I answer their questions, I laugh and smile, and when they continue on their way, I walk on with my mom and drink in the sound of the silence. Peace fills me, overflows me. This is home.

Waking Up

By Madeline Booher, Psychology

One of the most challenging parts of depression for me is the complete lack of motivation. Finding the strength to open my eyes, take in the sight of my messy bedroom, and remember that I am well and alive is the hardest part of my day.

I don't want to be alive and well.

I want to sink a little deeper into my bed covers and go back to sleep. Why am I waking up?

What could I possibly do today that would matter to other people?

I don't matter to other people.

I feel like shit today.

I have actually had to make myself a list of positive things others have said to me, and repeat it to myself often:

You do matter to other people. You matter to me.

I care about you. I care about what happens to you.

I love you.

You are important to other people. You are important to me.

You matter.

I find it difficult that I know these things, yet I have to talk myself into believing them.

This is when I have to remind myself that there is more than what I feel.

Feelings don't last. It won't always be this way.

I am loved. You are loved.

I matter to other people. I should matter to me. You matter to me.

I should care about myself. I care about you.

I am part of a story that involves other people. Some of them love

me. I love them.

Wake up today for them. Don't get stuck in moments. They won't last.

Keep moving.

Look through those brand-spankin'-new glasses you just got and see the world around you a little clearer. You and I are part of a story that has so much to offer. Life. Everlasting life.

This is just one day. You can get past it. You don't have to get over it, but you will get past it. Take your time.

Wake up. Look around you. There is more than this moment.

You are more than this moment.

Poster Series

I: Summer Camp

By Hana Spangler, Theatre/History

What do these famous people have in common??

Josh from *The Table Across the Room* who wouldn't share the pool table except when he was hogging the immersive Pac-Man console.

Actress *What's-Her-Name-Started-With-A-T* who told me that machines were perfect and it was divine intervention that left bark on posts.

TV Host Josh Anybody, because everybody named Josh at this camp seemed like a good candidate for a career in television.

Actress *The-Same-Gal-as-Before* who made me stare at her till I noticed what was different. Apparently, mascara.

THEY ALL WENT TO SUMMER CAMP!!

Because there's something character-strengthening about running when you're told to walk as you're being pursued by water-gun snipers, except your sister is on your back because she has a splinter in her foot roughly the shape and size of a basketball-inflation needle, so you have to be very careful in your descent, landing knees first before keeling backward on top of your sister, and you don't notice till you get into the shower that your knees are already dripping, like the Niagara Falls moved to Transylvania, but you get a lime popsicle that drips in a more pleasant way and watch Tom & Jerry prove that you're not the only one with problems and notice that you're not as bad off as the kid over there—that kid over there looks like sunburn incarnate.

You never know who's life you might impact as a camp counselor...

You, too, could be the unrecognizable face in the crowd, who chugs our juice packs and bans anyone from singing that particular song that you hate but insist on making us (your charges) sing it in our swimsuits to your friends so you can prove how obnoxious it is.

You, too, could be the unanswered letter from the scar-kneed pen-pal, who wrote to you in a raspberry color because it's your favorite, but you've already got a new batch of kids with wounds to heal, anyway. Too busy to write, right?

So—go on! Pac-Man will come to those who wait. This time, though, don't give me your address. I'll look for you in sloshing dreams instead of my silent mailbox.

Next time: *ARE YOU ENGAGED OR MARRIED??* How to respond.



Adam Levine from
The Voice



Actress
Ginnifer Goodwin



TV Host
Larry King



Actress
Natalie Portman

THEY ALL WENT TO SUMMER CAMP!!

You never know who's life you might impact as a camp counselor...
SUMMER CAMP DAY: WEDS, JAN 29th in the RSC
 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

See what camps will be here and what positions they have available by going to:

www.nwciowa.edu/calendar

January 29

Summer Camp Days

Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day	Career Development Center www.nwciowa.edu/calendar January 29--Summer Camp Day
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"Summer Camp" Poster

On Words

By Natalie Church, Writing and Rhetoric

My name is Natalie. I am a senior writing and rhetoric major at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, with a minor in business administration, and plans to add a minor in German after graduation.

Once I have delivered this fairly standard introductory statement, I get a fairly predictable, fairly standard response: raised brows and a surprised, confused, somewhat pitying “What are you going to do with that?!”

I am prepared for this, I know how this exchange goes. I answer honestly: “I want to write,” because I do, though it goes beyond mere wanting – I *ache*, I **long** to write.

The pity deepens on my conversational partner’s face and their tone softens as they tell me, as gently as they are able so as to avoid shattering my fragile sense of self and direction, “Writing doesn’t pay.”

At this point in time, I try not to let my natural sauciness get the better of my conversational abilities. I want to say, in tones dripping condescension, laced with a stinging venom, with just enough force to cause one *small* step back, “Oh darling, oh dear little child, oh small inexperienced one – I *know*. Better than you, I know. *You* have no idea.”

Instead I say something more polite, more mature, something about how I am aware of how little writing pays, how willing and prepared I am to do the menial work I must to pay the bills I must in order to write as I must, something about how I really *must* write, *must* work with words, *must* read and shape and create and breathe language daily – I don’t often indulge myself in that last bit; it’s too fanciful and idealistic for most to understand seriously... But it is true.

Since I am so prepared to live as I must, my conversational partner will at this point (inspired by my great maturity) be very gracious, and assume I have a plan. Which is cute.

I have lived a fair amount in the rather short span of time in which I have been, as it were, alive. I have seen many things, things you would not guess from seeing me, things which have broken my heart and filled it to overflowing, struck me dumb and caused me to sing, numbed my senses and brought me new life. I have tried planning, and found plans weak in the face of unpredictable and uncontrollable reality. I wish I could believe in plans, but life makes me play by ear. Life is a jerk.

People too, are sometimes, unfortunately, jerks. I don’t think it’s

always intentional, but there is, commonly, in this sort of conversation, some insinuation or suggestion that writing isn't a *real* career, something you can do in *real* life. It's not a *real* job, it's not *real* work. To play with words is simply play, and to pursue it as **work**, as some kind of *calling* is to mock the rest of the world, those who keep standard hours and work regular shifts and bleed and sweat and weep for weekends where they can drink themselves numb, pretending or believing life is good long enough to start the cycle again. Which is cynical, I know; not everyone has the need to drink for distraction. Yet the idea still stands there, as though invincible, unmoving – writing isn't work.

Not only is writing not work, not *really*, people will ask with their eyes and sometimes their mouths if I know my odds. If, by chance, I, the hermitic writer, have poked my head out from under my rock long enough to know how few of the people who write have the ability to write well – how little of that group is actually published – how even less of that group has any street recognition – how, a miniscule little group now, how few of those individuals could be considered famous. Or they ask, in the tilt of their head, if I actually believe my words are strong enough, important enough, valuable enough – are they really worth the paper they'd be printed on? Could they ever stand the murderous Test of Time?

I really am very polite. I ignore these little insinuations, or make cheerful, light responses that redirect the conversation so that no one winds up injured (I can be a vicious arguer when my ire has been raised; the pen may be mightier than the sword, but my tongue can spit acid). I've been raised to behave rather docilely, to be considerate. But here, in this moment, at this hour, I should like to respond to the charges so lightly dropped at my feet; I should like to address the accusations leveled at me like handfuls of powdery snow, landing like bombs in my heart.

You, unnamed conversational partner, you presume a great deal. You say that writing is not work, implying that I am selfish to crave it as I do, suggesting that I am trying to avoid the real world, Real Life. You say that for my words, my work, there is no chance. You say that I am not good enough, not smart enough, not clever enough, too young, too ignorant, too Midwest, too *common* to have words worth sharing. You tell me that I am dreaming, and that waking will kill me – that you are trying to help me “see sense.” Even when it's not said, I can read it – in your eyes, in the pitying half-smile you offer while bitter words hide on your tongue behind your teeth (as though that weak smirk could lessen the bite), your posturing when you dip your head in disbelief, certain you've

heard wrong. You presume a great deal.

First, you presume that I have need of Healthy Doubt. You see me, genetically adorable, and you know that I cannot have possibly Thought Of These Things. I must be Realistic! I must Think Things Through! I cannot go about dashing headlong into a life of poverty! How will I feed myself? Do I want to live in my parents' basement forever? And what about modern amenities? Even if I am so very fortunate as to be able to actually make money off of books or short stories or poems or essays or whatever the heck it is that I think I can write, that money won't come easy and it won't come early and somehow, I've got to eat. Have I thought of that? And what about actually **making money** off of words – people don't buy books anymore, you tell me. People don't even read. Even if they did, what is it that makes me think, really, honestly, truly, that I have words worth reading? It's all very nice and good to want to do a thing, but wanting to do it doesn't mean you're any good at it, and dreaming when you aren't very good is no good at all.

As if I've never doubted myself for a moment. As if it was easy for me, one morning, to just sit up in bed and cheerfully declare myself a writer. As if I haven't second-guessed or questioned myself. As if I honestly believe that everyone is dying to read my words! I don't need you to question their value; I do that every day. Some days, some *months*, that question keeps me from writing anything at all. Healthy Doubt? Some days I think doubt is all I have, and I can't believe that's "healthy." "But!" you object, obstinately, "What about Real Life?"

As if writing conceals me from reality! As if, in writing, I can protect myself from any interaction with the outside world. As if writing were some solitary pursuit. As if it were truly possible for anyone to hide from Real Life. Words, writing, are a form of connection to those around me, to experiences and moments in my life and in lives outside my own. The best things I have ever written have been carefully read and reread by others, pulled apart and pieced together again, made stronger and truer and more real by connection with community, vulnerability, trust. It is in writing, through stringing together letters to form words, words to form lines, lines to expose thought and action, that I come to terms with real life; that I can process and understand what I live through; that I convey my experiences to others. It is in writing that I find reassurance that I do not stand alone, that I have never been insignificant, that my experiences are real, valid, true. Writing keeps me from forgetting my mistakes, prevents me from failing to learn from the moments when I have been weak, when I have been less than the best of humanity. Writing

reminds me of the moments when I have got things right, when I have loved wholly, have listened fully, have been good to others; it keeps me from believing that I have only been, can only hope to be, the worst of humanity.

You, Shadow-Fiend, have also objected, though, to the idea that I might think myself good. I want to laugh at this – does this matter? But you seem to think it's a serious objection, another thing I Ought To Consider. I am polite, so I will consider:

Am I actually any good? Well, I've practiced for a great number of years, which generally leads to a certain level of proficiency, if not skill. But I suppose that doesn't satisfactorily answer the question... I guess I don't really see a point to answering the question, not as it's put. I don't think good really matters, in some ways. Yes, if you want to make a career of writing, you have to be able to reach a certain level of semi-objective "good-ness," which can be rather hard to define, because writing styles are so different and people have such varying tastes and how can you objectively say one writer is good? I haven't seen a checklist, though I certainly believe that writers can easily be quite thoroughly bad – though, to my knowledge, there's no checklist for that, either. "Good" is a really hard idea to talk about. But I suppose now I'm waxing philosophical, which may be a bit more than you bargained for; whoops.

I will try again: I am not greatly concerned with being good. I must write, so I will write. If I am fortunate (or "good"), people will read my writing, recognize in it that which is true and real, connect with it in a genuine way. Regardless of this, I must write, so I will.

You may conceivably at this point again bring up the concern of Real Life and bills, but let me remind you – initially when we spoke, I was quite prepared to work a rather ordinary, perhaps even dull or **undesirable** nine-to-five in order to be able to live and write at the same time. Are you still unconvinced?

I am tired of this whole debate, of the need to, for some strange reason, justify my life decisions to someone I may never speak to again – why have I given you this information in the first place? Social constructs are weird. We say so much about ourselves in introduction to ease the categorization process, sometimes saying nothing at all – and then stereotype and further categorize unfairly. Oh, but you said – you said, I think, at some point, you *questioned*, rather, the value of the written word? That was silly.

Do you know that we, as humans, are very visual? We use our eyes lots. We use them to scope out the territory, read signs, ascertain the

probability of events, pick up on another individual's emotional state, all sorts of neat things. We use them as aids in categorizing people, too: things like, oh, flat-ironed hair-sprayed dyed-black hair, that one's Scene. Unnatural white base with black, that one's Goth. A pack in sports gear? Sportsballers, of course, probably Coly. Long hair and flannel? West Hall. No distinguishing marks? North Suites. We make judgments about people based on external stuff. It's not the greatest thing humanity has ever done, but it's pretty common and it's pretty hard to combat. People judge you, not based on who you are or who you have the potential to be, but on the manner in which they perceive you. If for no other reason, writing has immense value in the fact that it is one of the simplest ways that exists for you to influence the way in which you are perceived.

Where else are you given such an opportunity to present yourself as an intelligent, thoughtful, decent sort of human being? What other areas are so suited to allow you space to map out your thoughts, then more space to refine them again and again until you are saying what you want to say precisely how you mean to say it? You are free to be as factual or imaginative as you like – provided you specify which – given all the space you need in order for your experiences to be real, your thoughts to be real, your mental processes to be valid. How can anyone, recognizing this, question the worth of any individual's words? In questioning the value of another person's words, you come dangerously close to questioning the validity of their experience, to closing yourself off from that which could broaden your mind, that which could make you more empathetic, more compassionate, that which could bring you closer to belonging to the best of humanity. And you ask why I write, what I will do with *that*.

I will write. I will write for my sake, for my sanity, to come to terms with that which I cannot comprehend, to understand that which I do not know. I will write to see through the eyes of another and understand the world more fully thereafter. I will write to live a life outside my own, a life that will touch others in remarkable ways and, I hope, make those lives better, fuller for that contact. I will write to share laughter and heartache, to ask questions I don't fully understand and to share ideas that I have just begun to know. I will write to be honest, and also to lie, because sometimes stories are better that way. I will write to see the ways in which the words order themselves, and to see how, in rearranging, they might be made better. I will write to see what I know, and discover what I did not recognize in myself. I will write out of necessity and out of love. I will write regardless of what Unnamed Shadow You may think, regardless of the objections brought before me, because I must. You may

certainly doubt me – I doubt me – but I will still write. And I will be unapologetic, and I will not pretend to not be bothered by your words. And will live as I must, and I will write.



Euphoric Ends

By Sarah Odom, Music Performance/Writing and Rhetoric

