

2017

Spectrum, 2017

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SPECTRUM

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE



SPECTRUM

2017 EDITORIAL STAFF

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NOTES

As students at Northwestern, many of us have experienced the feeling of living in the “Christian Bubble,” a place where faith permeates our atmosphere in both positive and negative ways. This edition of *Spectrum* showcases a community of faithful writers and artists who, with boldness, step into the vast culture beyond. Stories which bring suffering and hardship to the forefront of our imaginations are not shied away from by these courageous authors. This collection of stories takes readers on a journey through the diverse world of schools, inner city streets, coastlines, cemeteries, and beyond, exploring common human experiences found along the way. The poetry and art delve into the rich creativity exhibited by those who carefully craft words and images into visions of how they see the world. Our cover art captures the kaleidoscope of ideas presented in this year’s *Spectrum*, and we invite you to step outside the normal and comfortable to see the world through this colorful lens.

-Amie Adams
Editor

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POETRY

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

I was caught right at the top by the “mourning doves” enjambment. The poem is a good example of William Carlos Williams’ sage advice, “No ideas but in things”: “Smashing ... brittle leaf to smithereens.” And read aloud, the poem sounds wonderful, with slant rhymes like “wisps” and “lips”, “serpentine street”, “leaves” and “trees” and sly alliteration like “fall enforces” and “upcoming cold”.

AN AUTUMN RAINBOW

BY ALYSON EVERSMAN, ECOLOGICAL SCIENCE; WRITING & RHETORIC

Every morning, mourning
 doves draw-out their laments,
 bidding farewell
 to geese escaping
 the upcoming cold,
 or hunters.

Goose honks echo
 overhead, like warning

shots—the geese always flying
 in militia-like formation. Those cries
 in the cool weather subdue me.
 A haze of breath wisps
 from my lips
 and I pull
 my scarf closer, watching
 that V evaporate.

The fall enforces
 the ancient trees
 that guard the narrow serpentine
 street to bestow their leaves
 to nature.
 My feet

crunch down this road,
 smashing each brittle leaf
 to smithereens while
 my aged, pale Nikes
 seem to drown in the
 numerous leaves that
 cover the street,
 like a blanket.

All this crispiness
 and coffee brown,
 these forest greens rusting
 into barn red, sunset orange, and
 birch trees flaring

OUR TIME IN NARNIA

BY MALLORY BJORK, ENGLISH TEACHING

The woods outside your house come
alive with dancing Dryads and flute playing fauns.
You're Peter and I'm Reepicheep, the best
sword fighters in all of Narnia, forever running
from the White Witch

We make our siblings be Susan and Lucy.
They're only playing, but for you and me, this is
real, this dream of glorious battles,
and I long for the day
when I will jump into my little coracle to sail
over the sweet lily-carpeted waters
of the Silver Sea to Aslan's Country

I want to experience too much light
and see the sun three times its size,
hear birds sing with human voices
and see the submarine forests,
be nourished by drinkable light
and wade alongside waterfalls
flowing backwards

I want to see the utter east

But one second I'm aboard
the Dawn Treader feeling
the sea breezes kiss
my fur and the next I'm flung

into a flash of light into a world
I have forgotten—so unexpected,
like the way you fall

asleep without knowing it or walk
into a room and forget why—it's like
that, leaving the wardrobe and Aslan
and all the magic of Narnia

In my state of bewilderment,
I remember Aslan's words:

"I am in your world, but there
I have another name,"

And I decide that this is hope enough

MOM SINGS THE CRUCIFIXION

BY MALLORY BJORK, ENGLISH TEACHING

as tears rain down her cheeks, watching
blood seep from Your crown

her voice trembles
like Your body
as soldiers flog You

drums beat out the rhythm
of Your footsteps,
carrying Your
cross to Golgotha

I feel her heart break
when You entrust the one
You love with Your
mother's care

her words echo in the sanctuary
as You cry
"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"

she sings of forgiveness
when You pardon
the criminal dying
next to You

I soak up every word
like the sponge
You drink from

she breathes deep to hold the last note
Your lungs collapse from exhaustion

her hand falls to her side
You bring down Your head

it is finished.

ON LIVING ARTFULLY

BY MALLORY BJORK, ENGLISH TEACHING

for my sister, Madelyn

You embody words,
while I just write them

You act, and I
scribble

Your voice, a spring sun,
warms your audience, sending
sun-kissed shivers
down seated spines
and rushes over us like a wave
salting our faces till we're lost,
adrift in the emotional ocean
of the stories you tell

Your seafoam eyes pierce
your thick lenses
and you glide above
the lights and catwalks
with feathers flexed
towards brand new skies,
graduating to a bigger stage

But don't forget about me
sitting here, grounded,
staked to
my pen,
trying to sketch
your stark genius, that piercing look,
afraid of not capturing your brilliance

Looking up, one solitary feather
parts from the wing closest
to your heart, drifting through
blue time to land on my
wet pages

POETRY

My fingers embrace the quill and dip
the white tip in the salty spray, moving
across the page in sporadic fits
of intensity, mirroring your
movements, almost taking
flight from the ease of holding
it, the lightness
freeing

This feather—my own left wing,
sends me soaring to other lands,
like you

And I set out to write the tale
of two sisters whose love is bound
by the art of words—one who likes holding
them and another who sets
them free—never forgetting to look up
when I feel the sun's warmth
tickle my neck
or when I hear a bird's song,
hoping it's you looking at me from
the places you've been



BUFFALO

BY EMILY WALLACE, GRAPHIC DESIGN

TO MY UNBORN SIBLING

BY MALLORY BJORK, ENGLISH TEACHING

I found out you existed while walking
through Walmart's sliding doors,
talking with Mom.

She was pregnant with you
a year before me.
You only grew for two months.
I asked what you looked like
and Mom said,

"A ball of blood and tissue."

I kept picturing her staring
into the porcelain toilet—a wet tomb—
grasping the counter to stabilize
her shivering shoulders,
an inescapable thought looming over
her hunched body:

Will I ever have children?

Maybe Dad came home from
a hard day in the field to kiss
a tear-stained face
as Mom went limp in his
arms, both of them easing
their backs down the front
of the sink cabinet to
the cold tile floor.

Did they both cry for you?

Did he convince her
it wasn't her fault?
Because Mom is like that—she'd think
it was.

I felt cheated having to ask these questions,
not knowing there was a hole in the family—like taking
off your shoe and discovering

you've worn through your lucky socks, or having
to pull over because you blew
a tire—it was like that,
learning about you.
You're the hole
we cannot fill.

Walking aimlessly around Wal-Mart's aisles,
it all made sense. I never felt
like the oldest kid and always longed
for an older sibling.
I guess I was longing
for you.

I never felt qualified to be
the first one to go
to college, the first one to have
a boyfriend, the first one to do
everything. It's a lot of
pressure, having them look
up to you. But I'm giving it my
best shot.

So after all those years
of not knowing,
I grieved for you
in the checkout line,
and as we drove home,
and today as I write this—
grieving for the older sibling
you never were, trips to Narnia
we never had, secrets we never
shared, for the lost chance of
being best friends.

Sometimes, when we all crack up at
the dinner table, I think
of you, and wonder if you would find
Kayla's laugh hilarious, or tell Maddy her strange
food creations are good (when they're really not), or challenge
Max to a game of basketball after supper.

But in reality
I guess you got it good,
going straight to Heaven.

cold bones you die in
alone

I stoop, knees creaking, to your lowly
level and stretch a smile
across my canvas frame to match
your own yellow-toothed
grimace—you do not
run,
defying the ways of your kin,
running the risk of torment, a twisted
tug of your tail or a swift
kick to send you flying, all
for the meager gamble of my fingers
to scratch your flea-bitten back and my palms
to smooth your bristling spine, flecked
with too many winters' worth

of grime

your swollen, starved mouth pushes
against the lifeline on my palm, the entity
you wish to prevent your heart's pending

flatline,

and I follow the wonky circles you weave
around my rooted soles,
mesmerizing me,
like a dizzy dancer
whose desperation alone
keeps her aloft,
and the mewling cries
you sing, pleading
for rest

so I cradle your nuzzling head
in my sweaty half-moon hand
and feed you— your ghastly
irises, gangrenous in color,
pupils like paper cuts—
a look that paralyze me
and yet pulls me in
through the eye of your needle
to live in that tiny black sliver
like the gentle parting of lips
before a kiss:

POETRY

our exchange of offerings is no lease,
but a contract between
you, the gnarled soothsayer,
and me, the newly saved

HOW WE ARE

BY HANA SPANGLER, THEATRE; HISTORY

Say:

were we ever young and unafraid?
I'm afraid we are;
there are nothings I would never dare
when you aren't here.

We are,

past all hope of knowing
who's still going and who's passed,
as content as we can be to end.

They pause their pretend and ask:

"Say:

how did you get this far
without knowing how you are?"

IT'S NOT ALL TOOLS AND TECHNIQUE, YOU NEED A LITTLE EMOTION TOO

BY CARRIE BOUWMAN, WRITING AND RHETORIC; ART

The paintbrush is
long and thin
like the fingers that clasp it;
the bristles
as delicate as the hair of a young child.

It dances across the canvas
an elegant ballerina twirling on stage.
Tiptoeing titanium white clouds,
leaps of cerulean sky,
and swirling different hues
of cobalt blue and terre verte waves.

Raw umber, cadmium yellow, burnt sienna
creates the beach
where the artist found and lost love.
The brush splashes colors
like waves slamming into the shore
where footsteps used to appear side by side.

When the job is done
it collapses
like the exhausted artist
satisfied by the work completed,
ready to begin the next memory.

MORTAL

BY MARIA VAN ZWEDEN, ART

Like wet wheat I rot
on my fallow life—
a useless existence;
a salted piece of quenched
clay.

Dead yeast is my conscience,
moldy dough for a raven.
Pure chaff, waste,
rubbish—
throw it away.

And my soul, it lies
reeking,
chained to the ribbed barrel
of my fermenting chest.
For what good is it?

I'm a stagnant swamp beneath
an angry sky, hell-bent
on lighting me

The black hill of Golgotha
is where I belong—
Gehenna, the garbage
dump, where nothing
grows.

Let the vultures peck
at my flesh.

Let me rot
and decay

or better yet,
toss me in
with that heretic
in that crusty tomb
next to Jerusalem.

NOSEBLEED

BY HANA SPANGLER, THEATRE; HISTORY

My nose
spilt
red as the compass rose
on the speckled charts:
spattered stars
and pulsing shipping currents
of the Western haemoglobin,
now tacking vein to vein,
now taking in dripping bilgewater.

Slipping, blood
lets out sails.
Cells shake out the seaspray
and soak up heartsweat
in fresh crimson salttrails
down from nostril's spars
to lip's dry planks below.

Storms blow in
ever starboard.

My veins disrupt.
Nasal cavity bruises, oozes and
erupts.
Slow yet constant volcano
drowns the naval
"Here there be monsters!"
Iron-flavored magma
marks new discoveries as
bleeding islands grow on the map.

Sneeze snaps pink blooms,
breathes in soaking cotton cloth.
the other, ever brother,
batters failing batten,
wounds in wildflowers, but still betrays
behind steel powdered blossoms red
round robin's rebel breast.

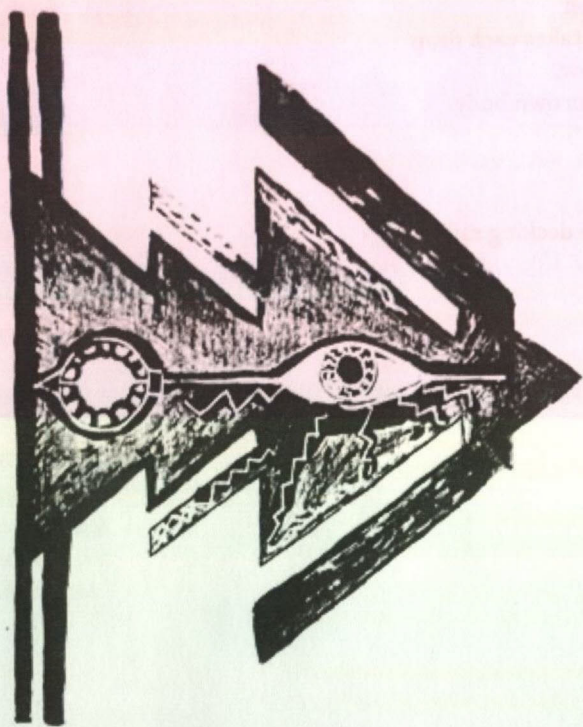
Hard abreast

of my love,
gripping above in crow's nest rigging
I count watchticks
ticking to tell
how long it takes each drop
to drop below,
the splash its own body
killed,
spilt

Dead on the decking rails.

AZTEC EYE

BY HANCOY BECERRA-BALBUENA, ART



AZTEC EYE

BY NANCY BECERRA-BALBUENA, ART

NOTE WELL (N.B.)

BY HANA SPANGLER, THEATRE; HISTORY

I nibble on my orange peel,
try to fix a shoulder
with my pencil,
when I see
Napoleon
Bonaparte
alone in the snow:

hat held down against
Russian winds
through the three-story
suburban Caucasus.

It is not very often,
rarely,
hardly at all,
that I see
Napoleon
Bonaparte
alone in the snow:

stomping down
on snowflake spines
while wind flurries in blasts
past his average height,

no sidewalks dragged clean,
neither elephants nor soldiers,
footfalls
nowhere in sight,
now just
Napoleon
Bonaparte
alone.

An excellent orange peel,
At that.

POTTER BOY

BY VICTORIA HORN, WRITING & RHETORIC; LITERATURE

sweet silver moon crooks
 her neck to look
 through the window, cracked
 to let late autumn press
 its cool palms against
 their feverish foreheads—
 the boy's sweaty fingers
 soothing, tracing
 a crescent moon from forehead
 to fragile cheekbone on this girl
 so like Diana, wanderer
 of the woods, defender
 of the living

her cheek—thick, time-dried clay—

breaks

with a tender brush

and yields

to soft, wet clay below,
 his thumb hollowing out
 a shallow forest pool
 in which blooms

 a warm rose
 blush

she, a huntress in his embrace,

quivers

and places her head
 in the shadowy nook
 of his neck—

release

she floats a half-moon hand up
 to cradle his unhandled clay,
 longing to take the heavy
 lump of his heady want
 in her open palm, claim
 his form for her own

but for now, she is content

merely to lay close to him,
 a sculpture in a museum
 she is allowed to touch—
 burrowing her artful nose
 into his crooked collarbone,
 carving away at his dead,
 hardened clay, hunting
 for life

the pale moon infects
 the room with her woozy
 gloom while this Diana-
 like daughter rests, delirious
 in the warmth of her potter's
 hands—
 his nimble fingers press
 her close to his chest,
 his hands curling around her
 shoulders, the way they always do
 when he's throwing pots
 in the studio, rounding
 out a rim for a jug
 while she looks on,
 his thumbs molding half hearts
 out of her shoulder blades
 like handles for an urn

But when she's not
 looking, he takes the hard
 clay from her chipped face,
 uses her cheek for a trowel
 to dig deep—then
 picks
 her strawberry heart

and escapes

She would have gone on,
 tender-hearted heroine
 hunting her own heart,
 hounding her lover,
 but she had no need:

her potter sucked the sweet juice
 from her kiss and spit
 to revive his crumbling clay—

POETRY

the taste of him like
a dried piece of fruit in her throat
too bitter to choke down

SAV: SEEK THE LIGHT.

BY VICTORIA HORN, LITERATURE; WRITING & RHETORIC

Night wind blowing
through the open front door,
swirling all around me
the scent of gesso and acrylics
and fresh-cut wood
and canvas and that heady
scent of her auburn hair
as she sits at her easel—
snapshot déjà vu— harkening
back to the little easel
our grandfather made
with two sides and two stools
so we never had to separate
to retrieve a new pot of paint
or cleanse and clatter
a blue brush inside
a smudged glass
of murky water

Now, our mother's garden rests
in deep green slumber—
dusk behind my sister,
a rich palette of earth
and hazy rose, airy cattails
like the brushes from which she gleans
her glossy paint and spreads
dreams
over canvas

Her gritty palms traced
tenderly with brushstrokes
that chiaroscuro
every crack, render
little riven master-
pieces in her swirling
fingerprints

My sister gazes at the created
void on her canvas,
then slowly,

POETRY

lovingly,
peels back the topmost
foil of her heart
and smudges
the gleaming
gold leaf
through the dark
oily center
of her painting

SHREDDING THREADS

BY LESLIE BRONDSEMA, HISTORY

Wish I did not see
 either nightmares or dreams
Don't want to know
 about the fabric and seams
Life is a quilt
 started with needle and thread
Once in a while
 seams rip and shred
The things that I see
 are not meant to be

SPOKEN WORD – THE CROSS

BY PEACE PRESTON, BIOLOGY HEALTH PROFESSIONS; CHEMISTRY

Splintered shards of oak are grating into his open wounds. Wounds bleeding and infected; bacteria rampant on the pus-filled piece of flesh that has become unattached from his back. He grunts as he drags the giant wooden log up the side of a cliff.

It is his desperate pleading with his father that chokes up the audience. It is not the torment inflicted on a human being, or the injustice, or inhumanity; or even their own selfishness for which this act is done.

No.

It's the fact that after every prophet said "it must be done" he knew he was in for it, aware from the moment he entered this earth exactly the nature by which he would leave it. Yet he still begged for mercy. His face twisted in pain as he stared into the heavens and asked why his daddy didn't bandage him. Why didn't his own father kneel down and kiss his wounds and nurse him as he did the slaves that beat their breasts because their milk did not taste like honey?

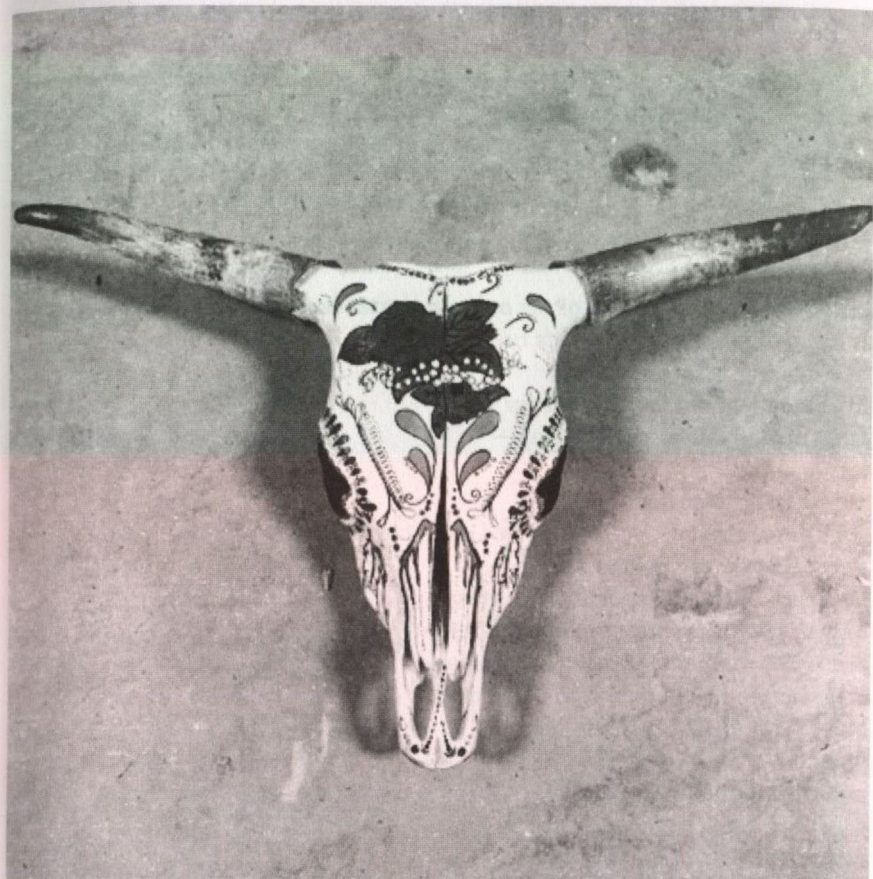
The crowd felt no remorse for their wickedness, only dumb shame for the man flayed before them, using his misery as fuel for their mockery. When he cried out to his father they spat and sneered. Their eyes black as the abyss into which their souls are condemned. Flames lick from their tongues with a laughing howl. They become the beasts that haunt dreams, when only yesterday they ate at his feet.

He looks up to his father, only this time he is not asking for deliverance. Now he pleads for death. It is with one final breath that he is rewarded with the world's most famous end.

Why did he suffer this?

Why did he endure what no man should so that rich men—who worship him publically but cannot remember his name—can be free of blame? He looks at us here and sees how hard we try again, again, again, again and yet still screw up the beautiful simplicity of grace.

Instead of smearing his own blood on our faces and screaming that he did this, he gently whispers, "It was worth it."



DISTANT

BY ALISSA SINCLAIR, ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

TEMPER MY SPIRIT

BY AMIE ADAMS, WRITING & RHETORIC

I came here to study hard things—rock mountain and salt sea—and to temper spirit on their edges. —Annie Dillard

My heart pounds in time
with the whooshing crescendo of water crashing toward me—
mind, body, spirit alert to the holy power drenching
my feet and pulling me in,
knocking over the balance of my ordered existence.
It may not be safe here, but it's holy.

My blood pumps fast through my veins:
and I'm alert, alive, senses firing—
awe and fear,
raging water mountains pouring
over themselves,
stretching watery fingers to pull
wet, clacking stones back in their grasp
only to return to shore a moment later—
the cyclic, methodic wearing away of land
and stone—a black dust trail between the
blue,
green,
and the mountains beyond.

I gape a pale-skinned 'O' of awe
and I stare through mesmerized blue eyes
which have somehow tinted the landscape.
How else to describe the layers
of blue surrounding me? From the white tips of mountains
to white tips of waves, the sky and water pass through gradient blues:
light navy,
cornflower (and clouds),
cerulean,
sky blue,
(the white line of horizon)
gray blue,
metallic gray,
green-gray,
and muted green-blue crashing against
black granules of sand.

I sit alone on a pale log, feet buried in coarse black sand,
under this dome.

Soft sunlight from the west warms
my back and sparkles on the snow-capped mountains.

I see no one else and
can see for miles.

Here at the edge of everything there are only
footprints, shorebirds,

and the tug-o-war between land and sea.

No whispers above the waves, only
echoey, rhythmic thunder

calling my feet back to the furious edge.

VOYAGER

BY MARIE VAN ZWEDEN, ART

Her life exhibits a
mess of ravishing
contradictions.

Inside she lives with a hurricane,
drowning her own compass, yet
outside she swims with captains,
evading sharks on her wings.

Her skin's a pale ship, and
she's bilging waves, but
in her mind, she's capsizing
with every salty piece
of knowledge
acquired.

She's a nautical
nightmare, a vessel sinking

but
she's rising
from the depths: a
beautiful paradox—lost

yet found.

WASTED LOVE

BY MARIA VAN ZWEDEN, ART

In loving memory of Grandma Priscilla

How quickly jealous
I became
when it was

them — those lilac
twigs—

and not me,
kissing
grandma's window—loving
her every
shuffle and
step.

those perennial branches,

did they even understand,
what a privilege it was,
to gaze

eternally

on her gentle laugh,
bubbling
from the bottom of
her delicate soul,

or know what a gift it was,
to feel
her hands, trimming
their branches —
her hands,
soft as velvet, and
sure as Sunday's
church bell.

And could
they even hear

BE WITH ME

BY MARIA VAN ZWEDEN, ART

POETRY

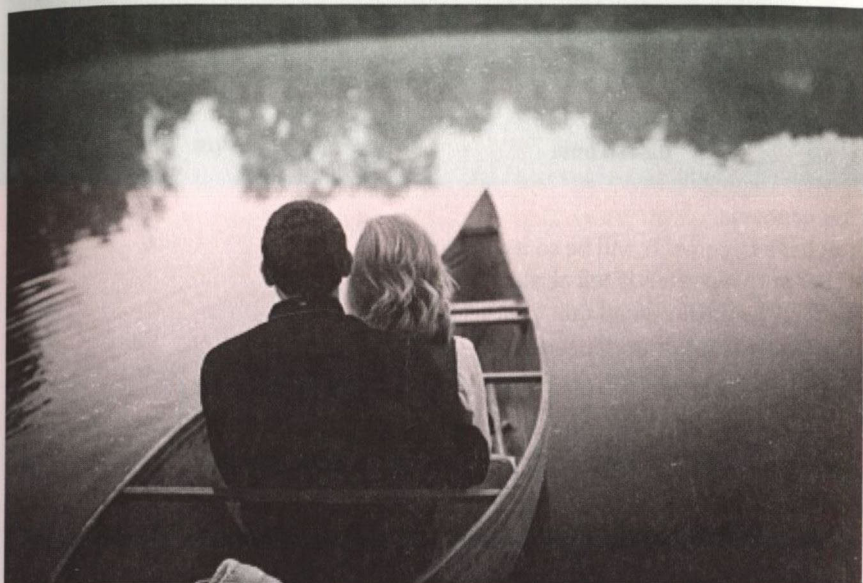
her melodious rhythms,
that she hummed
while baking
almond sand pastries —
the ones that I and Grandpa
loved — did they even
savor that
home-baked aroma?

Or did they only

selfishly

breathe in their own
celestial scent?

You — yes, you
you ugly
lavender florets,
you wasted
your time. You didn't deserve
her.



'BE WITH ME

BY MARIA VAN ZWEDEN, ART

"THE WORLD INSIDE MY HEAD"

BY JAYDE LOGEMANN, WRITING & RHETORIC

You say:

Come on! Get dressed! It's time for us to go
hang out with tons of people you don't know!
We're all going. The party will be great!
We'll talk and eat and won't get back 'til late.

I think:

This
 will
be
 disastrous.

You continue:

You have to come! It will be so much fun
to listen to our friends tell all they've done.
We'll sit and make small talk for a while,
spending the evening extraversion-style.

I think:

So...
 I'll
feel
 awkward
 and
exhausted
ALL.
 NIGHT.
 LONG.

You say:

I won't put up with your little fuss.
I'll drag you by your hair along with us
to fellowship with real community!
We both know that you can't say no to me!

I know:

I will
 feel
 like your words
 are

binding
themselves

around
my
chest,

but...

I say:

Of course! You're right. I'd love to come along—
I just need some fresh air. I won't be long—
Play without me. I'd rather watch instead.

And retreat into the

inside world

head.
my

"PIANISSIMO"

BY JAYDE LOGEMANN, WRITING & RHETORIC

You assume
I will be debilitated
by stage fright
because I am soft-spoken
and don't respond well
when you bark
in my ear
every five seconds,
telling me
I'm doing it wrong.

I wish you could see
I divulge more confidence
and competency
than the loud-mouth
self-aggrandizers
who scream too loudly
to hear their stories swirling
through the room.

I wish you knew
that I am soft-spoken
because I know there are
other people
who need to be heard.

Besides,
being soft-spoken means
I have done enough watching
to know
no eyes will fixate on me
a moment longer than
I am on the stage, and
(believe it or not)
I have succeeded enough
to know
that failure doesn't make a difference
because, either way,
I will eat lunch alone.

And
stop
telling
me
to be louder.
A *fortissimo*
without a *pianissimo*
is just noise,
and I want to make
music.

So watch me step
onto the stage
striding forward with pride
my head held high
my shoulders wide,
and hear me
shut my mouth
and let the music
do the talking.

Can you see now
that the spotlight
in my eyes
makes the audience
and the pressure
disappear
and reminds me
that when I step
off the stage
my mistakes and I
will become
invisible,
too?

DEAR WIND

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

Hello, wind
Good afternoon, breeze
My dear friend, the cool air:
I hear you rushing
To greet me!
You race through leaves and brambles
To tangle my hair
And tickle my cheeks.
Oh, you have never been good
At surprising me, dear wind.
After all, my close friends,
The trees, enjoy
Warning me of your approach—
Your name whispered in the song of their branches
That sway and hum
Like some ancient flute
You might hear echo
In amber tongues of fire.
You are never far from me,
Lovely breeze.
Always there waiting
To gust past
My bare arms, chilling
Me long enough to know
I am alive
As you race and hide away.
But you always come back,
Hey ho!
Dear wind!

ENTICED WORDS

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

I hope to draw you near with my soft sounds
That, like silken rope, wrap around your soul
Enticing and pulling you closer to the page.

I hope to capture your gaze with my words
Seductively swaying, lithely leading
You around the paper, making your eyes comb
Through these figures with hypnotic desire.

Is it working?

Are my words warmly melting on your lips?
Is your heart racing fast as these words reach out
To touch your soul, making you swallow hard
Against the anxious lump in your dry throat?

Can you feel it?

I want to make you feel the wind caressing
Your arms, the water streaming down your body,
The pulse of the sun beating, beating, beating
Down on your face in hot, steady waves.

I hope so.

When I can make the strong woman cry
And make the fat man dance; when I can make
Your caged bird sing then I will know my words
Can take your soul rapt in mine.

I SEE THE MOON, THE MOON SEES ME

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

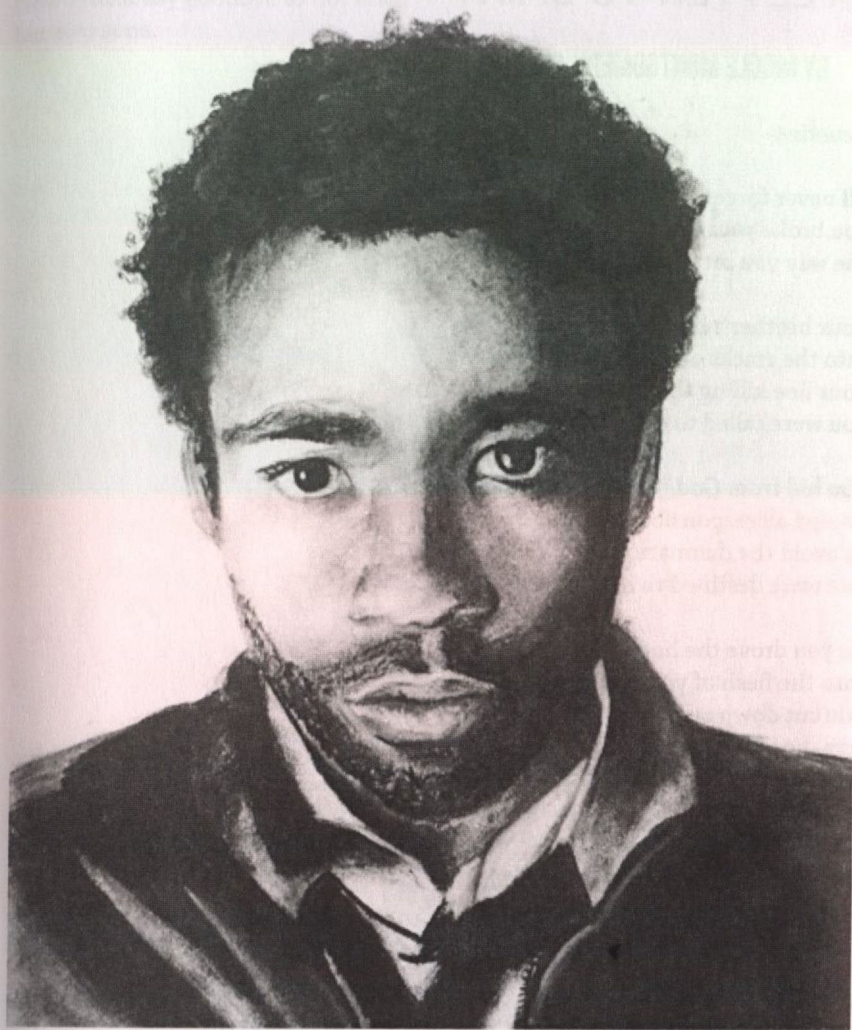
What if the moon is made of cheese
and the man whose face occupies
the frontal lobe of the great Swiss sphere
is the shadow of a gaunt Rwandan
starved?

What if the sun doesn't actually blind you
and that bright, golden ball of flame
is circling through the lonely sky waiting
for you to see her, a child bride
abandoned?

What if the common stars you wish upon in the
dark night, those you see twinkling above Native American lands,
have been screaming for light years—their own wish for
recompense only heard as small energy waves w
ignore?

What if the rain cloud who hangs above your head
is lifting his strong back, arching into an anvil Asian sky,
and is raining the sweat and tears of unfruitful
labor to provide for his dying planet that remain
enslaved?

What if the earth is holding her humanity close like
an exhausted parent, as she drains herself bone dry
just so her helpless children can feel satisfied while the
white eldest steals food from the mouths of his
scrawny brown kin?



GAMBINO

BY JAYCEE VANDER BERG, CRIMINAL JUSTICE

"A LETTER TO CAIN" THE MOON SEES ME

BY NICOLE MONTGOMERY, ENGLISH TEACHING

Genesis 4

I'll never forget the day
you broke your brother's skull
the way you broke and tilled the soil.

Your brother's blood seeped
into the cracks of the earth,
your hoe killing the creation
you were called to care for, then

you hid from God,
denied all responsibility
to avoid the damnation
you were destined to receive.

As you drove the hoe
into the flesh of your flesh,
you cut down our family
tree, uprooted us, left
us as a stump, exposed
to the elements.

I saw you, I saw what you did,
Cain, and do you know what
you've done to me? I know why
you hide your hands, that permanent
blood stain you can't wash off,
punishment for your actions.

As you split Abel's skull,
so too did my womb split,
and I cried out in labor
as I heard your brother's voice
crying in the soil. You've spoiled
the crop, reaping what you've sown.

I love you, but why
did you have to do this hateful
act against your own blood?

Now I must say goodbye to not one,
but two sons.

MY SEASHELL HEART

BY NICOLE MONTGOMERY, ENGLISH TEACHING

Along this Atlantic shore, the ocean murky blue,
I stand lost between horizon and sun,
ready to abandon my broken, seashell heart—
bury it like glass shards in the sand—
a sharp, fractured treasure waiting to cut or be uncovered,
held by your delicate hands.

Here water and sand touch hands
and the ocean shivers in its brilliant ice blue
and I imagine you sifting sand, my heart uncovered
in your hand. I squint, watch the setting sun,
my cold feet sinking in sea-wet sand,
watching you piece together my heart.

With gold-soldered care you piece
each shard, examine in gracious hands,
fit each to the whole, all these missing pieces in the sand.
The sky now a stained-glass swirl of deep reds, pinked blues,
Reveals the sun's many layers, and
you look my way: a sweet reminder of love uncovered.

On the western side, the moon wakes, uncovers
the dark eclipsing my heart,
nothing now to stop this unstoppable sun
from shining through these cracks in your hands.
You stand in silence, watch the deep and deeper blues
roll in, flattening kid-made castles of sand.

I imagine you sitting in sand,
cutting your finger on my lip uncovered,
lifeless, cold, a deathly blue.
You've discovered me, breathed life into my heart,
and taken me in your loving hands.
You hold me up to warm me in the sun.

Sun settles into night, and you show me the me you've uncovered,
mended in mending my seashell heart:
gold-veined and blushing blue.

And from that North Carolina ocean blue,
 gently holding up this new-formed heart you
 know that in Iowa I'm seeing *your* heart uncovered too.

HUMANIST APPROACH

BY ABBEY SLATTERY, WRITING & RHETORIC

what else has to happen
for it to stop being about politics
and start being about love,
compassion,
humanity?
how do we find
the beating heart
inside our own misconceptions?

how many more kids
need to be told
to go back to Mexico
even though their parents
come from Guatemala
and their sisters
were born stateside,
their whole family confused
because they thought
this was their country, too?

how many more people
will now be told
to sit in the back
of the bus
as if we've regressed
sixty years
and that public transit protest
in the deep south of Montgomery
wrote itself right out
of our history books?

how many more times
does "build that wall"
have to be chanted
in elementary school classrooms
before we realize
that fear
has manifested itself
into hatred
and we are all casualties?

how do we cool
the molten steel
burning in our guts
with the cool waters
of the gentle peace
that we're called to make?

is there a way to balance the two?
to temper the heat
without cracking the host?

who's to say our anger is righteous?
who's to say we're right?

still, fear's black smoke
blinds our eyes
as we squint through slit eyes
burning with pain.
division sends its spider web
cracks through our country's
bifocal lenses of black and white,
and we all become
too blinded to stop
the anger
that courses through our veins
from coast to coast,
all of us ignorant
as we shoot up with more
bipartisan bile.

we may never sober up,
as we wait for the smoke to clear
a path to common ground.
forever stuck
between idealism and rationality
in a tug of war
over the people
we've spoken for
instead of listened to.

BY ABBEY SLATTERY, WRITING & RHETORIC

Ennui in a crowded bar,
hope for humanity chipping away
like the lettering on the dingy walls
that peels off in strips of gold
fit for a place far more clean than this.

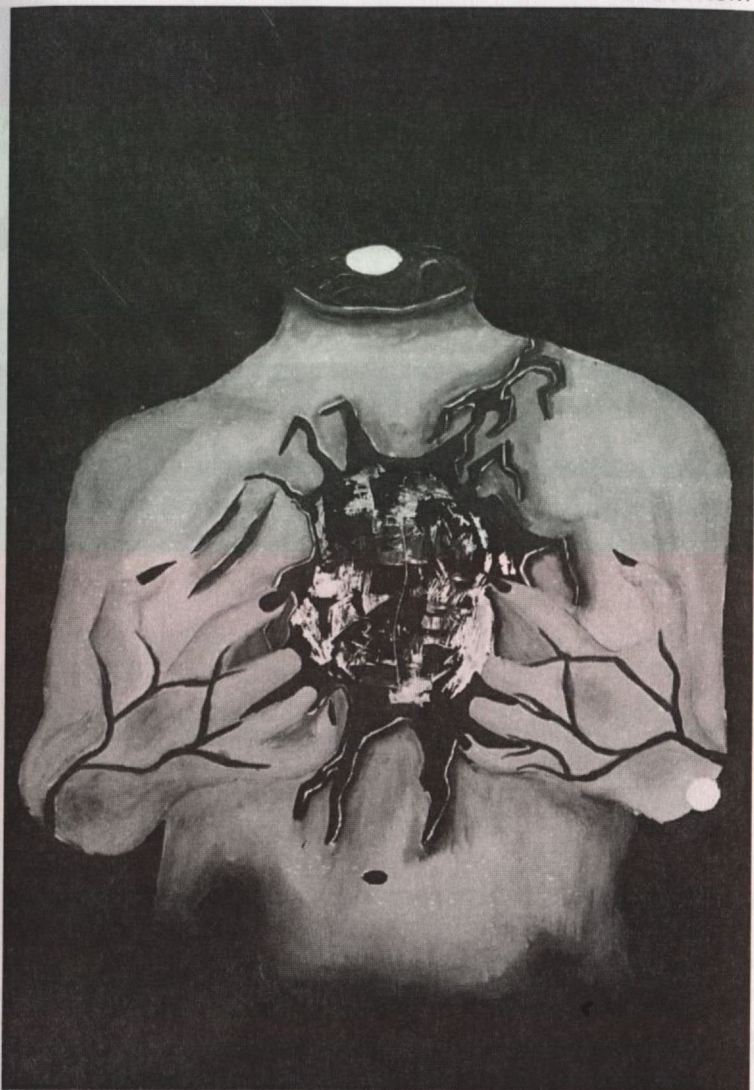
Waitresses walk by in short skirts
while middle-aged buzzed-off-of-Bud-Lights
put hands on their backs
and call them sweetheart,
and I can't help but wonder
if those girls feel as shitty as I do.
From the looks on their faces,
I think they do.

Cheap beer and loud drunks—
the couple at the bar
in a boozy love stupor,
hands all over each other.
A clatter of dishes and the chaos
of slurred conversations
compete for maximum decibel count.

I look around and wonder
if this is what happens when you get older.
If your week simply becomes
a wait for the weekend when
you finally get to release
and slam shots
and slap backs
and stumble home.

In the meantime,

I should've brought a book.



HEADLESS

BY NANCY BECERRA-BALBUENA, ART

FICTION

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

Full disclosure: As a child, my mother “collected” clowns for me. But that played no role in this selection—nor did its cultural clown-killing timeliness. The story had a dialogical rhythm that was nicely foot-tapable and an overarching scene to scene surprise. Also: the Macbeth references were perfect. I had a teacher once that told me a story needs a few horses to pull it from beginning to end and Ms. Logemann accomplished that with a subtle aplomb.

MY HOUR UPON THE STAGE

BY JAYDE LOGEMANN, WRITING AND RHETORIC

It started when Jenna leaned toward me across the lunch table, her eyes flashing with excitement, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. “What are the odds that you would dress up as a clown and stand outside Jake’s window for me?” she said.

“Why?”

“He told me yesterday that he is terrified of clowns, and I really want to see his reaction.”

“Then why don’t you dress up as a clown?” I said.

“I want to get it on video,” Jenna said. “And I want to push you out of

your comfort zone.”

I looked down at the green beans left on my lunch tray and shook my head. “You’ve got to be crazy.”

“No, you’ve got to be crazy!” Her voice squeaked with excitement, and I had to stop myself from wincing. She cleared her throat. “This is our senior year of high school. Are you really going to waste it—”

I turned away.

“Look at me!” she said.

I felt her eyes boring into my forehead and tried to flatten my smile as I tilted my head to meet her bright green eyes, but only for a moment. Jenna was my best friend, but I’ve always felt awkward making eye contact with people.

“See,” she said, “you’re smiling! Won’t this make a great story to tell your grandchildren?”

“Not if he shoots me in the head.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to let my boyfriend shoot you.”

“What if his neighbors call the police?” I watched her shrug. “I really, really, really don’t want to get arrested.”

“No one’s going to call the police.”

I picked up my fork and started rolling the green beans around my tray. “So, if you saw a clown standing outside your neighbor’s window, you wouldn’t call the police?”

Jenna shrugged. “I don’t really like my neighbors that much. I don’t really care if they get killed by a clown.”

I must’ve made a face, because Jenna laughed. “I’m kidding,” she said. “I will make sure nothing bad happens. We’ve been best friends since the seventh grade. You know you can trust me.” She held her pinky towards me.

I covered my eyes with one hand and reached with the other, wrapping my pinky around hers. “I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

“I—what?” Jenna gripped my pinky with hers. “So you agree?” She threw her head back and laughed so hard the boys sitting at the table behind her turned and stared. “I’ll be at your house at ten!”

The bell rang, and Jenna picked up her tray.

“I’m still not sure this is a good idea,” I said.

But she’d already disappeared into the crowd.

~

True to her word, Jenna showed up at ten. I jumped when I heard her tapping on the window.

“You know, we have a front door,” I said, unlocking the window and sliding it open.

“Aren’t your parents home?” she asked, climbing into my room.

I nodded. “They’re watching TV in bed.”

“Did you tell them I was coming?”

"I said you might stop by to work on a project." I didn't mention how sick lying to my parents had made me feel.

Jenna gestured for me to sit on my bed as she slipped her backpack off her shoulders and yanked the zipper open. She pulled out several tubes of face paint. "Now, take your glasses off," she said, biting her lip, "and close your eyes."

I followed Jenna's instructions wordlessly as she applied grainy paint to my face with cold fingers. She drew long blue diamonds around each of my eyes and stretched my smile halfway to my ears. She drew a red circle on the tip of my nose and covered the rest of my face in white paint that itched as it dried. Then she pulled my long brown hair into two ponytails near the top of my head.

I examining my face in the mirror once she'd finished. "I look ridiculous."

"Do you have anything to wear?" she said.

I shrugged. "What do clowns wear?"

Jenna threw open the doors to my closet. "Just put on this," she said, throwing a plain white shirt at me, "with jeans."

I changed quickly, and Jenna slid the window open. I grabbed a sweat-shirt and pulled the hood up close around my face before I followed her out the window.

Jenna had parked several blocks away, but no one saw us as we dashed over to her car. I laid down in the backseat.

"What are you doing?" Jenna asked as she slipped into the driver's seat.

"I don't want anyone to see me," I said.

Jenna rolled her eyes and started the car. It only took us a few minutes to drive to Jake's house. Jenna parked near his house and left the doors unlocked, just in case we needed to get away quickly. I felt my stomach twist itself tighter into knots as we snuck around to the back of the house, and Jenna showed me which window was Jake's. The light was still on, shining through the slats of the blinds. I glanced down at my watch. It was just past eleven.

"How am I supposed to get up there?" I asked, pointing to the window. At best, Jake would be able to see the top of my forehead.

"There's a ridge in the wall from the foundation or something," Jenna said. "You can stand on that and hold onto the windowsill."

"You've really thought this through," I said.

"Well, practice makes perfect." She winked and ducked behind a tree and pulled out her phone. "I'm ready when you are," she whispered, her eyes fixed on the screen.

"What do I do?" I hissed once I'd climbed onto the ridge.

"Knock on the window," Jenna hissed back.

I turned to the window and lifted my hand to knock, but looked back at Jenna once more. She gave me a smile and a thumbs-up. I rapped on the window three times and plastered a smile on my face. I saw motion through

the slats in the blinds, Jake jogging towards the window, expecting Jenna. He fumbled with the blinds for a bit before they clattered up—his face frozen in a flirtatious smirk.

Until his grin melted into a scream.

I could hear him through the closed window as he collapsed onto the floor. His bedroom door opened and I jumped off the ledge and dropped into a crouch, my back to the wall.

"What?" Jenna hissed. "What happened?"

"His parents," I whispered back.

Jenna knelt in the grass, her body still half-hidden behind the tree.

"Run for it," she said.

And we did.

I heard a door open behind me and a deep voice shout something as I reached the car, but I didn't stop. I had hardly closed the car door before Jenna pressed the accelerator and we were halfway down the street.

~

Two days later, I lay on my bed with sweat-smearing face paint dripping down my face and neck, waiting for Jenna to pick up her phone.

"Is everything OK?" Jenna's voice crackled on the other end.

"Yeah," I said. "I just... I just did something," I could hardly keep myself from laughing.

"Are you OK?" she asked again, her voice more urgent. "Do you need me to come pick you up somewhere? Are you in trouble?"

"Jenna, I'm fine," I said. "I'm in bed. But you'd be so proud of me!" I rolled over and looked out my window, trying to imagine how scared I would be if I saw someone like myself outside, leering at me.

"It's two in the morning."

"Just give me two minutes, and then you can go back to sleep," I said.

"You know Olivia from school?"

"Which one?"

"The cheerleader," I said. "Well, she had a party at her house tonight with all the other cheerleaders and football players and rich kids."

"So? We hate all of them." Now that she knew I was safe, she sounded like she was about to fall asleep again.

"Well, I found the face paint from the other night. You left it on my bed."

"Go on," Jenna suddenly sounding much more awake. I could almost see her sitting bolt upright in her bed, her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes flashing with excitement.

"Well, I decided that it might be interesting to provide a little... what word am I looking for? Not entertainment..."

"You did not!"

"I'll send you a picture."

"I love you so much right now," Jenna said. "Tell me more!"

"Well, Olivia's house has this big hedge around it and this massive iron gate in the front, so I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get very close, but then I found a hole in the hedge that I could squeeze through. I went around to the back of the house where everyone was. Marcus Taylor—you know, from the football team—and Lizzie Mills were apart from the group, making out. I snuck right up to them. Close enough I could've touched them. Then Marcus saw me and screamed. You should've heard him! He sounded like a six-year-old girl, and he sprinted faster than I've ever seen him move on the field. Lizzie collapsed onto the ground and started whimpering. A bunch of people came running, but I slipped back outside the hedge."

"Did anyone follow you?"

"No," I said, "but I stayed right outside the hedge and heard them all freaking out."

"What were they saying?"

"A lot of things that I can't repeat." I laughed. "And that they'd peed themselves. I think I heard someone say something about calling the cops, but I'm not sure."

"Do you think any of them recognized you?" Jenna said, her voice suddenly quiet.

"No, I was far enough away, and I don't think Marcus looked too closely before he ran. Besides, I don't think he or Lizzie would recognize me even without all the face paint."

"Good," Jenna said. "Look, that's hilarious, really, but I don't want you to get into any kind of trouble."

"Trouble?" I said. "Weren't you just telling me two days ago—"

"I know. I'm sure it's fine. You said you had a picture?"

"Yeah," I said. "I can send that to you. I'll see you at school."

"See you," Jenna said. "Sleep well, you clown."

I laughed.

And she hung up.

~

I always sit in the front during study hall and try to focus on my homework while the popular kids talk in the back of the classroom. The teacher, Mr. Robinson, never tries to quiet them down, which is normally frustrating, but the Monday after Olivia's party, I didn't care. I opened my British Literature textbook on my desk and stared at a picture of Lady Macbeth and her bloodstained hands while trying not to laugh at the conversation taking place behind me.

"It was honestly, like, the scariest thing that's ever happened to me," Mia said, twirling her bleached hair around her finger. "Like, I thought we were about to be in a horror movie or something."

"I wasn't that scared," Jackson said. "I was going to go after it, but then it disappeared." I had peeked through the hedge a couple times after

slipping away, and I was fairly certain that Jackson was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth and muttering to himself.

"It disappeared?" Emma said. I was sure that she wouldn't have been invited to the party. She was pretty, but too much of a good girl to be popular.

"Marcus said that it snuck right up next to him and Lizzie," Mia said, "but when he got back, it was gone. I was looking over my shoulder the entire night after that. Seriously. I was scared it would, like, jump out of the bushes or something."

"Do you have any idea who it was?" Emma said.

"It was too far away and was wearing a lot of makeup," Jackson said.

"And it left before I could go after it."

"Stephanie Laurence got a picture and sent it to me," Mia said.

I froze. We aren't supposed to have our phones in study hall, but Mr. Robinson doesn't care about enforcing that rule, either. How clear was that picture?

"It's not very clear," Mia said, "because it's from far away, but it's still creepy."

"No no no no no no no!" I heard Emma say behind me a moment later. "No! I think I'm going to have nightmares just looking at that thing!"

"It took me forever to get to sleep all weekend," Mia said.

"Did Stephanie send that to the police?" Emma said.

"I don't think so," Mia said. "A lot of people talked about calling the police, but no one did. We weren't sure that we wanted them showing up at the party, if you know what I mean."

"But if things like this keep happening," Emma said, "you should send that to the police. I don't want some creep like that wandering the streets."

"The clown didn't seem that dangerous," Jackson said. "Looked pretty small, like a girl. I could've taken it easy. Only about what's-her-face's height—the brain in the front row."

All the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. He meant me, and I knew they were all looking at me now. I waited for one of them to say my name, but none of them did.

Their conversation morphed into a discussion of some stupid drama that I didn't care about, so I tried to turn my focus back to Macbeth. I ended up doodling clown faces in my notebook instead.

I found a billowy, blue and yellow striped shirt and a pair of bright green pants at the second-hand store, but I waited until Friday night to put them on. This time, instead of bright blue diamonds around my eyes, I drew dark black circles with lines like tears dripping down my cheeks. Instead of simply stretching my smile, I made it twist across my face in a macabre grin. I arched my eyebrows high and covered the rest of my face and neck with white paint. I pulled my hair up into two high ponytails—still hadn't found a rainbow wig.

I tilted my face down, letting the shadows gather beneath my eyes.

Perfect.

I slid open my window and jumped outside. It was only the third time I'd ever snuck out of my house, and I was sure my parents still had no idea. Who would expect the quiet nerd to sneak out of the house at night dressed as a clown?

I hid in the shadows and turned by head away the first few times a car passed as I walked, but thought I might as well be back in my warm bed if that was all I was going to do. The next time a car passed by me stared into the windshield, desperately hoping to be seen. I couldn't see the driver's face, but the car's breaks squealed as the car skidded to a stop. I kept staring and charged towards the car, and the driver slammed on the accelerator.

They sped through the stop sign at the next intersection.

And it took me a full minute to stop laughing.

I continued down the sidewalk, and I got three other similar reactions from drivers. A passenger in a red pickup truck leaned out the window as the truck sped away and shouted something after me, middle finger extended, but his words were lost in the wind. I flashed him a smile and waved.

I turned a corner and saw a couple walking away from me, swinging their joined hands, about a block and a half away. The man was wearing a baseball cap and the girl was wearing cowboy boots. I stepped out of the circles of light created by the streetlamps and picked up my pace. Within a minute, I was close enough to hear their conversation. I rose onto the tips of my toes and snuck up between them, holding my breath. Once I was practically on top of them, I let out a high-pitched giggle.

They both whipped around, eyes wide. The man pushed the girl behind him, and she started screaming for help. He put up his fists as if he were going to punch me, but I stood my ground, face fixed in a leering grin.

I lifted my hand towards his face, eyes locked with his.

Took a step forward.

And he took a step back.

A door opened, but I kept my eyes fixed on the man in the cap.

"What's going on out there?" a guy in the house bellowed.

The man in the cap turned to the guy in the house.

"Get out of here!" the guy in the house shouted.

But I didn't move.

A gunshot echoed, and my eyes flew to the house. The guy had pulled a hand gun from his hoodie pocket, had it aimed at the sky, his eyes fixed on me as he re-cocked.

I turned and sprinted faster than I've ever run down the street, the back of my neck tingling as I expected every moment to feel a bullet lodge between my shoulder blades. I turned as soon as I could, not caring which direction I was going or which direction my house was. I only stopped to reassess the situation when I heard sirens wailing in the distance. My hands were trembling. I looked around for a street sign. Knew I was close to a bike trail that passed near my house. One lined with trees most of the way.

I could hide there.

I took a deep breath and made a dash for the trail, crashing through the trees, feeling the branches pull at my hair and snatch bits of paint off my face. I wished I could wash my face. In the shadow of the trees, I felt there was no need to keep running, but I froze every time I heard a noise. By the time I made it home, my hands were shaking and I had a pounding headache. But I still wanted to call Jenna before I went to bed. I couldn't keep an adventure like this to myself.

She answered after the third ring, but she didn't seem as excited about my story as I hoped she'd be.

"Is it all right if I come over?" she asked after I'd finished the story.

"Tonight?"

"Is that all right?"

"Sure," I said. "Come to my window."

"I'll be there soon."

~

I heard the tapping on my window fifteen minutes later and pulled the shade up and Jenna jumped back, one hand pressed against her heart and the other pressed over her mouth. Her eyebrows shot halfway up her forehead, and I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see someone behind me, forgetting that my face was still a mess of makeup and sweat. I struggled to open the window because I was bent over laughing.

"It really isn't that funny," Jenna said as she swung into my room, panting, out of breath.

"Why didn't I start doing stuff like this a long time ago?" I turned away from Jenna to admire what was left of my makeup in my dresser mirror.

"Take that stuff off your face," Jenna said. "You look like you're demon-possessed."

I shot her a look as she sat on the edge of my bed, then I hissed, thinking she'd laugh.

"I'm serious," she said. "Wash your face."

"Your face was hilarious," I said.

Jenna shook her head and looked away.

"Everyone's face is. I think the best is when it's a man—a big, strong, football player type—and he looks like he's having a seizure. Girls just go pale and get big eyes, but the football players act like they've been electrocuted."

"You're going to get yourself killed," Jenna said, refusing to look at me.

"You don't realize how good it feels to get those reactions." I said.

"These people wouldn't look at me twice, and now..." I shook my head, laughing.

"I'm worried about you."

"I ran so fast when I heard the gunshot," I said. "It was like being in one of those superhero movies, except I was wearing this instead of spandex." I pulled at my billowy shirt and giggled.

"Do you even hear yourself?" Jenna looked up at me at last, shaking

her head. "You're talking about someone firing a gun. This isn't like being in a movie. This is real life and people have real bullets in those guns."

I shrugged.

"Where did you get this?" Jenna reached out to touch the shirt. "And stop looking at me like that! This isn't you."

"I thought that was the point," I said, crossing my arms. "Stop being so boring," I said in my best Jenna-voice. "Stories for the grandchildren."

"This isn't what I was talking about," Jenna said. "You have to stop."

"Stop what?"

"This whole dressing up like a clown thing and trying to get yourself killed." She looked away again. "It was funny when it was just Jake, or even when it was Olivia's party, but this is real life. Do you realize how many people conceal or carry in this town?"

I thought of the man who'd pulled the hand gun out of his hoodie.

"You could end up hurt or... or..."

"Killed?" I said. The sharp crack of the gun echoed in my memory, and I swallowed hard. "Trust me, Jenna, I'm not that stupid."

"Someone fired a gun. You have to take this seriously!"

"I am taking this seriously," I said. "It's not like I stayed. I ran away. No one got hurt."

Jenna bit her lip and looked down at her hands.

"Did you really just come over to tell me to stop?" I asked.

"This has gotten completely out of hand," She looked back up at me, her eyes shining. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I can take care of myself."

"At least wash your face," Jenna said. "Do you really think they didn't call the police? And the people from school have been talking. Jake heard Ryan—you know, the one whose dad is a cop—talking about how there's a crazy clown on the loose."

"So I'm wanted as a stalker," I laughed. "There's a story for the grand-kids."

"This isn't funny!" Jenna snapped.

"You really think they're going to find me ... here? There's no way any of them would know who I am," I said. "Besides, if I wash my face, I can't do this." I raised my eyebrows and widened my eyes I tilted my head down like I'd practiced in the mirror. I let my lips slowly widen into a smile.

Jenna shook her head and walked over to the window. "I'm going to go," she said.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"No," Jenna said, her back to me. "I'm scared. Please promise me that you'll stop."

"OK," I said.

"Promise me!" she snapped, turning around. Tears had fallen from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

I held my hand out to her, my pinky extended. She wrapped her pinky

around mine and wiped the tears from her face with her other hand.

"See you Monday," she said, and I nodded, and she slipped out of the window. I stood there until I heard her car start down the street. Then I walked into the bathroom and stood before the mirror. I wiped my hand across my mouth, smearing my fingers with red.

"A little water clears us of this deed, Macbeth, darling," I crooned into the mirror.

I splashed some water on my face, watching the red, black, and white drip off my face and swirl down the drain.

I kept my promise to Jenna.

For an entire week.

I threw the face paint in the back of my desk drawer and stashed the costume under my bed. Tore the doodles of clowns out of my notebook, and made myself draw flowers instead, although sometimes I couldn't help but give them faces with scraggly smiles.

On Monday, my history teacher couldn't remember my name and stood at the front of the classroom, massaging his temples and muttering for twenty seconds until he realized he wouldn't be able to remember it and called on someone else.

On Tuesday, Jenna had a dentist appointment and was gone during lunch. I sat by myself. No one so much as smiled at me.

I was almost late to choir on Wednesday because a herd of cheerleaders were standing in the middle of the hallway and wouldn't move when I said, "Excuse me"—over and over and over again.

Jake asked Jenna to go to the homecoming dance with him on Thursday. He did it by standing on one of the lunch tables and singing a song to her that he had written himself. I watched, remembering that I've never been asked on a date once.

Friday was the worst.

On Friday, a boy bumped my arm as I was walking into the school, spilling my coffee all over me. Didn't even apologize. During study hall, all that the popular kids could talk about was the homecoming dance. And Jake sat with Jenna and me during lunch. Though they ignored me because they were making homecoming plans.

Plans that didn't include me, of course.

Then my English teacher said, "Turn to your neighbor and tell them what you think the most important themes in *Macbeth* are and how Shakespeare communicated them." No one even looked at me, and all I could do was sit and think that blood will have blood.

When I got home, my mom was sitting on the couch watching TV. She said, "Hi, sweetheart!" and waved vaguely in my direction but kept her eyes glued on the television, and that was all. When she called me for supper, I told her I wasn't feeling well.

It wasn't a lie.

When she came to check on me later, I pretended to be asleep, and stayed in bed until I heard the buzz of my parents' TV.

I threw my desk drawer open then and pulled out the paint. Smoothed a base layer of white all over my face and then drew a crooked, scraggly smile with black paint that cracked my face from ear-to-ear, then outlined it with bright red. I blackened the space between my cheekbone and my brow and redrew my eyebrows in the middle of my forehead. Snatched the costume from under my bed and threw it on.

I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled—actually smiled—for the first time that day. I wouldn't be overlooked dressed like that.

So I crawled out the window and headed toward downtown, where I knew there'd be more people. I wanted to be seen.

I needed to be seen.

It was a nice night, especially considering it was the middle of October, so it didn't take me long to find people wandering the streets.

I saw three freshman boys riding their skateboards down a quiet street that intersected the one I was walking down. I sprinted towards them, waving my arms and letting a laugh erupt from deep inside my chest. They all turned and ran, pumping their legs as quickly as they could. One of them lost control and fell sprawled out in the middle of the street, but he scrambled to his feet in an instant and sprinted after his friends.

I kept walking. Saw two college-aged guys and three girls walking straight toward me. But they hadn't seen me yet, so I slipped into the shadow of a tree and waited for them to pass by. When they were close enough, I reached out my hand and brushed one of the girls' arms with my fingers. She shrieked, and they all jumped back, but one of the boys rebounded quickly. He took three steps towards me, and I stumbled back.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" he yelled, rolling up a sleeve on his gray sweatshirt.

I'd recovered, though, and flashed a smile.

"What are you, twelve?" the guy said. "Why don't you go back home and leave us alone? Seriously, that's not even funny. Just immature."

He kept talking as I slunk backwards around a corner. I found myself running, limbs flying and breath ragged, and I hated myself for running away. I turned down the street at the end of the alley and kept jogging. I wasn't about to let him ruin my night.

So I scared a few people in cars, getting the same kinds of responses I'd gotten before, but that wasn't as fun as face-to-face interactions because I couldn't see the drivers' expressions. I kept walking, wandering around town. At last, I turned down a street and saw a group of people walking in the opposite direction.

Same group that I'd confronted before.

I gritted my teeth and ran down a side street, hoping to intersect them before they reached the next street. I found an alley that connected the two streets and ran down it. I didn't even wait until I could hear their voices before

I jumped out, making a noise somewhere between a shout and a laugh, barreling towards them at full speed.

Two of the girls screamed, and one of the boys swore. The boy in the gray sweatshirt stepped towards me, his face stone cold and unmoving. He reached behind him. When his hand came back into view, he was clutching a hand gun.

I stretched my hand out as if I could catch the bullet in my fist. Screached to a halt, frozen, unable to scream. The gun fired, and the noise didn't jolt me awake. The world stopped—the bullet was halfway between me and the gun. Everything flashed through my mind at once—that I was sorry for not listening to Jenna, that I wished I was invisible now, nothing but air, that I loved my parents but hadn't told them.

The bullet rips through my outstretched hand and pounds my chest.

A voice, faint, above me. God? "Is someone calling 911?" God's a girl and he's screaming.

"Yes," I hear—another voice, deeper. "We're on fourth street. No, near the park. Yeah, about—about a block and a half from the park. There's a clown." A pause. "Yes, a clown. No, my friend Brian shot her. In the chest, I think. There's a lot of blood. I think she's conscious. Britney, is she conscious?"

"She's not responding," God says, and I don't like how desperate God sounds. I thought he was supposed to be in control. I try to focus, but everything is blurry.

Someone is asking if the clown is off her medication, and I want so badly to sit up and to tell the girl that I'm not crazy or an idiot. I want to tell her that my name is Ava Rose Thompson, and I live on Seventeenth Street and I want to be a pharmacist when I grow up.

So much weight on my chest.

I catch a glimpse of God's face—a girl—and this heavy weight pressing down on my chest—that face, her face, blood smeared—like a clownish Lady Macbeth kneeling over me. Dark—it's dark—her face fading. Just an eye now. Out, out, brief candle!

And gone.

DEATH GOES TO THE VICTOR

BY CARRIE BOUWMAN, WRITING & RHETORIC; ART

Victor Nesmith killed his first man at the age of eighteen.

He'd trailed the man for twelve blocks. The guy was short with broad shoulders, handpicked by the leader of the Fallen Angels, one of the gangs that ran rampant in town.

Victor checked his watch.

He was going to be late for supper. His mother was normally an angel of a woman, but if someone crossed her, she could become a fiery demon. Victor looked down at the knife in his hand. Did he really want to kill this man? But the thought of his mother unprotected made him squirm.

The man, a member of a rival gang, paused to look at a sign, allowing Victor to creep closer. He had to stay focused on his mission. If he wanted to join the Fallen Angels, he'd have to complete this initiation.

Victor had kept his plans to join a gang quiet from his mother. Even though he was technically an adult, the angry look in his mother's eye could make him feel like a small child.

His hands shook before he jabbed his knife into the man's back, and even more when the task was completed.

The man gasped and collapsed. His blood spurted out of the wound in his back. As it leaked out, the man grew paler. Victor made the mistake of locking eyes with him. There was so much pain and confusion there, and he could see the life drain from the guy's eyes. Victor felt vomit rising up his throat, but he swallowed it back down.

He looked at the dead man lying on the ground, drew his jacket tighter around himself and hurried home. There's no going back now. Hopefully, it'd be worth it.

~

"Is that you Vic?" Joan Nesmith called out as soon as she heard the front door close.

Victor smirked. "No, Ma, it's a robber, coming in through the front door. I've come to take your valuables." He walked into the kitchen where his mom stood over the stove. "Who else would it be?"

Joan bumped his nose with the handle of her ladle. "Don't be smart with me, young man." She continued to stir the soup she was making. "This is almost ready, so wash up."

"Yes ma'am." Victor saluted.

"Wait." She turned to him with a raised eyebrow. "Are you okay? You look pale."

He ran a hand through his curly brown hair, a trait he'd gotten from his mother, although she kept hers hanging down to her shoulders while his piled on top of his head.

"I'm fine."

Joan set down her ladle and approached her son, who was a head taller than her. She looked into his eyes, stormy gray like his father's.

"You look sick," she said.

He shook his head, thought of the dead man. "I'm fine, Ma. Really. Maybe tired and a little cold."

She gave him a sad smile and patted his face affectionately. "Ok, go wash up."

He responded with a weary nod.

As he turned to go to the bathroom, he saw the picture of his father sitting on a side table in the living room. He faltered. Victor picked the photo up without thinking. He hadn't seen his father since he was three years old. His mother had taken Victor and ran from the abusive drunk.

Joan ducked her head into the room. "Come on, Victor, supper is ready." Her eyes fell onto the picture frame in Victor's hands.

"Mom?" Victor asked solemnly. "Why do you keep this picture of dad out in the open? After all he's done."

"Fifteen years that's been sitting there, and you ask now?"

Victor shrugged.

Joan crossed the room and took the picture from Victor. "I guess, despite myself, I still love him." Her small smile didn't reach her eyes. "At least this version of him." She gestured to the picture. "This was before the drugs and the drinking. Before he thought he had to join a gang."

Victor put his arm around his mother's shoulder.

She turned to him. "No matter how much I love or loved him, it's nothing compared to how I feel about you." She stood on tiptoes to kiss his forehead. "Your safety is more important to me."

He hugged his mother, hiding the tears forming in his eyes. Regret pooling in the pit of his stomach.

She patted his back, "Let's eat."

~

Victor approached the bar—Heaven's Gate. He had to meet with the leader of the Fallen Angels, Mickey, to talk about Victor's kill the night before.

Mickey's girlfriend Riley was sitting outside smoking. She had been a few grades above Victor in school. Back then she was tamer, with long brown hair, but now her hair didn't quite make it to her shoulders and she liked to dye unnatural colors. This time a vivid violet. When the weather was nice, she almost always wore combat boots with tights, shorts, and a tank top.

"Hey, Nez," she said between puffs. "Doin' good?"

Victor nodded, "I'm great."

Riley gave a slight smirk. "Good. How's your mom? I haven't seen in her so long."

"She's fine."

"You think we could meet up with her again?" Riley tapped her cigarette to get rid of the ashes at the end before taking another drag. "She always

brought the best pie to bake sales.”

Victor leaned against the building. “How do I explain that we’ve been hanging out? We were never friends in high school.”

She shrugged. “You’re smart, Nez.” She blew smoke in his face. “You could figure something out.”

He shook his head.

“Whatever,” Riley replied. “Mickey’s waiting for you.”

“Nez!” Mickey cheered when Victor walked in, raising his glass. “Good to see you, man!”

The door closed behind Victor and Riley slinked into the room. She crossed over to sit in the chair beside Mickey and leaned against him. He threw his arm around her shoulder.

“Whiskey?” Mickey offered while also pointing at the seat across from him, signaling that Victor should sit.

“No thanks, man,” Victor said.

Mickey pouted. “Are you sure, Nez? They have some really good stuff here. Top shelf alcohol is amazing.”

“Well, uh...”—Victor looked sheepishly at his hands in his lap—“I’m only eighteen. Isn’t that, you know, illegal?”

“Illegal? Shit, man, you’re in a fucking gang!” Mickey snorted. “You’ve killed someone. I’m sure it’s fine if you can have a drink.”

Victor nodded. “Right. Of course.”

Mickey waved at the bartender to bring Victor whiskey. It was set in front of him, but Victor still hesitated in taking a sip. His mom never kept alcohol in the house because she wasn’t a drinker. He himself never drank, even in high school, because he was afraid that it would do the same thing to him that it had to his father. Victor still had vague memories of his father coming home wasted, raging around the house, and shouting at his mother.

“Cheers, Nez.” Mickey raised his glass.

Victor picked up the glass in front of him and tapped it against Mickey’s. He had to stop himself from coughing it up as the cold liquid seared his throat. He smiled at Mickey and hoped that it wasn’t a grimace.

“Great, isn’t it?” Mickey asked.

“Uh.” Victor cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

Mickey took a sip, then beamed at Victor. “Tell me, Nez, why did you want to join the Fallen Angels?”

“Protection.” Victor tapped his fingers on his glass. “You said you could protect us, my mom and me. From them.”

“Ah yes.” Mickey’s smile grew. “The Grim Reapers. Worst gang in the city.”

Riley nuzzled herself against Mickey. “They’re not as bad as the Fallen Angels.”

Mickey raised an eyebrow at her.

“I mean it in a good way, Mick.”

"Anyway," Mickey continued. "You got a threat from them."

Victor nodded. "I think my father is in that gang, but I don't know. I know he's in some gang."

"Ah, yes, your father. Papa Nez." Mickey threw back the rest of his whiskey and then signaled the bartender to bring him another. "We're trying to figure everything out. I wouldn't be too surprised if it was something related to your father though."

"Thanks, Mickey, really."

"Hey, it's nothin'," Mickey insisted. "Once you're part of the Fallen Angels, we got your back. We're like your brothers now."

Victor checked his watch. "Oh shit, I'm going to be late again. Sorry but I have to go."

"It's alright. Later, Nez." Mickey waved Victor off nonchalantly.

He ran out of the bar and to the sidewalk that would lead him straight home. Victor wasn't quite halfway there when everything went black.

~

When Victor came to, he was hanging awkwardly from the ceiling, handcuffed to an exposed pipe in a basement. The pipe dripped rhythmically onto the cement floor. The room was lit by a single lightbulb, flickering slightly. The back of Victor's head throbbed where a lump was forming.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty."

Victor blinked, trying to get his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. A Hispanic man, with a face only a mother could love, towered over him.

"Now, what was your name again? Nez?" asked Big and Ugly, "Isn't that what they call you? Your buddies in your so-called gang."

Victor stared at the man, nonplussed.

"Tell us where it is," the man said. Two partners stood behind him, grinning at Victor. One was a tall, skinny, and white. The other short, muscular, and black. The shorter man looked familiar, but Victor couldn't place where he may have seen him before.

"Wha—?"

A fist hit his face. His nose cracked and blood ran down his face.

"You sure as shit know what I'm talking about." Big and Ugly gave a few blows to Victor's torso, cracking a few ribs to match his nose.

Victor coughed before answering. "I don't, I don't know what you're talking about. How the hell am I supposed to know what you mean when you say to tell you about 'it'? It could be fucking anything, man."

That earned him a punch in the mouth.

"Your hideout, or whatever the hell you want to call it."

Victor stayed silent, looking at the man, but not really seeing him. He'd let his eyes go fuzzy.

"I said"—the man pulled his fist back—"tell us where the Fallen Angels operate." He slammed his fist into Victor's gut.

"Fuck you!" Victor spit blood at the man.

"You know, Nez," the man said. "I've never hear of a place called fuck

you." His fist collided with Victor's stomach once again. "Is it new?"

Blood dripped from the corner of Victor's mouth. He felt more stabbing pain in his side. Figured the man had broken another rib or two.

"Nez, man, you seem like a nice guy," Big and Ugly said. He cracked his knuckles and stretched his arms behind him until his back gave a pop. "I don't know why you won't just tell me what I need to know." He moved his head side to side and then rotated his arms around once. Preparing to strike again.

"Because I don't snitch to motherfuckers like you," Victor said. He'd managed to talk calmly despite the fact that his insides were on fire.

The man shook his head. "You are so disappointing." He prepared himself to hit Victor again.

"Wait." The black man finally spoke. "I think I have a better way to get him to speak."

"All yours," Big and Ugly said. He stepped aside and gestured to Victor. Short and Stocky stepped forward and said, "Tell us the information we need."

Victor glared and replied, "If I didn't tell him, I'm not telling you."

Quick as a flash, Short and Stocky pulled out a switchblade and stuck it into Victor's thigh. Victor screamed. "There's more where that came from, he guy said. He twisted the knife as he removed his hand. "This is for my brother," he whispered.

The scream that escaped Victor's lips was earth-shattering. He had finally realized why he recognized this man. It was his brother Victor had stabbed—the guy he'd gone after to join the Fallen Angels.

"Are you ready to share now?" the man reached into his pocket and extracted a second switchblade. He flipped out the blade and held it threateningly close to Victor's leg, this time higher up, nearer to his groin.

Victor whimpered.

~

The room was empty when Victor woke up. He'd passed out sometime after the fourth or fifth blade penetrated his flesh. The knives were gone now, and someone had haphazardly wrapped his leg to stanch the bleeding.

He'd fallen when he'd passed out, dangling from pipe. His arms felt as if they were about to pull out of their sockets, his wrists rubbed raw. Victor tried to stand up, putting more weight onto his good leg.

He looked around the room to ensure that he really was alone. There was no sign of life. The three men were probably off somewhere, torturing someone else.

The door opened and Victor tensed.

A girl entered the room—short, blonde, not very threatening. She smirked at Victor's awkward stance.

"Hello, Nez," she said, standing in front of him with her arms crossed.

"Who the hell are you?" he grunted.

"That's not important." She took a key out of her pocket. "They told me that they weren't going to get anything out of you, so I should just let you go."

Victor was stunned. "Just like that?"

"Well, unless you want to stay here and continue."

He shook his head.

The girl undid his handcuffs and ushered him out of the building.

Victor paused in front of the house, marveling that he was free.

Then he ran.

~

His run was more of a hurried limp for the first couple of steps until the adrenaline hit him. Renewed energy pumped through his veins. Victor didn't stop until he made it back to Heaven's Gate. He had to warn Mickey that the Grim Reapers were looking for him.

He burst into the bar and Mickey looked up at him, lazily. The rest of the Fallen Angels were there, drinking, conversing, playing pool.

"Nez, you came back." His face quickly changed. He beamed at Victor. "You came to party with us!"

Victor panted and shook his head. "Grim Reapers," he gasped. "They caught me. Tortured me. Trying to find you."

Mickey stood. "How did you get free?"

Victor shrugged. "They decided to let me go."

Mickey's face drained of color. "They're coming," he said.

"What?" Victor looked around nervously.

"They probably let you go so they could follow you." Mickey turned to address the rest of the room. "Prepare yourselves, boys. We might get some company."

The occupants of the room scrambled, trying to arm themselves for whatever might descend on them, right as the doors slammed open. The Grim Reapers filed into bar—Big and Ugly, Short and Stocky, and Slim Jim in their midst. They all parted to let their leader through.

He had a glint in his stormy gray eyes.

"Mickey." The man's voice boomed, filling the room. "Nice to officially meet you."

Mickey's face blanched. "What are you doing here?" He tried to make his voice as loud as the man's, but it almost sounded like a whimper.

"You've killed some of my men, I've killed some of yours." The man inspected his fingernails as if the conversation were boring him. "I figured it was time we just duke it out all at once."

"You're on." Mickey had found his voice. "Might as well get it over with sooner than later, right?"

"That's what I was thinking," the man said.

"Dad?" Victor stepped forward. The years had changed his father's appearance somewhat, but he was still recognizable as the man in his mother's picture frame.

"Wait," Mickey said. "The leader of the Grim Reapers..."—he turned to look at Victor—"is Papa Nez?"

Victor's father grinned. "Name's Charles."

"I knew you were in a gang," Victor said. "But I didn't know you were their leader."

Charles eyed his son. "Well, it took me almost fifteen years to get to this position, and once I became the boss it was a lot easier to track you and your mother down." He shook his head. "Thought she'd have been smarter than just move you across town."

"What do you mean track us down?" Victor felt he was either going to start screaming or crying, he wasn't sure which.

Charles laughed, "Obviously you don't know what kind of power a boss has. I can control my men, have them do whatever I want." He gestured to the men at his side. "Or I can bribe cops to give up your address."

Victor's eyes stung. The pain in his leg was starting to come back, not that he had been standing still. The wounds throbbed, mocking him. His father had let this happen to him.

"As for the threat, I sent it because your bitch mother ran from me. I fully intend to get my revenge." Charles clenched his fists. "And you decided to join this loser gang. I can't forgive that either."

"You know Mom still loves you. Or at least the man you used to be." Victor glared at his father. "She only ran to protect me. From you."

Charles scoffed.

"So," Victor said. "Are you going to kill me then? Is this what this is about?"

"No one runs away from me."

Mayhem broke out at that moment.

Riley ran, slid over the bar, and ducked behind it to hide. Mickey threw punches and wrestled a knife away from someone. Stabbed wildly at the Reapers around him. Another Fallen Angel broke a pool cue over someone's head and then used the sharper side as a weapon. Another picked up pool balls and brought them down on the heads of his enemies. The cracks from the impact radiated through the bar and the victims crumpled. Reapers retaliated in similar ways, using whatever they could as weapons.

Blood made the floor slippery and sticky.

In the midst of the fighting, Victor attacked any Reaper that came near him with fists and feet. He felt a hand on his shoulder and a sudden, sharp pain stabbed his back.

He fell to the ground and saw his father walk past with a bloody blade. His dad looked back at him with a menacing glint in his eye. Victor hyperextended, felt the blood rush out of him.

Was this how the man he killed felt?

He couldn't get up and there was too much madness in the bar for anyone to notice him on the ground. He started to see spots and thought of his mother as his world turned black.

His last thought: What's going to happen to her now?

Charles Nesmith killed his first and only son at the age of thirty-eight.



SHUT UP

BY CARLYE SHERMAN, PSYCHOLOGY

LOVE, SWEAT, AND GLASSES: A THIRD-GRADE ROMANCE

BY MARIE JEPPESEN, ENGLISH TEACHING

Jeremy sat in a chair specifically designed to make him feel puny and defeated. His feet barely touched the rough carpet of the principal's office. Normally, a child in Jeremy's shoes would think of themselves as being in a sticky situation. Many would even shed a tear or two. But this was not true for Jeremy. Sitting there, smiling slightly to himself, Jeremy knew that he had accomplished exactly what he wanted.

The school year had started like any other. His new teacher, Miss Bammershoot, was a little too peppy, and his lack of friends became impossibly noticeable. For the past few years, Jeremy had been a background character to the whole school experience. He wanted friends, sure, but that was easier said than done.

This year would be even more difficult, though, due to one small event that happened in the summer. Jeremy had gotten his first pair of glasses. Glasses are hard for anyone to pull off, especially a third-grade boy who has a self-confidence problem. That is why Jeremy refused to wear them for so long. His mother had been lax the whole summer with how much Jeremy had to wear them, but after a few days of school, she noticed that he still hadn't worn them and forced him to wear the geeky, horn-rimmed, bully magnets.

At first, Jeremy hated for his glasses, deeply. He was getting along fine without them for the first week of school—so why were they necessary now? His glasses were nerdy and would fall down his nose all the time. How was he supposed to find friends or look cool with a pair of ugly glasses barely hanging onto his face?

But when he walked into his third grade classroom—seeing everything differently through his glasses—he felt like he was seeing Jasmine for the first time.

More specifically, her hair.

He had known Jasmine since kindergarten and had even played on the monkey bars with her a few times, but had apparently been blind to this beauty until today. Jeremy stopped in his tracks and gawked at Jasmine putting her backpack into her assigned cubby. As Jasmine sidled past Jeremy, her ponytail swung in front of his face and rendered him speechless.

One might say that Jeremy thought Jasmine's hair was pretty, but what he really thought was that the onyx locks that cascaded down from her crown past her back pockets made his heart thump out of his chest and turn his hands into sweat faucets.

Why are my hands sweat faucets? Jeremy thought, holding up his palms, watching droplets dribble down his wrists. He attempted to clean his new glasses to get a better look at this goddess, but the sweat from his fingers only blurred the lenses more. *Or maybe my hands are sweat rivers. Sweat waterfalls! Do they have those? How is no one noticing the sweat pouring out of my hands? It's dripping everywhere! This is gross!*

Jeremy continued to stare at Jasmine and her hair for the rest of the morning, hardly listening to his teacher ramble on about how much progress they had already made in the first few days of the school year.

Maybe I could be a sweat monster, Jeremy thought, still worrying about his gland issue. I could be like The Blob in that one movie. But maybe not that scary. Maybe I would just make Slip n' Slides. That would be so cool! Everyone would like me then. I would be the coolest kid in class! Maybe not the girls though. Girls don't like sweat. I bet Jasmine hates sweat!

He shoved his sweaty hands into his pockets, deciding that it was anatomically impossible for Jasmine to have that much hair in their eight short years of existence. Which, of course, made her hair that much more magical. As the class lined up for lunch, Jeremy nearly lost his breath when Jasmine took the spot right in front of him.

Maybe she doesn't hate sweat! he thought, a grin growing on his freckled cheeks.

The line slowly plodded forward, and he could all but keep himself from imagining that ponytail swinging him straight into heaven. Try as he might, his sweat waterfalls simply wouldn't stay dry long enough to give him a chance to run his fingers through that ponytail without completely drenching it.

If Jeremy could find someone to listen, he could speak novels about this girl. He had the hots for Jasmine. Plain and simple. Lucky for him, Jasmine Joshi and Jeremy Jothston are right next to each other in the alphabet, making them work-time buddies, lunch partners, and basically at each other's side every second until that final bell next June.

Sparks of a plan to make Jasmine fall for him glinted in Jeremy's mind.

As they returned from the cafeteria—the aroma of beef fingers and mushy peas wafting behind them—Jeremy went to his cubby to put back his extra lunch money. He looked inside the cubby and saw a surplus of pencils in his backpack. Right next to them, he spied his brand new green notebook. The cover was spotless – no robot doodles, no rips or tears, and a spiral so perfectly wound he could barely rip a page out.

Miss Bampershoot, a 24-year-old straight out of the university, noticed Jeremy in the corner, his face buried in a cupboard, and was immediately thrown into teacher mode. She tittered across the room and crouched down to Jeremy's eye-level.

"Are you admiring your brand new crayons and markers, Mr. Jeremy?" Miss Bampershoot asked, her eyes wide with excitement.

Jeremy stared blankly at her.

"I have the perfect activity for you to use these. But first, I would like you to sit on the carpet with the rest of your classmates and learn this new song I wrote to help us remember all of the names of the planets! Do you think," she sang, shoving Jeremy towards the puzzle piece carpet, "that you can bring your beautiful voice and help us out, Mr. Jeremy?"

"But...I just have to...," Jeremy stammered, reaching back for his cubby, "give me..."

"I heard you are a little shy, Mr. Jeremy," Miss Bambershoot said, squeezing his shoulders, "but we are going to get you to step out of your comfort zone this year. We aren't going to get that accomplished with your head in a cupboard, are we?"

Miss Bambershoot giggled at her own joke and sat Jeremy down between Smelly Kelly and Harrison.

This is only the beginning of the year, Jeremy thought, paying little attention to why Mercury wanted to play with Venus. All of my pencils and notebooks still look like new and Miss Bambershoot is way too perky. That means I have more than enough time to make Jasmine my girlfriend.

Suddenly, there was a commotion behind the kitchen play set. Miss Bambershoot stopped singing mid-verse and bounded across the room to find none other than the class bully, Hudson, drawing a much fatter and uglier version of the teacher on the wall. The class followed Miss Bambershoot behind the kitchen playset and upon seeing the awful drawing, began to laugh in her face.

From his scuffed sneakers to his perfectly spiked hairdo, Hudson was nothing less than your average troublemaker. He wasn't a bully from the beginning—in fact, he was a very sweet boy last year, but as soon as he found out that getting in trouble made the other kids laugh, it had been one episode after another. Hudson had early on found out that Miss Bambershoot wasn't the best disciplinarian, and he'd pushed her buttons. So often, in fact, that all of her students could see that she was wearing thin.

Jeremy would never say it out loud, but deep down he felt jealous of all of the attention Hudson got doing these shenanigans. The only problem was that Jeremy just didn't have the guts to pull off a stunt like Hudson could.

"Hudson Hughes!" Miss Bambershoot screamed, "I have been patient with you this year. I ignored you when you wiped your...nose excrement in Holly's hair."

There were a few giggles in the background.

"And I merely gave you a warning when you put a frog in Issac's milk carton,"

More giggles.

"But this...this...portrait is the final straw! I must send you to Mrs. Kordeki's office." All the kids looked at Hudson. "Hopefully she can talk some sense into you." Miss Bambershoot pointed at the door, breathing heavily through her nostrils.

As Hudson swaggered out of the classroom, Jeremy noticed Jasmine do something very odd. Her eyes got all sparkly and they glazed over, staring after Hudson. She stood motionless, goggling him. Then she balled each of her perfect hands into a fist, held them up against her rosy cheeks, and did this excruciating sigh of pure desire.

That's when Jeremy put the pieces together—Jasmine had a thing for bad boys.

Jeremy's heart sank to his light-up sneakers.

He knew in the pit of his stomach that he was not and never would be a bad boy. The floppy mop of brownish reddish hair, the spattering of freckles across his nose, and the nerdy glasses made him look more like a loser than a punk. There was that one time he tried doing the spiky hair thing all the bad boys were sporting these days, especially Hudson, but the intense odor from his mom's maximum strength hair spray made his eyes water (he was very sensitive to specific smells). It looked absolutely, totally rad, but the watery eyes would have been mistaken for tears.

If anyone saw me like that, Jeremy had thought, I'd be finished.

So, hairspray wouldn't work. But he had to do something. For the rest of the school day, Jeremy schemed and plotted ways to get Jasmine to notice him without having to be a bad boy.

Dad always brings Mom chocolate when she gets mad at him, he brainstormed, but I don't have any money. Hold her hand during recess? No, there's still the sweat waterfall problem. Any plot he thought of had some sort of issue. Maybe she isn't even worth it, Jeremy thought after a while.

But when he tried to think of a life without her by his side, his markers seemed duller and chocolate milk lost its taste. Anything he came up with was just too difficult to pull off—difficult for a wimp like him, at least. His stomach started to turn at even the thought of just chasing her around on the playground.

Although a classic game of cat-and-mouse wasn't without its old-school charm, Jeremy knew that Jasmine deserved more than that. If he was going to win this girl over, his move had to be big. Eventually, while he was putting his colored pencils and notebook back into his cubby for the day, Jeremy decided that if he really wanted Jasmine, he had only one option:

He had to get sent to the principal's office

"Class," Miss Bampershoot whined, "if you would please turn your eyes to the board, maybe we can get just this one activity accomplished today." A few weeks had passed and her enthusiasm was already starting to wane.

Eventually, though, the chattering third-graders quieted down.

"Alright," Miss Bampershoot huffed, "for a change of pace, I have designed a scavenger hunt for you today! Doesn't that sound fun?" No one said anything. "I sure think so! You and a partner *whom I will assign* will go around the room and search for the items that I have on this list right here. See?"

As Miss Bampershoot was explaining instructions for their activity,

Jeremy was trying to build the confidence to go through with yet another plan to get sent to the principal's office. So far, he had been through four failed attempts since he first thought of trying to get sent there.

Operation: Make A Huge Mess had ended with the whole class joining and calling it a confetti party, and *Operation: Be Really Obnoxious* got him a go star for extra participation in class. His most recent endeavor *Operation: Drink a Bunch of Water* seemed like a fantastic idea at first, but proved to be mortifying.

When Miss Bampershoot had repeated the instructions at least three times, the class finally got started. Jeremy seized the opportunity to begin *Operation: Sticky Shoes*. He squirmed on his elbows and stomach toward the supply closet, trying to keep his mind focused on the end goal.

Keep it together, Jeremy, he urged himself, don't wet your pants ... like last time. Please don't wet your pants again. Please, please, please, please, please.

He managed to reach the closet without anyone noticing—and his bladder still intact—and slowly opened the door. There, on the very top shelf, was the key to *Operation #5*—a gigantic jar of Elmer's Rubber Cement, sitting perfectly poised and ready for action. Jeremy began his ascent to the top, but before he put his shoe on the shelf, none other than the angel herself interrupted him.

"What the heck are you doing?" Jasmine asked in a loud whisper.

Jeremy's heart stopped.

He physically could not move. Seconds passed. Then more seconds passed. One minute. And then another. He couldn't say a word! Jasmine shifted her feet and glanced around, waiting for an answer. Jeremy still couldn't find his voice.

Oh, no, Jeremy thought, here come the sweat waterfalls again. Can she see the sweat drips? It's all over the floor! What if she slips? She'll be covered in her sweat! Say something!

She started to slowly back away, but Jeremy finally pulled himself together.

"Uh...just....getting the glue to....uhm...it's on the list right? Yep. That's what I'm doing. I'm just filling out the list," Jeremy said. Jasmine began to back away once again, still looking very uncomfortable.

Oh my gosh! Could you sound anymore stupid? It would have been better you wet your pants! Quick! Say something else!

"Your hair is pretty. Super pretty," Jeremy said, the words escaping before he could think of something better to say.

"Um...thanks, Jeremy." She ran her fingers over a strand of her ponytail. "Daddy says I can't cut it, and I wish I could, but yeah. Thanks, I guess." She gave a small smile and, still looking slightly uneasy, backed away to find her partner.

Jeremy gawked at her, mouth agape, before smacking his forehead with his palm in embarrassment.

Focus on the goal! Once she sees you as a bad boy, you can say whatever you

want and she'll think it's cool. Everyone will think you're cool. He thought about that a second. Wow, that will be so much easier. This had better work.

He scampered up the rest of the shelves and hoisted the rubber cement from its pedestal. It took a couple of tries to really grab hold of the jar—the stress from talking to Jasmine had made his hands all sweaty—but eventually he managed to slide the tool for his success under one arm. A newfound sense of confidence from actually acquiring the most important ingredient urged him to go through with the rest of *Operation: Sticky Shoes*. He dodged the eyes of his peers and tiptoed all the way back to Miss Bampershoot's desk.

Underneath the desk, a pair of shiny, purple high heels sat covered with a thin layer of dust. Jeremy picked one up and examined it, reassessing what he was about to do. Lately, Miss Bampershoot had been wearing a pair of old, worn out black clogs, but at the beginning of the year, Miss Bampershoot would wear the pumps—every single day—regardless of what else she was wearing. Things had changed since then, including Miss Bampershoot's level of enthusiasm for her job, and the purple heels were now saved for a when a parent was visiting or when Mrs. Kordeki would sit in on class.

Am I really going to go through with this? Jeremy thought, suddenly second-guessing everything he had been working towards for weeks. *Is Jasmine this important?* He peeked out from under the desk and caught a glimpse of the end of that ponytail.

I wonder why her dad makes her keep it long, he thought. Doesn't matter. It hardly makes sense. He watched Jasmine walk, seeing her ponytail swing with every step. It swished and swayed and Jeremy was hypnotized once more.

I don't even care if it makes one bit of sense. I don't even care if she wants to get it cut, Jeremy thought again. *Jasmine's dad, you rock.*

Before the urge to back out again consumed him, Jeremy poured the rubber cement straight into the shiny, purple high heels. As the glue oozed out of the container, a certain odor drifted into Jeremy's nostrils.

No, no, no, no, this is so much stronger than Mom's hairspray, he panicked as tears brimmed in his eyes.

He knew the number one rule of third grade: do NOT for any reason cry in front of anyone or you will be uncool forever.

Tears streamed down his freckled cheeks.

He could barely see anything now, the stench of the glue blinding him. The panic of the moment made his hands sweat profusely, and he dropped the rubber cement on the rainbow tiles underneath Miss Bampershoot's desk. The noise of the jar sounded like an explosion! Jeremy knew that the whole point of his plan was to be caught and sent to the office, but he'd completely forgotten that in the heat of the moment.

Fearing that he would be discovered, Jeremy darted from under the desk and frantically searched for his partner, but he couldn't see anything because he was a blubbery mess.

"Oh, Mr. Jeremy!" Miss Bampershoot said. "No need for tears now. I hid some of the items on the list really well, didn't I? I am so sorry that you

couldn't find them. Why don't you take a quick trip to the restroom to clean yourself up?"

"Oh...okay. Thank you," Jeremy sniffed, deciding that the rest of his prank could wait a few minutes.

The rubber cement, after all, would be right where he left it when he got back.

As he wiped one last tear from his eye, Jeremy saw Hudson saunter down the hallway.

"Did you honestly think that a little dab of glue in Miss Bampershoot shoes would win the heart of my precious Jazzzzzzmine?" he sneered, stretching Jasmine's name and making Jeremy cringe. "Sssuper sssstupid, Jeremy. Just sssstupid." With every "s" Hudson hissed, a little spritz of spit collected on Jeremy's glasses.

"H...h...how...how could you know about that already?" Jeremy stammered. "I haven't even gotten in trouble for it yet!" The evil glimmer in Hudson's eyes made Jeremy's heart sink to his stomach. He knew exactly what Hudson was about to say.

"While you were cleaning up your crybaby messssss of a face out here I got all the credit for your amateur prank. Miss Bampershoot just figured that I did it and ssssent me to the principal's office. Jasmine's eyes got all googly for me, you know. For me and me alone. She's as good as mine! Muahahaha!"

Hudson had Jeremy right where he wanted him.

"How could you possibly take that from me?" Jeremy shrieked. "You're already a bad boy! You have the confidence, the horrible grades, the questionable smell, and the hairdo! You don't need my prank to get Jasmine. All you have to be is yourself and you'd have her! I've been scheming for weeks trying to pull this prank together. I just want Jasmine. That's all I ever wanted." He saw his nemesis smirk. "Why would you do this?!"

Jeremy stopped yelling and realized how much he just said to Hudson. It was probably the most words he had ever said in one breath.

Cool guys don't yell at other cool guys, Jeremy thought smacking himself in the forehead. This is only making things worse!

Hudson leaned in close, his breath fogging up Jeremy's already spitty glasses. He waited a couple of moments, only inches from Jeremy's face, that smirk curling his lips.

"I only want her 'cuz you do."

This was the last straw for Jeremy. He burst into real tears and sprinted away from Hudson, away from his classroom, and away from failure. All the scheming he had done had gone to waste, just because he couldn't handle a little glue stink. He'd thought that this time he'd be the winner—he'd been so close. But close wasn't enough to become a bad boy and win Jasmine's heart. Jeremy soon became too tired and stopped running. He looked around and saw that he'd run all the way to the high school section of the building.

High schoolers?! Oh no. They can't see me like this! I have to get out of here!

And now! Jeremy frantically scanned the area for a way out. He didn't see an exit or even another bathroom, but some of the older kids definitely saw him and started to walk toward him.

"Hey kid," one of them called. "Ya look a little lost. Need a hand or something?"

"Don't talk to him like that, Rick," a girl said, shoving the guy. "God, you can be such jerk. Show a little sympathy." She turned to Jeremy. "Hey little fella. Do you need some help getting back to the elementary school?" She bent over and touched Jeremy's shoulder.

"No. N-n-no," he said. "I can't g-g-go back there." Jeremy tried to stifle his crying. "He's just going to l-laugh at me some more," he said, trying to catch a breath between sobs.

"Oh honey," the girl cooed. "Who would ever laugh at you? You're way too sweet to be laughed at."

"I am not sweet!" Jeremy yelled. "I am not adorable! I am a bad boy!" He flung her hand off his shoulder. Since his encounter with Hudson, Jeremy was finding it less difficult to come up with words to say. Yelling gave him even more confidence. The two teenagers glanced at each other, barely able to hold back their laughter.

"Okay, tough guy," the slouchy boy said, shoving Jeremy back the way he came. "Why do you want to be a bad boy?"

"I AM a bad boy. I already did something bad! But I didn't get any credit for it, and now Jasmine won't love me." Jeremy could believe he'd just spilled his heart to two complete strangers. He could feel more tears welling up, but couldn't tell if it was from all the emotions of the day or from the slouchy boy's body spray. The trio had started making their way back to Jeremy's classroom and already things were starting to look more familiar for Jeremy—he'd run a long way down the hall.

"Oh, precious," the girl said as they walked. "You don't have to be a bad boy to get a girlfriend! Girls really like the sensitive guys, too! If Jasmine saw how much you really liked her, she might give you a chance anyway." The girl put her arm around Jeremy. "There is no need for you to do something bad to get her attention. Maybe you can get her attention in a different way."

"Do you think that could work?" Jeremy asked, a glimmer of hope returning to his eyes.

"Heck yeah!" the slouchy boy said, "You're thinking too small, kid. Your move has to REALLY get her attention. What do you love the most about this girl?"

"Um...I don't know. Her hair, I guess. Maybe. I don't know." Jeremy felt awkward now about infatuation with Jasmine's hair.

"Well then," the boy said, "you gotta know how MUCH you love her hair. But remember, think big!" The boy in front of the third-grade classroom. "Is this one you?"

"Um, I think so. Yeah, Miss Bambershoot is my teacher," Jeremy said, eyeing the colorful sign above the door.

"Okay, Jeremy," the girl said, leaning in close. "Just remember what I told you. There is no reason to be a bad boy. All you have to do is let Jasmine know you love her in a really big kind of way. Sound like a plan?"

"I think I can do that. Thank you," Jeremy said, his voice filled with sudden confidence.

"See ya around, kid," the slouchy boy called over his shoulder.

Jeremy gazed at the high schoolers, both of them leaving the drama room, his silly third-grade life behind.

They sure have everything figured out, Jeremy thought.

He opened his mouth to call them back. Maybe they could help him become as cool as Hudson. If they think he can win Jasmine over without being a bully, well, maybe he can even become cool that way, too. But the moment passed too quickly and Jeremy was left alone in the hallway, just as uncool as ever.

He opened the door to his classroom, and somehow Miss Bamber-shoot and the rest of the students were still doing the same scavenger hunt.

My whole life has changed, and once again, no one seems to notice, Jeremy thought, *especially Jasmine. I don't have to be a bad boy anymore, but I still have to do something big. I love her and I love her hair. That lovely hair. Wow. What can I do to show her that I am the one for her?*

Miss Bamber-shoot beckoned him to come closer and join in for the rest of the activity, but Jeremy was too deep in thought to notice anything around him. He remembered that the only time Jasmine had ever noticed him and smiled was when he said her hair was pretty.

But what did she say after that? he thought. Something about her dad? Jeremy squeezed his eyes and racked his brain for some sort of answer — that's when it came to him. *Cut! She wants it cut! he remembered. I can do that! I can do that for her!*

He almost jumped out of his sneakers.

Racing back to his cubby, Jeremy threw open his supplies box found his scissors sitting right on top, as if they knew what was coming. He grabbed his destiny and forced back the urge to run to his one true love—better safe than sorry, Mom always says.

Without a second thought, Jeremy hollered, "This is for you, Jasmine!" and forced the shears open with his chubby fingers. He grabbed ahold of those beautiful locks, and chopped them all off, right there.

The next few moments seemed to pass in slow motion. Jasmine turned around, her mouth forming an O—her eyes as big as the planets they had learned about that year. Other students around her began to take on the same look. Slowly, they all raised their fingers and pointed to the ponytail Jeremy now clutched in his hands. Contrary to what Jeremy had thought, none of the students began to cheer or clap him on the back.

What's happening?

They only stared, waiting for the—

"Jeremy Jothston!" Miss Bamber-shoot screamed. "What do you thi

you are DOING?!" Her face contorted into the meanest scowl any one the students would ever see. "Why in the world would you EVER think to cut off Jasmine's ponytail?!" He just stared at her. "Hand that over and go to Mrs. Kordeki's office IMMEDIATELY!"

Jeremy knew enough to get away from his teacher before she exploded. He handed over the ponytail and the scissors, turned on his heels, and hurried to the principal's office, leaving the whole class in a state of utter surprise and amazement.

"I didn't know Jeremy had the guts to do anything," Harrison murmured to Smelly Kelly.

"Especially something like that!" Smelly Kelly agreed.

Jasmine just stood motionless, holding her head.

"Father is going to kill me," she whispered.

Fresh off a short suspension, Jeremy strode into his third-grade classroom with a completely different personality. No longer was he the timid, nerdy Jeremy of four days ago. That boy was long gone. In his place was a confident and cool kid who'd managed to pull off the greatest bad-boy prank his school had ever seen. Nothing was going to keep him down now. All he needed was a lady to go along with his new reputation—and he knew just the one. Moving his classmates aside, Jeremy looked to see where his Jasmine was hiding.

What he saw shattered his whole world in one look.

Jasmine's desk was empty.

"Where did she go? Where's Jasmine?" Jeremy said, frantically searching the room for any sign of his prize.

"Her father made her transfer, Jeremy," Miss Bampershoot said, glowering down at him. "He said that this school was too rough for his daughter." She let that sink in a moment. "You'vee made a fool of yourself, our whole class, and especially me. Are you happy about that?"

Jeremy looked around him.

The girls were shoving each other to get a spot next to him, and Hudson was nodding in approval. He thought back to the tiny wimp he was before—a boy who could hardly say a small sentence in front of his classmates. He thought back to the crybaby who had to get advice from smelly high schoolers. Before he made the biggest move of his life, he'd been a nobody. Jeremy almost wiped his hands on his pants, but for the first time, he noticed that they were completely and utterly dry.

"Answer the question, Jeremy!" Miss Bampershoot's voice cut through to him. "Are you happy about what you have done?"

Jeremy smiled and pushed up his nerdy, horn-rimmed glasses.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess I am."



PERSONALITIES

BY JAYCEE VANDER BERG, CRIMINAL JUSTICE

THE NOVASHI

BY OLUWAYEMISI AYENI, WRITING & RHETORIC; LITERATURE

The sun burns bright overhead, but it's still cold, barely forty degrees. The wind whispers through the dark, empty trees like a warning in a foreign language. Winter is coming, and with winter the Novashi will rise and resume his torment over the world. Every winter the Novashi wakes from his slumber and comes out into the world, looking for his prey.

Men.

But not just any men.

The really goody two shoes ones. The ones who help the poor, go to church on Sunday, and do right by society. You know, the ones who would cause the most damage to society. The ones who believe in God. Oh, they are the tastiest. *Haha. God.* The Novashi laughs cruelly. *God. If only they knew what God really had in store for them. Maybe they wouldn't love Him so much. Ha!* He was doing them a favor—the Novashi.

He'll start his hunt in three days, and he's itching with excitement.

He recounts his last kill.

It was a priest. The Novashi had shed his True Form for a human one and had gone to church and later, confession—just for kicks. It was the end of the season anyway. The priest taught the Gospel of Luke that day. Just going on about how Jesus says to do this and Jesus says to do that. What does he know? Love thy neighbor and He will love you in return.

The irony.

The Novashi had to stab himself to keep from laughing. When the priest started talking about how Jesus would return to save them and that he was watching over them from heaven the Novashi could no longer contain his laughter. He burst out laughing, drawing daggers from the entire congregation. He didn't mind though; he reveled in their anger, their disgust. He eventually got up and left, laughing the whole way out.

If only they knew.

He came back in time for confession. He'd smelled the priest's anger and wanted more. He sat down at a booth.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," The Novashi said. He could tell the priest recognized his voice. Before the priest could respond, the Novashi pulled off the screen of the confessional window and slammed the priest's head against the prayer stool. The priest was out cold. He relished the taste of the priest's terror, like sweet candy. This would be a good one. He picked up the priest and dragged him out of the church.

Past the corner market and the superstore and finally into the woods.

The Novashi had underground tunnels all over the woods to provide quick entrances and exits to all his dungeons. He knew them like the back of his hand. He dragged the priest through the main tunnel and into a dungeon.

This dungeon was a dark room with steel walls. The back wall held restraints which the Novashi used to anchor the priest to the wall.

~

The Novashi woke the priest with an earsplitting howl, and the priest tried in vain to cover his ears—the Novashi chuckling at his struggle. The two side walls held torture equipment. The Novashi took a crude neck brace off the wall. It was made of the bones of one of his victims. Circular, with spikes stretching into the center, made of sharpened bone. He stalked over to the priest and shoved his head inside the brace. The priest screamed as the sharp bone cut him and blood ran down his neck. He jerked at his restraints, trying to free himself.

The Novashi forced his head back against the wall and licked up the blood as it ran down the priest's neck.

The priest tried to recoil.

"Son of Satan!" he yelled. "God punishes the evil! The mean spirited!" The Novashi lunged to the torture wall, grabbed a stake and plunged it into the priest's left eye.

The priest howled.

The Novashi laughed.

"God," the Novashi said, slowly. "God cannot help you. He created me to destroy you! He made me as I am. A demon who feeds off the souls of the innocent in order to survive! What say you of your God now?! What say you?!" The priest's entire soul quivered and twisted while the Novashi watched with delight. He laughed and pulled the stake out.

"What do you want from me?!" The priest whimpered.

"Why, my dear priest, we've been over that." The Novashi cocked his head and pulled his fingernails across the steel wall, then clasped his hands together. He tilted his head more and smiled, dropping his human I and returning to his true form. The priest gasped in horror and yanked at his restraints.

"I want all of you," The Novashi said, watching the priest struggle. "Every last thing. Your heart, your desire, your sin—I want to taste it all. But most importantly ... I want your soul." With that, the Novashi took a spiked whip down from a wall and beat the priest to death—beat his corpse until at last his soul came out.

The priest's soul was timid and weak, and the Novashi devoured it.

Maybe he'd start with a priest this time. Only three more days now. Winter is coming. Winter is coming. The Novashi smiled and erupted into laughter.

~

Winter is here.

The Novashi woke fully and began to ready the tunnels and dungeons for new victims. He made sure all his equipment was clean and sharpened to cause maximum pain. Then he ascended the tunnels and started scouting the land for victims.

Who would cause the most damage? He thought to himself.

He decided to take ten men.

One for each dungeon: start slow, and then build his way up. *Maybe father and son tomorrow*, he thought—then grinned. For the first night, he set his sights on the fathers of a leukemia patient, another cancer patient, and the husband of a woman giving birth to a baby. Then he chose seven more victims at random and returned to his tunnels to prepare for the coming night.

Once night fell, the Novashi resurfaced, and took his victims one by one, systematically knocking them out and dragging them through the tunnels to their respective dungeons.

The Novashi—hungry—only wanted to make the three suffer. So he made short work of the random seven; torturing them for a few minutes and then beheading them. Their souls tasted bitter and disgusting, but he was momentarily satiated.

He went to the dungeon of the leukemia patient's father, who was down on his knees, praying. The Novashi lifted him clear off the ground and threw him into a spiked wall. The man stuck there, spikes protruding out of his stomach and arms.

The Novashi smirked. *Let his God come help him now*. He left the man to bleed out, deciding to come back in time to collect his soul.

He went to the other cancer patient's father next. The man blitz-attacked the Novashi as soon as he entered the dungeon. But the Novashi threw the man off like a sack of garbage and proceeded to strip the man stark-naked and hog tie him. He picked the man up by the rope and hung him over a giant cauldron in the center of the room. Heated oil to the boiling point and dropped the man inside, relishing in his screams as the oil seared off his skin.

The man's soul tasted like a warm cookie.

The Novashi then went back to the leukemia patient's father to claim his soul. Then on to the dungeon of the husband whose wife was giving birth at that very moment. The Novashi was just about to begin torturing the man, when a child no more than five or six came stumbling down the tunnel steps calling for her mother.

The girl's dark braids were plastered to her face, and she held a yellow teddy bear in her arms. She froze at the sight of the Novashi in his true form. Then she held the teddy bear tightly to her chest and walked slowly toward him.

The Novashi kicked the man in the head and bolted him to the ground by his neck. The child stopped walking, but did not seem alarmed as Novashi exited the dungeon, slamming the huge iron gate behind him and locking it.

The child rocked slightly, still holding the bear to her chest.

"My name is Aibala," she said quietly. "I'm looking for my mommy. Have you seen her?" The Novashi was bewildered by this child, who did not seem to fear him, or even notice that he wasn't human.

"No, child," he hissed. "I haven't seen her."

The child looked sad—about to cry.

"Will you help me look for her?" The child rocked faster now, clutching the bear to her chest. "We got lost in the woods."

"I'm a little busy, child," The Novashi said. "Run along now!"

The child's face hardened and she stamped her foot viciously. "My name is Aibala, not child! My mommy is missing. I want my mommy! I want my mommy! I want my—"

The Novashi scooped up Aibala and held her by her neck. The child was still not alarmed, though. She didn't try to wiggle free or make any attempt to save her life.

"Help me find my mommy," she said.

The Novashi released her and handed her the teddy bear, which she'd dropped. The child took it and clutched it to her chest. Stared at the ground for a while, then started rocking again. The Novashi was at a loss.

How could this girl *not* be afraid?

Everyone feared him for his six rows of teeth and his black eyes that shone like obsidian against his pale white face. His lips snarled to bare his teeth, and the long black horns protruding from his head. His skin, mottled white, was flaky, like that of an old woman.

But the child just stared into his eyes. "Will you help me find my mommy?" she asked again. And the Novashi contemplated his options. The child was so sweet and innocent—and she did not fear him.

"Yes child—Aibala, I mean." He watched her face. "I'll help you ... but first I must take this man's soul."

"Why?" Aibala asked. "What'd he do to you?"

The Novashi shook his head and laughed.

"Why, my dear child, he didn't do anything. He's my victim. I get to torture his soul out of him, and then eat it to survive."

"Haven't you ever tried to stop?"

The Novashi laughed once more. "To stop would mean death, child."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried?"

"No, child. Every winter I come out and take the souls of foolish men like this one because it sustains me."

"But have you ever tried to stop?" The child stared at him, unblinking. "Mommy says there is always another way than violence, if you are willing to look for it."

The Novashi shook his head. He hadn't even thought of it. Evil was so much fun, and the taste of each soul so different—he would have never dreamed of stopping. But here was this child making him feel as if he was somehow in the wrong. She made him feel ... something. But what was it?

Guilt, maybe.

To him, this had always been his way of life. Every winter, hunt to survive. The humans were merely prey, he the predator. But here was this child telling him he could change. Telling him that there was another way to survive without torturing or killing. He shook his head viciously. What was he thinking—letting a child control him like that?

"Impossible!" he blurted. "It's impossible for me to survive without souls!"

The child took a step toward him and cocked her little head, causing her dark braids to swish.

"Do you feel hungry now?" she asked.

And the Novashi did a double take, because now that he actually thought about it, he didn't feel hungry. Only annoyed that this child was keeping him from his kill.

"See," Aibala said, "you're not hungry right now. There's always another way. Perhaps you could feed off love," she said, "or off people's happy auras."

He abandoned her and stormed back into the dungeon with the man, who by this time was slowly regaining consciousness. The Novashi slapped the man awake and then picked him up by his neck, the way he had the child. The man squirmed, begged, and pleaded for his life, but that only fed the Novashi's desire for the man's soul.

He held his struggling victim.

"If you kill him now," Aibala said, just loud enough for him to hear, "then you won't ever be able to change." The Novashi dropped the man and stalked over to the gate.

"What did you say to me?!" he barked.

The child didn't flinch.

"I said if you kill him now, there won't ever be another way for you. You will always be evil. You'll kill me, too." She blinked her big brown eyes and hugged the bear, still rocking.

The Novashi blinked, eyes full of rage.

"You'll kill everyone. Women and children, too, not just men. You won't have a choice," Aibala said, "you'll be so consumed with hunger. But you can end this now."

"And how would you know this, child? What do you know?"

"I know what my mommy's taught me," she said softly. "And I know that your hesitation means that you don't really want to be evil."

The Novashi contemplated the child's words. Looked down and somehow felt his anger seep out of him. In his peripheral vision he thought he saw the child glow with yellow light, but when he looked up, she just stood there.

Staring at me—staring right through me.

As if moved by some other force, the Novashi picked up the man, opened the gate and plopped him down outside. Then stood in the gate's entrance and watched as the man scrambled to his feet, gasping, and hugged the child.

"Oh Aibala!" he cried and pulled the child closer to his chest.

The Novashi stood in the gate's entrance stunned and confused.

Before he could ask any questions, the child wrestled away from her father and pushed the Novashi into the dungeon, locking the gate behind him. She stood glaring at him. Her brown eyes narrowed into slits, the start of tears forming in her eyes.

"I didn't come here to find my mommy, and I wasn't lost in the woods!" she yelled angrily. "I saw you! I saw you take Daddy, and I came to save him! You are a cruel and evil being, and you will rot for all you have done!"

The child ran back to her father.

And the Novashi banged against the gate, over and over, but the gate didn't budge. Curse my own handiwork! He almost screamed, hearing the child and her father escape up the tunnels.

~

A few weeks later, the child came back with a bag of raw meat and tossed it into his cell. Then she turned on her heel and went back the way she'd come.

This she did all winter, and the Novashi saw that his need for souls lessened. He was able to stay awake late into spring. Every day the child came, never saying another word.

~

Finally, at the end of a winter a few years later, the girl came back. She was no longer a child. No longer clutched the bear to her chest.

She approached the Novashi warily, and he was disappointed to see she did not carry a bag of raw meat with her. She came up to the gate and unlocked it. Then, to the Novashi's shock, she held the door open. The girl made for the stairway leading out of the tunnel. She was already out of the tunnel by the time the Novashi got his bearings.

He raced after her.

"Wait!" he bellowed. "Wait, Aibala!" He raced and caught up to her, and she stopped and turned around.

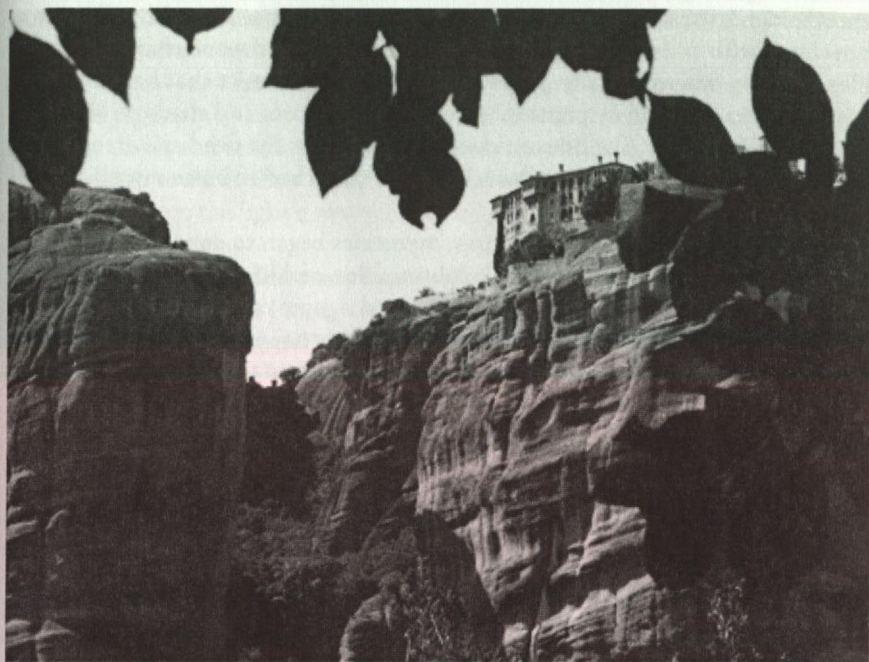
"Thank you," The Novashi said, quietly. "Thank you."

Aibala nodded and turned back around, walking away from him. Then she stopped and came back.

"I will never forget you as you were," she said. "I'm glad you've changed." She turned, then, and walked away.

The Novashi stood there silently—watching her leave.

Until next winter.



METEORA, GREECE

BY ABIGAIL STOSCHER, THEATRE

THE HOUSE WHERE I USED TO PLAY

BY CARISSA TAVARY, ENGLISH TEACHING

I came to the house where I used to play. The door creaked with age as I entered, exposing the forgotten walls to the chilly, outside air. Crossing the threshold, my eyes flitted around the stale room. The once cheerful wallpaper now hung with an eerie abandonment. The once polished wood chairs and tables were covered with dusty, yellowing sheets. The portraits that had once held wisdom, strength, and inspiration were now only ghosts and shadows of once-great men, forgotten. The house, now a home only for the dead and creeping, that thought swept over me with such sorrow that I had to brace myself on the mantle place.

As I fought to keep my senses, memories began to dance before me and the room was filled again with laughter, color, and life. Children ran past with ribbons flying behind them, and I realized a game of tag was at hand. I looked to the grimy window sill, saw the cat quietly napping in the sun, and reached out my hand to touch the rainbows reflected on the wall. The tabby opened its eyes, made a halfhearted, content meowl, and stretched out its paws before yawning and falling back into a doze.

The call of a warm voice came down the hall and followed after the children who'd left their game of tag to answer the sweet beckoning. The voice, soothing—like home, I thought—seemed to speak within me, as if I'd heard with my heart and responded with my soul. I came to the door of the playroom where I'd seen the children disappear and stood just outside. The warm glow of light shone through the crack, and I listened to the hushed giggles coming from inside. I reached and gave the heavy door a push and walked in.

The room was empty.

A draft whispered through my hair, chilling my face—the chill creeping down the back of my collar. I shivered as I walked slowly past the toys thrown haphazardly around the room. The stuffed bears and elephants, remnants of treasured days filled with childlike imaginings of pirates and mermaids, heroes and damsels, and tea parties in tall castles.

I came to the short, cluttered table where I used to spend hours lost in the waxy magic of crayons and coloring pages. The yellowed pages lying beneath scattered crayons were the Picasso's, van Gogh's, and Dali's of my childhood. I reached down and picked up a messy coloring of three lilies scribbled over in light pink. The aspiration of being a great artist tickled my mind. I admired the masterpiece.

I turned around to the warm, golden light shining forth from the cracked door across the room. The voice called to the children who were now at my feet clambering for crayons on the table. Their heads turned toward the voice, and they slowly left behind their creations to follow. I tucked the pinkies into my purse and walked through the door, hoping to catch up to the wa-

voice and those sleepy children.

As I entered the room, I saw them kneeling beside their beds with their heads bowed and lips quietly speaking. Their innocent prayers seemed to radiate and fill the room with the sweet smell of cinnamon. I had the urge to step beside them and listen, drawn to the gentle beauty of these kids—only wanting to hold them close.

I felt again the tickle of a dream come to memory as I clutched my purse strap in an effort to keep from weeping. How I had imagined my faith being like theirs: trusting, simple, carefree, and unrestrained.

Faith—as I knew now—was such a responsibility, needing to be groomed regularly to keep from growing wild or stale. I wiped a single tear from my cheek and reached out to move near the children. But before I could take the step towards their beds, I heard the voice sing to me from the hallway. I turned towards the light a moment before glancing back at the empty bed in that gray, cold room.

The singing filled every room with a quiet intensity that crescendoed as I neared the kitchen. I stumbled over the tattered rug in the doorway and caught myself on the center counter of the room. The smell of baking bread lifted my spirit and made me realize how hungry I was.

As I neared the dining room, though, an overpowering feeling of love washed over me, exciting and saddening me all at once. I paused, placed my hand over my heart and felt tears run down my cheeks. The memory that tickled my mind was so familiar, but remained elusive, mysterious.

The singing continued—a soft hum—as I entered the dining room.

The voice was everywhere now, coming from nowhere and having no beginning or end. I looked to the table and saw a warm, steaming loaf of bread laid in the center. Two plates with napkins and matching wine goblets filled with glimmering, crimson liquid.

Welcomed—I felt welcomed as I ripped off a piece of bread and sat at the table.

Dipping the bread in the dark liquid, I placed it on my tongue. And with a swooping force the elusive memory came back and the overwhelming sense of love created a lump in my throat. I saw myself as a child sitting across the table with an immense peace glowing from her face—my childhood face. The voice so tenderly whispered to her—to me—and with each word that face brightened.

But the words!

I could not hear the words!

I so desperately wanted to hear, but could not find any of my own words to ask. The voice was there before me, but so completely out of my reach and growing more distant. An anguished cry escaped my lips and I lay my head on my arms as the tears streamed. The room grew dark and cold again, the smell of bread disappeared. The singing ceased, and for the first time since entering the house I felt extremely alone.

With my strength sapped and the cold settling into my bones, it was

all I could do to simply sit and cry bitter tears of betrayal, longing, and homesickness.

But slowly my sobs subsided.

Wasted and empty, I stood up from my chair and got down on my knees. Clasping my hands, I did the only thing I could: I prayed. With what words, I cannot recall, but I found them deep within my soul in a dark corner filled with hurt and brokenness. As I spoke, the taste of the wetted bread once again danced on my tongue.

I wish I could say the room then grew bright and warm, that the singing again reached a magnificent crescendo, and in that moment the voice spoke to me the words I had wanted to hear...but I cannot. After tasting the bread again, I rose and left. As I walked towards the door, I grasped the mantel place and paused. Turned to look a last time at the house where I played and saw the ghostly portraits, the covered furniture, and the grimy window.

But among these, in the middle of the floor, was a shiny, satin, purple ribbon. I stared at this small piece of ribbon and my heart knew the words the voice had spoken. Like an unsuspecting guest quietly entering into a house, promise and peace entered my heart.

So I turned and left the same way I had returned—through the old creaking door.



THE CONSEQUENCE OF WATCHING

BY WILL BROWNING, BIOLOGY HEALTH PROFESSIONS

NONFICTION

FIRST PLACE

JUDGE'S NOTES:

Another full disclosure: I just noticed the pun in the title. How did I miss that before? Another piece that depends on subtlety. Also, another entry that builds foundationally on rhythm—both in sentence and overall macrostructure. I love the grab bag of statistics that, in the end, mean nothing. How hard it is to know another person—and how important. Ms. Church lays that out honestly and fully, sentiment without sentimentality—a tricky beam to balance, much like the relationship between parent and child.

LOCAL CHURCH FALLS INTO DISREPAIR

BY ALICE CHURCH, SOCIOLOGY

My mother called me today. Five minutes of my time were all she asked, and ten minutes were all she took. "I called the county clerk," she told me. "They said you can register to absentee vote online." A response to a question I had asked ten days prior, though time was of no essence to the matter. "Oh," my

mother went on, “and your father and I went to the doctor last week. They were able to detect some cerebral atrophy, and give us a definite diagnosis.” A slight pause. “It’s Alzheimer’s.”

The doctor has given it a name, but the dementia that is eating at my father is nothing new. Being able to say, It’s Alzheimer’s, doesn’t make it worse, it just allows specification within that broad category.

Dementia. I have lived the majority of my life without an understanding of what the word means. When I was a young teenager, sometimes I would hear it mentioned by my parents, or by my sister who worked in a nursing home, but I didn’t have an idea of what it meant or what it entailed, nor did I have any sort of desire to find out. As far as I was concerned, it was just one of those unfortunate things that happens to old people, kind of like losing some mobility or getting wrinkles: sad and maybe a little annoying, but not terribly impactful—definitely not to me.

There are many things I have lived the majority of my life without understanding: politics, taxes, evolution, how the Christian god supposedly understands everything humans have to go through, yet has probably never personally experienced menstruation. I lived almost twenty years without bothering to try to understand or even grasp dementia, and I lived almost just as long thinking that somehow my father was immune to everything: both to sickness and to old age.

I have always known that my father is older than most parental units of people my age. But my family has always been different than most others; my mother was a month shy of forty when I was born on the green couch in our family’s living room, the sixth and final child to an already-full family. By the time I was able to form my first words, my father was already in his fifties. So while my father may objectively be old, he has always been this way, and hence, he has never *seemed* this way.

I do not remember my father getting sick. If he was ever sick, I cannot imagine that he let it incapacitate him, regardless of the severity of the illness. When you are sick, you are supposed to take it easy, to let up, to relax. My father does not relax.

In a house with six children, there is always something to be done: to be cleaned up, put away, fixed. With three acres of grass to be mowed, outbuildings to be kept, animals to be fed, there was never *nothing* to do, though I suppose if nothing had been a thing that needed doing, my father would have done it. While my father’s to-do list was never-ending, I cannot imagine that:

- *get dementia*

was among the tasks he had any intention of completing.

Dementia is one of those things that happens to old people; maybe relatives, but not anyone too close. My dad’s mother had dementia—probably Alzheimer’s, though she never got diagnosed—but that was just the way I always knew her. You could have the same conversation with my grandmother

five times in one day, and sometimes she might forget who exactly you were, try to steal back a mug she had gifted you last Christmas, but that was just the way she was. I didn't know her before the dementia, so I didn't see her change. I didn't see her change, so I didn't have to care.

So that was the extent of it: I knew dementia existed, and I knew it affected other people. There was no reason for me to know more. There was no reason for me to know that aside from memory loss, people with dementia can have trouble not only finding words, but forming them. There was no reason to know that people with Alzheimer's can find themselves lost, even in places they have been a hundred times. I didn't know that this shrinking of the brain could affect one's reasoning skills, one's levels of irritability. I didn't know anything, because I didn't have to care.

But then there was that one Sunday. I was at the lake with some friends, waiting for a turn on the Jet Ski when I got a phone call. My father was in the hospital, they weren't sure what was wrong. He was having trouble speaking. They had been at church when, without warning, my father's speech had inexplicably devolved to gibberish. But they were never sure exactly what had happened, even after that hospital visit; although it happened a few more times, eventually the speech problems just stopped.

Then there was the time when my father was driving out to church – route he'd taken hundreds of times before – and had to stop to call my mother because in a town of less than three square miles, he didn't know where he was anymore. And then there were the smaller things: losing keys, mail, important notes he'd written to himself. I would tell him what day I had to go back to college, then I'd tell him again a few days later, and then he'd get upset with me on the day I left, because I had never told him when I was leaving.

There was the time I asked my father his opinion on something so mundane I can't recall it, and he got up and walked out of the room without saying a word because I had made him so angry. Then there was the time when my family had gathered for dinner and my mother was asking my niece about a picture she'd drawn in Sunday school. As my eight-year-old niece began to answer, my father interrupted to tell her that *she doesn't need to talk so much. People don't always want to have to listen to her; listening to her speak is annoying.*

I have lived the majority of my life without an understanding of what the word "dementia" means. I never had the desire to look the word up in a dictionary, to become acquainted with an experience so far outside of my own. But I know what "dementia" means now, and not because I have suddenly been struck with the desire to pick up a dictionary. I know what "dementia" means because every time I go home, my father shows me.

~

One in every nine Americans over the age of sixty-five has Alzheimer's, but that statistic never scared me. Statistics are not, by nature, frightening; almost two out of four people have brown eyes, but that has never threatened to impact my own eye color or way of life. Statistics just tell you about things that happen to people.

Specifically, other people.

So, sure, my dad's just an unlucky one out of nine. And to most people, he's just one of those *other* people with Alzheimer's. But he's the one out of that nine that I care about.

So, I'm trying to understand dementia now. Kind of. It's easy to learn facts about Alzheimer's: up to 70% of people who have dementia have Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's starts slowly, but gets progressively worse over time. Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death within the United States. Alzheimer's can be hereditary. Alzheimer's is more likely to affect Hispanics than whites. Knowing these things isn't quite useless, but maybe I misspoke when I said that I'm trying to understand dementia.

More than that, I'm trying to understand my dad.

Understanding my father has always been a difficult task, maybe because we do not really talk. Occasionally my father has instigated conversations with me, but I have almost always felt immensely uncomfortable throughout those conversations, perhaps because I associate our intentional talks with Bad News—someone has died, a sibling has been arrested for drunk driving, or maybe just, You did something wrong. Even when there is no Bad News, I still find conversing difficult. My father does not wish to reveal the secrets of his rebellious youth that I am so curious about, and I feel no longing to reveal the secrets of my own ongoing rebellious youth.

I do not want to make it sound like my father and I have never had a good interaction; to do so would not only give an unfavorable impression, but a false one. My father and I have sat together on our small porch, and we have talked about the classes I am taking for my major, why he thinks the union of marriage is an important one, and why he married my mother. When I hesitantly told my parents that I had begun dating someone, my mother was the one who began to worry too much, while my father only expressed a suspiciously high amount of genuine happiness at my ability to *trick* someone into dating me.

For everything that I know and do not know about him, I love my father. I cannot imagine being the person I am today without the childhood that I had with him reading books to me on cold winter nights, playing rowdy games of pitch where we would always pretend to cheat, and playing capture the flag on our old clunky computer.

I love my father.

But the father I know now is different from the man he used to be. Sometimes changes of this sort are a good thing; my father is said to have been an incredibly different man before his religious conversion—a man primarily interested in drugs, sex and alcohol—and his conversion is unanimously said to have changed him for the better. But the changes I see in my father now cannot possibly be construed as positive, and I imagine that if anyone were to try, I should have a strong desire to allow them a close examination of my fist.

I could learn every fact there is to know about dementia and Alzheimer's, and still not be able to understand in the moment why my father

says what he says or does what he does. I can know how little control my father has over his cognitive ability, yet still become upset with him when he does not understand that I am not trying to start a fight when I ask how church services were that morning, or when he forgets that he went into the garage forty minutes ago just to get me a light bulb. I can know how depression and Alzheimer's often go hand-in-hand, and still get frustrated with him when he becomes angry with himself, as if he somehow shouldn't have the right to be upset with his own failing health.

I know what dementia means now, but I still do not understand it. I am not sure that I ever really will. Knowing what dementia is and knowing what Alzheimer's is does not help me know who—or what—my father is becoming. Knowing that over five million Americans have Alzheimer's does not help me know how to keep loving the one in that five million who is my father.



FISH TANK

BY NANCY BECERRA-BALBUENA, ART

VISITING THE SEALS

BY AMIE ADAMS, WRITING & RHETORIC

I had only been in Kaikoura, New Zealand for a little over a week when I first saw the fur seals. On a bike ride out to the peninsula, three friends and I pulled off the road to gaze at the gleaming blue ocean and the snowy mountains beyond. We were planning to look for paua shells, shiny rainbows hidden amongst the rocks, but we found the seals instead. A baby seal and its mother were lying up on the rocks only a few dozen meters from where we had just stopped. The mother seal was huge, gray and furry, with patches of brown where her flippers connected to her body. She had expressive black eyes, a pointy black nose, and small ears set back into her fur. New Zealand fur seals are of the family Otariidae, the 'eared seals.'

Looking exhausted where she lay stretched out, the female fur seal basked in the sun like a giant cat. This mother seal, back from days hunting at sea, was well in need of a rest. In the spring, female fur seals simultaneously raise a year-old pup while gestating again. Hunting becomes more laborious, because the mother is essentially "eating for three" to maintain proper nutrition for herself, her pup, and her unborn baby.

Her pup, more oily and black, was poised on the rock next to her, full of playfulness and curiosity. The pup swam in the water and posed on the rocks for the captive audience, while its mother kept a lazy eye on her child.

We crouched low to take pictures, smiling and laughing, enjoying the moment, but failing to consider how our intrusion affected the seals. We didn't know then that New Zealand law requires humans to remain fifty meters away when viewing marine mammals—for their safety as well as the safety of the animals.

A few weeks later, I came slowly and quietly to visit the seals, biking from the base of the mountains, past pastures of cows, sheep, and horses, through town, weaving around buildings and cars, along the beaches and rocky shoreline, and out, out to the ocean where the road ends and a rocky tip of coastline pokes the light blue water. The spring sky matched the water, and a brisk breeze stirred up the sweet pungency of the sea. I locked my bike and crossed the crowded car park, descending down the cement steps and onto the flat sheets of exposed rock at the edge of endless water.

Tip-toeing around tide pools and slippery patches of green seaweed and pearly Neptune's necklace, I worked my way to the outer edge of the point, where the placid ocean lapped gently against the rocky shelf.

Standing at the edge, it only took a moment to spot my first seal. Alone, the fur seal swam with pleasure; I could almost make out a smile on his whiskery face. His—well, I assumed he was a male. The sun-tinted ocean was his private bath, and he floated lazily in the water, stopping occasionally and sitting upright in the shallows to bathe his fur, licking it with his pink tongue

like a cat might. I was much more familiar with the behavior of house cats than my new neighbors, the seals.

Point Kean is a diverse neighborhood indeed. I heard at least three different languages spoken by the tourists scattered around, each as foreign to me as the language of the seal that swam away from me and his other onlookers.

I turned my attention away from the people clambering around on the rocks and back to the seal, watching as he disappeared into the waves. Only the occasional flip of a tail gave away his location. He ventured farther away, hand-standing as if to say, "Look what I can do!" and teasing his dazzled spectators from a safe distance. Then the tail came down, sleek black, smooth back breaking the surface of the water, and gone—vanished out of sight. I moved to the opposite side of a large tan rock, squatting above its rough surface and scanned the water, squinting in the brightness. I saw the seal floating out in front of me as I listened to water flowing around the rock and the seagulls calling. A glance down at my notebook and up again, and the seal was gone.

I picked my way across the jagged, half-submerged rocks and, after a short walk, found myself almost running headlong into another seal sleeping among the gray-brown stones. These huge animals have the uncanny ability to hide in plain sight, passing off their lumpy bodies as nothing more than another pile of rocks on the beach.

But other people got too close on purpose, despite the posted signs reminding tourists of the fifty-meter law. I understood the appeal of these furry creatures, and admittedly, I would have loved to inch close enough to pet one. I could hear yelling coming from the other side of the bushes where a young seal slept on the boardwalk. "Look, look over here! Another one!"—the sound of shuffling footsteps down the path. Off to my right, a young Asian woman clapped her hands directly in front of a sleeping seal, mimicking its own circus trick. All around me tourists clamored close—too close—to the sleeping creatures. The easiest way to spot the seals was to follow the protruding camera lenses. Capturing the moment was these onlookers' only objective, and they each seemed to think nothing of their brief intrusion, unaware that for these seals, daily life was a series of constant interruptions.

The whole scene felt wrong, as if we were spying on something quite private.

I settled down with my back against a tall rock warmed by the bright New Zealand sunshine and watched three sleeping fur seals and two people, a young man and woman who were weaving around them. Suddenly, one of the seals lifted his head and began to walk, shuffling his massive body over the stones and toward the sea. He made his way to the large, brown seal near the water and paused. Then he settled down to rest in this new place, rolling over and turning his back toward the sun. The seal closest to me also lifted his head and the couple stopped, caught between the pair and the lone seal. The seal drew himself up as if about to move toward them, but only slid about a foot to the right and flopped down with his head on a rock. In this exhausted state, the seals did seem lazy, slow, and bulky—hardly dangerous. However, these male

fur seals were beginning to stake out territories as mating season approached, and it was quite possible that they could become defensive if their space was invaded. I made eye contact with the couple, and we shared a quiet chuckle. I wanted to tell them to be more careful next time, to keep their distance, but I couldn't conjure up the words. Thankfully, they moved on to a different area.

For a moment, no one disturbed the seals and I observed their relaxed and peaceful demeanors. I admired the way they seemed to lack fear, sleeping out in the open that way. There was something that seemed almost carefree about that, the knowledge that they had no predators to fear on land, and I wondered if I was worrying too much about how the seals perceived the people snooping around their bedrooms.

Suddenly, the calm was broken by a young seal that raised his head and sounded a high-pitched cry from his bright pink mouth. He wailed like a fussy child, lolling his large head around, but after receiving no response from the three adults sleeping near him, he lay back down and returned to sleep. The seal in front of me shifted in his sleep, and I could see his shoulder muscles rippling as he rolled.

The farthest seal heaved himself up and rotated his hind flippers to move about, and the woman with her camera, pink jacket, and floppy straw hat was still too close. An American woman seated next to me on a bench shouted, "Hey! Back off!" but the woman didn't speak English and remained where she was. The shout instead alerted others to the presence of the seals. Seven people quickly flocked down with their cameras and surrounded the seal.

"People are so stupid," the American whispered under her breath.

It was plain that the people wandering the rocks were not looking far beyond their camera lenses. One woman nearly stepped on a seal, and the American called out another warning. She jumped, startled, and stepped aside. The woman and her companion retreated up the embankment and began speaking with the two Americans on the bench. "People keep getting so close," the American told them. "And when people get too close, then the seals don't have a home."

She was right. This woman summarized exactly what I had seen on my bike ride to Point Kean—the development of the land for agriculture, tourism, and industry. Humans kept pressing closer and closer to their neighbors who lived down at the end of the road, overtaking the neighborhood until only one forgotten house back in the cul-de-sac remained. Banging down the door, a constant stream of knocks despite that fact that we had always been taught to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I did spot one faithful neighbor that afternoon.

She sat directly to my left with her back against a rock. Looking quietly, she simply stayed. In an hour's time, twenty people came and went, intruding and taking their photos, but she only watched. Instead of coming to snap a photo and move on, she came to get to know the seals. She made me hopeful—hopeful that people can still visit the seals, live peacefully with them, and truly see.



HEART OF THE MOUNTAINS

BY ALISSA SINCLAIR, ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

NO TRESPASSING

BY JAYDE LOGEMANN, WRITING & RHETORIC

As I ride into the cemetery, my bike wheel catches on a patch of half-melted slush. My tires screech, and I lurch dangerously to the right. I envision myself, covered in blood, trying to explain to my roommate why I fell off my bike in a cemetery, but I catch myself with my foot before I topple completely over. Slip my other leg over my bike. I can almost hear something whisper—You and your bicycle don't belong here. Stay away.

I walk in anyway, slowly, holding onto the handlebars of my bike as I start down a damp, dark path. Someone has cleared all the paths of snow, but puddles and occasional clumps of slush still threaten to soak through my shoes, and I can only see the top halves of the tombstones poking up out of the snow. The bodies beneath don't care that the snow began to melt with today's uncharacteristically high temperatures.

They don't care that no one brings flowers in the winter.

But we seem to.

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Cemeteries aren't designed with the dead peoples' comfort in mind, but this cemetery doesn't seem to welcome visitors, either. There's a sign near the entrance that says, No Trespassing. Open 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

I walk around the perimeter of the cemetery and through a path in the middle, looking for a bench where I can sit, pull out my laptop and let my thoughts become words, but I never find one. Maybe that's because people don't normally go to cemeteries to think about all the graves. Maybe writers don't normally go to cemeteries to write because how they died makes a much better story than they're dead. Maybe we aren't supposed to romanticize being dead, but that's not what I intend to do. I find a patch of the path that's not too damp, spread out a blanket, pull my laptop out of my backpack, and start to write.

The dead won't mind.

They're not the ones who told me I don't belong.

Is it just I don't belong here in this cemetery, or do I not belong here period? This world is not my home, just like the people whose bodies lie rotting six feet beneath me do not claim this graveyard as their home. If they suddenly came back to life, or if they were able to return as ghosts, I don't think they'd haunt the graveyard. I think they'd go back to their houses, or their workplaces or churches. To where they belong.

Not here.

But we think of them as being here. We say, "I went to go visit Cindy today," when we bring flowers to the cemetery on her birthday. Cindy doesn't care that it's her birthday. Cindy doesn't care that you remembered it was her birthday. Cindy doesn't care what kind of flowers you brought, or that you

came at all.

I don't think that ghosts exist, and I'm not scared of cemeteries, but I keep finding myself looking over my shoulder. I'm not distracted by the dead, but by the living. I imagine a groundskeeper emerging from the shadows, saying Get out before I call the cops.

Cars buzz past, their headlights pulling my attention out of the graveyard. In their homes, people talk, and laugh, and watch television, and don't think about death, even if they have loved ones who have died and are buried in this cemetery.

I know that sometimes days go by when I don't think about the people I love who have died. Would they be angry if they knew? Or would they be relieved? Wouldn't they be glad that we can still enjoy our lives? Wouldn't they be happy that our lives continue after their deaths?

Some people are scared of graveyards, but I wasn't afraid to come here. I find cemeteries to be peaceful. They remind me of cathedrals; maybe because being in a cathedral is the closest you can get to God without being in a grave.

My hands are cold. My fingers have started to numb. Is this what it feels like to be dying? I sometimes wonder about the process of death. Do you see a glimpse of heaven or hell as your heart shivers one last time before freezing forever? Does the world dissolve into light or darkness? Do you know which breath is your last as you draw it? I suppose that most people die in their sleep. That's the way it's described. They go to sleep, and then they never wake up. Do they dream in that final sleep, making their last memories of this life fictitious? Do they fight or tremble or cry in those last dreams? On the outside, not much has changed except that their breathing has stopped. They look as if they are still sleeping.

Is sleep practice for death?

The word *koiman* means, "to put to sleep" in Greek. A derivative of this is *koimētērion*, which means "dormitory." This word passed through Late Latin and emerged in Middle English as "cemetery." When I think about it, this graveyard isn't all that different from my residence hall at college. We file into little rooms one-by-one, our names written on the doors, and we lie down in the darkness, and we practice for death in a place which we did not come from and which is not our final destination.

I don't think about death very often.

Maybe it's because I'm young, and my frontal cortex hasn't finished developing yet or something, and I still foolishly base my decisions in the present, which I guess explains why I'm not allowed to buy alcohol or a lottery ticket or a handgun.

Or maybe it's because we don't talk about death as much as we should. One time, I was at a visitation, and I had a two-year-old girl on my hip, and she kept pointing at the casket as we walked by, and she tried to ask me what was

wrong with the woman inside, but I pointed to all the flowers because I didn't know what to say, and because I didn't want to be the one to break the news to her that she, too, will someday lie cold and motionless in a box while people pass by and try to think of something meaningful to say to her grieving family.

Is that why we have flowers at funerals? To divert our attention from the corpse in front of us to something that is still alive and beautiful and well?

I like to think that I am unafraid to die. I picture myself knowing that I have drawn my last breath, and closing my eyes without crying or trembling or fighting against destiny for one more breath or raging against the dying of the light.

In *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien refers to death as being a gift to men. The immortal elves envy the men who can die peacefully of old age, while the elves can only die by being slain or by wasting away in grief, which sounds like the worst and most hopeless way to die.

I don't want to be hopeless when I die. I want my death to mean something even though I know it won't matter to me how I've died once I'm dead. I won't be able to hear people praising my heroism, even if I died saving a child from a burning building, or diving in front of a bullet, or defending my comrades in battle.

I think it would be fulfilling to die like Éponine from *Les Misérables*, except I would want to die much faster, because she hangs on for a while after she's been shot, and I don't want my death to be a long, drawn-out, painful process. When you're reading the book, you almost forget that a mysterious figure jumped in front of Marius to save his life in battle by the time Marius finds Éponine bleeding to death. But I think it would be easier to die if I were in the arms of someone I had just saved, telling them that I believe I was a little bit in love with them, knowing that they would kiss my forehead once I was dead.

I want to die knowing that my death means something.

I know it's much more likely, though, that I'll die like Augustus Waters from *The Fault in Our Stars*: slowly, from something like cancer, in the middle of the night, when some of my loved ones are sleeping—in the least romantic way possible.

Nobody was there when my grandpa died.

My mom, and her sisters, and my grandma had just been to visit him in hospice, and then they went home for a little bit, and a little while later they got a call saying that the nurse had gone to check on him, and he was dead.

My fingers are so cold now that they're clumsy, and it's hard to type. Someday my fingers will grow completely numb, and then I'll never be able to warm them up enough to say anything again. I only have one lifetime to write the things that I want to write and to say the things that I want to say. I don't have an infinity of tomorrows. I probably won't be able to say goodbye to every one I love before the blood vessel erupts in my brain, or before my face collides with the inside of my windshield, or before the robber pulls the trigger.

Death is the only surety in life.

I spend a lot of time dreaming about my career, or my wedding, or my children, but I am not guaranteed that any of those will become realities. I know with certainty that I am going to die, but weddings are much more exciting to daydream about.

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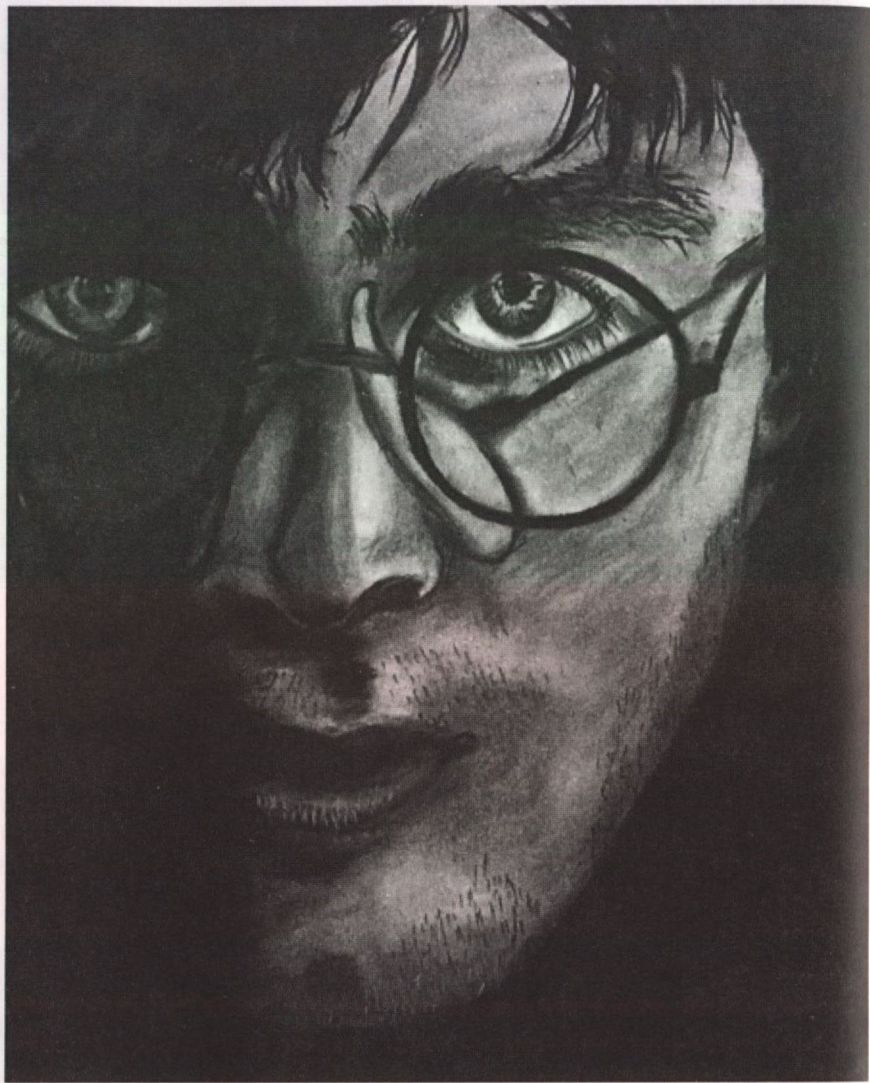
I've been in my fair share of graveyards before. I went to one when we buried my aunt and grandma and both of my grandpas. Grandpa Moose said before he died that he didn't want us to give him a funeral, but that he wanted my grandma to throw his ashes out with the trash. We didn't follow his wishes because he couldn't care anymore, being dead, and it meant a lot to my grandma that we did something to commemorate his life. We held a service in the cemetery, which was almost as brief as his obituary—He lived. He died. Goodbye. We looked at the tiny black box which held his ashes while a pastor who didn't know my grandpa delivered a eulogy mostly made up of lies. But it sounded nice. The pastor promised we would see my grandpa again, but all of us knew that wasn't the truth. Grandpa defied Christianity. I had known that grandpa was going to hell for as long as I can remember, but at that moment, it became real, and I despised the pastor for saying that grandpa was in heaven, and we would see him again. Did he have to rub our hopelessness in our faces? Did this stranger even talk to my grandma about my grandpa before he delivered the eulogy? Or did he only know what was printed on the tombstone?

Darrell Miller, 1935-2008.

Names and dates are the most that I can know about the people in the graves surrounding me here, and I don't even know that much, because it's too dark to read the inscriptions from where I'm sitting, and the snow is too deep for me to go look at them all. My feet would get wet. Isn't that pathetic?

I've been in enough cemeteries to know that some tombstones don't even have first names written on them, and some don't have dates on them either. I wonder if that's because the family has reserved the plot for more than one person. Or maybe it's because we like to put our last names onto other people's tombstones, so we can come and kneel in the grass and think about how our lives have changed since the person buried beneath us has died. Maybe I wouldn't feel like I'm trespassing if there were a headstone engraved with my last name in this cemetery. But I've never come to this cemetery in grief, so I'm not welcome here. No trespassing. No benches. Cold wind and deep snow. Puddles of slush in the driveway. No lights. The dead aren't afraid of the dark, but we're afraid of the dead, although being in the graveyard makes me feel like being afraid of ghosts is the most unnatural thing in the world. Six feet of dirt prevent these people from coming to get me.

And I can leave.



HARRY POTTER

BY JAYCEE VANDER BERG, CRIMINAL JUSTICE

