The Mall: Writing from Butler University's First Year Seminar 2017-18

The Mall Staff
Butler University

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THE MALL

Writing from Butler University’s
First Year Seminar 2017-18

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and artists.
Dear Butler students, faculty, and community members,

The Mall staff are proud to present this new edition filled with the wonderful writing of many 2017-18 first year students. During the spring 2018 semester, students from many different first year seminar classes offered at Butler submitted their writing to the journal. As a staff, we read through each submission, and it was a challenge to choose just a handful of pieces to publish. Every author who submitted work, published or not, added to an incredibly unique blend of passions, perspectives, and voices with their writing. It was an honor to read them all.

The wide range of submissions we received is evidence that our class of 2021--and our university, too--is full of encouragingly courageous, tenacious, supportive, dedicated, and caring people. People capable of greatness, of making change happen in our world. As Editors-in-Chief of this year’s Mall, Wade and I would like to thank each one of you who submitted your work. Your vulnerability in sharing your writing with us showcased the remarkably strong minds on campus here at Butler University. It proved that each one of you is striving to better yourselves, and in the process, you are making each person around you stronger as well. We loved reading your work and regret that we could only choose a small number of pieces for the final edition. Thank you for allowing us a glimpse into your lives, for sharing a bit of your pain and your bravery, your loss and regret. And most of all, thank you for sharing your joy and success.

We can’t wait for you to read the wonderful pieces authors from the Butler University class of 2021 have allowed us to share with you, and we hope you enjoy this 2017-18 edition of The Mall.

Lindsay Marohn and Wade Townsend
The Mall Editors-in-Chief, fall 2018
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Dearest Susan

Alexandra Cordill

“When I was a child I was ostracized by my peers. Mostly for saying words like ostracized.”

-Patrick Ledwell

Dearest Susan,

You were with me through my first year of life. My little towheaded self crawling around on the ground with a teething ring in my mouth and one in each hand, all because you told me to. Because of you I could name every character in Richard Scarry’s Busytown before I could read.

Our childhood was very unconventional. We spent our time sprawled in large piles of books instead of playing with kids our own age. Poring over the intricacies of Fabergé eggs and the work of impressionists, you nestled beside me helping me commit every crevice and brushstroke to memory. From the ages of 4 to 7 I only had one good friend because of you. Every single time I tried to make other friends, you tied my stomach into knots and made me blurt out odd sentences at random times. You convinced me you were all I needed. You robbed me of a whole part of my childhood. Not a day goes by when I wonder what it would have been like without you.

I remember you standing next to me at age 8 while I stared at myself in the mirror and practiced facial expressions for hours on end until I had perfected each one and knew which one my face was making at any given time. I had gotten rid of the toothy smile that scared off my peers, replaced it with a much more subdued one and learned how to frown properly. At the time, this was the greatest feat I had accomplished in my young life, and I was convinced it would turn our social life, or lack thereof, around drastically. But, I was wrong, I was still the girl who played by herself at recess and was better friends with her teachers than her peers.
In Junior High things went from bad to worse. Because of you, we were bullied. Bullied for not understanding the intricacies of the middle school social classes. Bullied for you not being able to understand basic social cues like how not to interrupt people when they are speaking and when the hell to use certain facial expressions. Bullied for you forcing me to tap my fucking fingers on the desks. I couldn’t help it, you would drop rocks into my stomach if I didn’t keep my hands moving.

Come to think of it, you do that a lot for the most insignificant shit. Like when we were 7 and you had a full-fledged meltdown in Von Maur on two separate occasions because Mom bought a watch for the first time in 15 years and Dad started to wear jeans again. You can’t accept change. You just freak out instead of being logical like you are in literally every other facet of life, undoubtedly to a fault. You wrap my brain in the itchiest sweater you can possibly find unless I eat meals in accordance to your absurd routine: vegetables, fruit, starch, then meat or when I eat something with the wrong texture. You realize that makes absolutely no sense, right? Melon is damn good but you don’t like foods to be watery and crunchy simultaneously. By the way, what the fuck is up with your stomach churning aversion to mayo? It’s a completely normal food. You refuse to let me study in the library because the fountain is too damn loud or take tests in the same room as my peers because you can’t let me think while the sound of pencils is pounding in my brain. Or when you make me lose all concept of time when I fixate on something so insignificant it’s laughable. You erase faces from all my memories. Do you know how fucking sad it is to have to memorize photographs so I can remember what my family looks like? I couldn’t describe our mother’s face to a sketch artist. Your complete inability to maintain some facet of normalcy around cute guys is literally the only reason I have never had a boyfriend. The more I think about all your transgressions the more I ask myself why I’ve put up with you my entire life.
I guess the best answer is that you’re like an annoying sister. I can only be mad at you for so long before I remember all you do for me. You have forced me to become an expert at reading people’s body language which is more helpful in life than one might think. You also have a fucking steel trap of a memory. Which has come in handy in the sense that I barely had to take notes in high school to get A’s on tests. You give me the ability to have a laser focus on whatever task is at hand. Two years ago, I decided that I wanted to memorize the entirety of Alphabet Aerobics by Blackalicious. For 2 weeks, I listened to it on repeat during my 20 minute rides to and from cadaver lab every Wednesday and Saturday until I had it memorized by heart.

I have thought that there might be something different about me but I was never able to quite put my finger on it. I never realized it was you all along. On the morning of the AP psychology exam, May 1st, I finally learned your real name: autism. A weight had been lifted off my chest, I wasn’t different for no reason, I had a developmental disorder. As Dr. Heinrich delved into the details of my diagnosis all I could think was, “I’m not crazy”. Two weeks earlier I had gone into the Dr. Heinrich’s office for a grueling battery of tests and questions. For 4 hours, I filled out questionnaire after questionnaire and answered questions about our childhood. I was almost certain that the tests were going to come back positive. For 5 months, I had been researching about you for hours on end after I had noticed that Max from Parenthood reminded me too much of my own internal dialogue. One day after class I approached my AP psychology teacher with the idea that I might be autistic, I could tell she was taken aback. I spent countless hours after school with her figuring out my next steps for diagnosis. Mom had to convince my pediatrician who was certain that nothing was “wrong” with me to give me a referral to a pediatric neurologist in Champaign. Eventually I got an appointment with Dr. Heinrich a psyD specializing in pediatric developmental disorders. It is increasingly rare to be diagnosed with autism at the age of 18. Typically, you are caught within the first five years of life but I guess we are part of that small percent. Coming to
terms with having a mental disability is not an easy thing to do. I guess that is why I separated you
from me all these years. My autism is not me, and I am not my autism.

When I tell people about you they feel bad for me, they say, “You don’t seem autistic” as if
to comfort me. But in fact, I don’t need to be comforted. There is a negative stigma attached to
being diagnosed with autism. You are by no means a burden to me, you are a part of me just as
much as my fingers and toes.

I’ve found that when people think of autism they think of Sheldon Cooper, the good doctor,
or whatshisname the main character on Atypical. But that is not me, and that is not the vast
majority of people diagnosed with autism. When explaining to people what it is like to live with you
I like to say that it’s like being an alien on your home planet. Or playing a video game without the
tutorial. I was basically thrown into life with zero social instincts, and your weird ass. I had to teach
myself the basics of human interaction through mimicry. I would watch TV to learn how to interact
with others. From Sesame Street, I learned not only how to share but when it is appropriate to
laugh and when it’s appropriate to frown. From iCarly I learned how to make friends and keep
them, and from Friends I learned the intricacies of adult society. People seem to view me as an
other because of you but I’m really not, I’ve just had to learn things a little differently than
everybody else.

Gone are the days where I have so much social anxiety I have to hide in a bathroom to keep
my shit together. You no longer force me to break out in hives so I can get out of socializing. You
have just about stopped giving me panic attacks when I fuck something up so bad you believe it’s
beyond repair. I no longer have to watch Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat at least
once a week. You have really stopped being as much of a bitch as you used to be and I thank you
for that. But your bitchiness lives on in your name, a tribute to the typical, white suburban mom with the “may I please speak to a manager” haircut.

In my opinion, you have changed my life for the better, although I am not you, and you are not me, you have made me who I am today, a somewhat normal 18-year-old girl. I have more friends than I have fingers and more fun than I could ever have dreamed. When I learned I would be coming to college autistic, I’m not going to lie, I freaked out. I spiraled into a deep researching hole. Spending hours upon hours on google and adult autism forums. Gathering up every tip I could find and reading every book about you I could get my hands on. But you, so far, have not fucked up my college experience. I recognize that you will never go away. But I still notice you today, you sneak up on me in the smallest ways. When answering questions in class I look approximately 4 inches above the professor’s head. I constantly have trouble figuring out when to speak in social and classroom situations. Sometimes I wonder if people can tell that I’m different and what would happen if I was “discovered”. Would people treat me differently? Then I remember that I am not ashamed of you, we are a packaged deal. I know we will continue to coexist and change together. But I’m proud of how far we’ve come thus far.

All the best,

Alexandra
Meine Fahrerin

*Molly Wells*

There I was, minding my own business, resting in my usual spot in the bike rack, when this little girl pointed her finger directly at me and said in some language I couldn’t understand, “What about that one?” The girl looked up at the taller man standing next to her with her large and longing blue-green eyes.

“I don’t know, Molly. How much is it?” the tall man responded with more gibberish.

“It’s in the used section… Can I try it out, dad, please?” the girl said questioningly.

“Koennte meine Tochter dieses Fahrrad probieren, bitte?” the taller man finally said something I could understand, directed at the shop owner.

“Ja, natürlich. Dieses Fahrrad ist sehr verantwortlich.” Oh, boy. Salespeople will say just about anything to get the customer to spend money. The salesperson should be telling the tall man that I need my tires refilled, my chain oiled, and a good scrub. Instead he’s calling me reliable. Oh well, I guess –

All of a sudden, small hands grabbed my handlebars, and before I knew it, the little girl was riding me down the street. She wasn’t like anyone else who had ridden me before. She was gentle and listened to me as she rode. Maybe I could survive being hers. Maybe being “Molly’s bike” wouldn’t be so bad.

“Dad, I think this is the one. Its tires are a little flat, but other than that, it’s perfect.” The little girl held onto my purple body as she talked to the tall man. That day I went home with the little
girl and her family. I wondered where they were from and why they were here. It seemed as if only
the tall man could really speak German. I wondered how the little girl would do in school without
knowing the language. Would she make friends? There were so many questions running through my
mind that day; little did I know, there were just as many running through hers.

Every day, Molly would take me to school. Sometimes she would talk to me, sometimes she
would sing. I slowly began to pick up the strange language called English, and I learned that she was
from a far-away land called America. Molly longed to go back to America. All her friends were there,
her cat, her life. I wished I could speak to Molly and tell her that life in Germany was better than
America, but she probably wouldn’t have believed me even if I could speak.

There’s one particular day that stands out in my memory. Molly and I had just gotten back
from school, and she was wheeling me down the wobbly brick driveway. Molly’s family lived in a
beautiful white stucco house with black trim that they shared with 3 other families. I loved living
here. Molly leaned me up against the house and locked my wheel to my body. She was fiddling in
her light blue backpack when she whispered, “No… no, no, no!”

“What am I going to do?” Molly was standing by the big wooden door, but she wasn’t
holding what she normally held in her hands when she got back from school: her keys. She looked
terrified. She ran back to the front gate. A few minutes later she came back mumbling to herself.
“Just do it, Molly. They’re your neighbors. Why are you so scared?” She ran back to the front gate,
and came back once more. She unlocked me, and then locked me back up. It was clear Molly didn’t
know what to do. Personally, I thought she should ring the doorbells of the other families living in
the house, but apparently, she was too scared to do that. Molly got pretty nervous in social
situations. I would’ve done it for her, but, alas, I am a bike.
Molly laid her jacket on the ground and curled up in a ball. I could hear her quiet little shakes and knew that the tears were streaming down her face. We stayed like this for no more than 5 minutes, when Molly jumped up and ran down the driveway. Her mom was back and could let Molly in! I had never been so relieved; I hated seeing Molly when she was sad.

She wasn’t sad all the time, but it took a while for Molly to get used to being in Germany, and even to riding me. The following months were a slow journey of gaining confidence. I still remember the first time her mom let her go to the grocery store by herself, which was a big deal for Molly.

“Molly, can you run to Tengelmann and grab a few packs of salami?” Her mom said as we were returning from the train station.

“Wait, like, by myself?” Molly’s green-blue eyes lit up with excitement.

“Well, your brother isn’t feeling well, so yes, by yourself.” Her mom was a little hesitant.

“Yeah! But you’ll give me money, right?” Molly was practically squealing.

“Of course. Just be careful, ok?” I wondered how stressful it was being a mom.

Molly’s mom handed her a few Euros and she hopped right back on me. As we started the trek to the grocery store, Molly tried something quite dangerous.

“Ok, we can do this.” Molly said to me. Do what? I wondered. At that moment, I no longer felt the small hands gripping my handlebars. This was strange, because I still felt her on my seat. OH MY WORD! She was riding me without any hands! I immediately got nervous and my handlebars started moving without direction.

“Woah! That was close.” Molly grabbed onto me again. Phew. Glad that’s over.
“Ok, I’m gonna try again, but I need you to help me this time.” Oh boy. Well, I guess helping is better than falling. She took her hands off, and pushed her weight back. I tried with all my might to keep my handlebars straight, and we glided along.

“We’re doing it! We’ve got it!” She got a little too excited though, and we started to wobble again. She saved us at the last second. From then on, every time we went somewhere alone, we rode with no hands on the handlebars. Which is kind of stupid if you think about it, because they’re called handlebars. However, I think it helped Molly gain confidence. She could finally feel like she was good at something in Germany.

Pretty soon, Molly could ride me easily without touching my handlebars, even on turns. While this was thrilling and fun, I still feared for the safety of both of us. Molly might’ve ended up with a scraped knee, or at worst a broken bone, but one wrong move and it could’ve been the end of me. But I decided to put up with it because Molly really enjoyed it.

Because Molly didn’t have many friends, she took to riding through the trails by her house with me. These rides were the one thing that she felt comfortable doing. I like to think that I was one of the things that made living in Germany bearable for her. We would fly through the sea of green and brown without a care in the world. Molly would yell “Fly faster! Wheee!” and my wheels would spin effortlessly.

“You’re my dragon, and I’m your dragon-rider!” I loved being Molly’s dragon, even though I didn’t know what a dragon was. I think Molly had an incredible imagination. Because she didn’t talk much, that left a lot of time for her to think. Sometimes she would share her thoughts with me.

“I don’t have that many friends. Today in school, the kids were teasing the kid from Mexico saying he smelled bad. They asked me if I thought he smelled bad, and even though I couldn’t smell him, I nodded my head because I wanted to have friends. I feel so bad about that.” I didn’t like to
think that Molly would’ve done something like this, but I can understand why. Sometimes I would try to fit in with the new bikes by making fun of the older used bikes. Everyone (even bikes) feels the need to conform. Molly couldn’t quite understand this yet though – she was only nine after all.

Molly never tried to be mean. She tried hard to be nice, but sometimes her intentions weren’t followed by the right actions. One brisk autumn day, we were at the park with Molly’s brother, Josiah. Josiah was two years older than Molly and owned a red bike slightly bigger than myself. Molly and Josiah, the only kids at the playground, were playing on the Merry-go-Round, spinning so fast that it made me dizzy just watching them. I wished so much that I could play with them. It must’ve looked like the world was spinning so fast from their perspective. I could only imagine what a whirl of colors that created.

Suddenly, I only saw one kid on the Merry-go-Round. Josiah lay on the ground gripping his arm in his pale-yellow shirt. “Josiah! Are you ok? What should I do? Should I go get dad?” Molly asked him in a panic.

“Get dad…” Josiah moaned from the ground.

Molly ran over to me and pulled out her keys. I was getting ready for the ride of my life. I was prepared to play my part as the hero. I was too busy thinking about my future glory, that I didn’t even notice that the little girl in the light green rain coat running away from me on the sidewalk was Molly. What was she doing? Why would she run when she could go 10 times faster by riding me? With every footstep, I heard the sound of defeat.

The next thing I saw was the tall man (Molly’s dad) riding his tall bike towards me. He threw the bike down (the tall bike would definitely have a few bruises after that) and ran over to Josiah. It turns out that Josiah was ok, just a few scrapes. It wasn’t till minutes later that Molly came back. She was heaving and obviously out of breath. Well, that’s what she gets for leaving me behind.
“Molly, why did you run back? Why wouldn’t you ride your bike?” Josiah asked, bringing up valid questions.

“I… I don’t… I don’t know, Josiah. I… panicked because I couldn’t… unlock my bike…” Molly panted. In my opinion, she should’ve spent the extra minute figuring out how to unlock my lock.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want to be here anymore. I want to go home.” Molly had caught her breath now.

“Well get your bike and we can go home.” Her dad responded.

“No… I want to go home home. Not Germany home. America home.” Poor kid.

“I know, Molly, I know. But we’ve been here four months already, so that means we only have nine left. It’ll go by faster than you think, I promise. You know I appreciate all that you and Josiah have put up with for my career.” 9 months?! That’s it? I thought Molly would stay indefinitely! Oh no. I don’t want to leave her. I don’t want her to go back to America.

“9 months?! Dad, that’s like infinity!” HA. It’s strange how 9 year olds think sometimes.

Molly was the kind of person who wanted to help others but didn’t always know how. That day at the park, she wanted to go get help for Josiah, but when she couldn’t get her key to unlock me, she panicked and ran home instead. She wanted friends, but made them the wrong way. Together we learned a lot of hard lessons, but we also learned how to have fun. While it may have felt like infinity to Molly, the remaining months felt like seconds to me. Before I knew it, I had to say goodbye to Molly. I was incredibly sad, but I knew she would do well in her future and hopefully find a bike that could serve her even better than I did.
One day in late summer, we were riding on one of the trails near her house. I knew that she had to leave soon, but I didn’t know how soon.

“This is our last ride,” Molly whispered to me. Yikes, I guess it was very soon.

“You’ve been with me through it all. Thanks for carrying me everywhere I needed to go. I loved imagining things with you. I’ve learned a lot about myself as a dragon-rider. I think I’m closer to being a grown-up now. You’re going to have a new family, but they’ll love you as much as I do, I promise.”

If bikes could cry, I would’ve been sobbing. I longed to tell Molly how much I would miss her and our rides together. We had gotten to know each other so well that riding with one another was as easy as coasting downhill. I wished I could’ve thanked Molly for giving me the best life; for teaching me how to use my imagination, how to be compassionate, and how to be the best purple medium-sized bike I could be. But, alas, I am a bike, and bikes do not talk.
(Lights on) An ominous alleyway is dimly illuminated, and a young female quickly dashes across stage in tattered clothes, her red heels fly off. (Lights off)

*The sound of a heaving woman and a dial tone ring out from stage.*

Operator: 911. What’s your emergency?

Woman: (Heaving) Help me. I’m scared… (choking up) I’m lost…I don’t know where I am, and I’m being followed.

Operator: Can you spot any street signs to help us locate you.

Woman: It’s dark…wait *phone static*(whispers frantically) I think they’re still following me!

(Shouting) Kentucky Ave!

Operator: Can you tell me any landmarks? Help is on the way! What are you wearing, to help spot you?

Woman: It’s too dark to make anything out. (loud car screech and phone static) …black dress and I’m barefoot!

Operator: Help is on the w- [call gets cut off]

(Lights on) *Next day* 11am Saturday morning at a table in Atherton Union on Butler University’s campus.
Evi: Man, I love the bagels here! Did you see the Dawg Alert last night? It said a student was abducted and to watch out for a 2001 green Odyssey with tinted windows.

Sasha: Yeah. I got the alert at like 2 in the morning. She must have been at a party or something off campus to have gotten abducted.

Maya: No! I heard she was grabbed on the BUPD side of Ross Hall!

Evi: No way!

Maya: YEAH! I read an article this morning about how when the cops found her she was like half naked. Her “dress” was basically straps of fabric barely hanging off her body.

Sasha: Well she must have fought the abductors to get away and they might have ripped up her clothes in the fight.

Evi: All I know is that my mom would not stop calling me last night to check up on me.

Sasha: You say that like it’s a bad thing.

Evi: I appreciated it but I’m not the one dressing like a skank on Friday nights and heading out to parties. I’m a responsible law-abiding freshman. I mean nobody told her to go underage drinking.

Sasha: So, you think she was drunk?

Maya: I mean just by looking at her victim’s picture it wouldn’t take much to get her tipsy, she has a small frame.

Evi: Yeah and you know what they say, “the lighter you are the easier for kidnappers to snatch you up!” They always said that at school while I was growing up.

Sasha: That’s messed up.
Evi: But it’s true! And last night was even more evidence. Man like she would have been fine if she had just stayed in or not dressed like a slut.

Maya: (freezes in the middle of eating cereal) So, you’re blaming her?!

Evi: No! Well…she does have partial blame. Women must be smarter with how they dress and act because if they don’t then stuff like this incident happens.

Sasha: (puts down toast) HOW!? How is she at fault for anything that happened last night?!

Evi: Well she chose to go out that night! Nobody was forcing her to go and flaunt her body at some senior house and get so drunk out of their mind that they can get abducted! She chose to dress the way she did, and she basically made herself an easy target! She has some of the blame.

Maya: That’s a sick mentality. That’s like shaming a woman for basically having freedom of expression. The way she dressed that night should not be any of your concern. Society is so fucked up that clothing- a piece of cotton fibers- gets sexualized the moment it hits a woman's body.

Sasha: That’s so true. Society is getting so oppressive and judgmental with what women should wear all the time it makes me feel like I’m living in the “Islamic revolution” and the next step society will take is “to force all women to wear veils to school”¹ or whenever we leave our dorms! This woman was a victim of abduction, she could have raped or murdered and you (points at Evi) want to pin the blame on her. That is so upsetting…I think I just lost all my appetite. We really need to work on spread awareness on Butler’s campus on how women are not sex objects.

Evi: Look, women just must be more careful is all I’m saying. We just aren’t as strong as men, so we need to be extra careful. It was a cause and effect situation. There had to be consequences for her actions. She had free will and look where that got her.

¹ (Satrapi 1)
Maya: Enough! Can you just shut up? That abducted student could have just as easily been anyone of us coming back to Ross Hall from studying late at night. She has suffered enough, and I don’t need to sit here listening to you blame her for the sick actions of some criminals! She fought and ran for her life and you don’t get to demonize her. You’re just like the trolls who spam women on social media telling them “fuck you”\(^2\) and calling them “cunts” or to “get back in the kitchen.”\(^3\) Your statements only fuel men’s power over women, which is dumb because (speaks slowly but with force) YOU ARE A WOMAN.

Sasha: Yeah, we should really check up on her and show her that her community cares for her safety and well-being. As a fellow human being, I want to acknowledge her humanity before villainizing her for her gender or what she was wearing when the crime happened. She is a fellow student and she deserves respect and compassion right now-- not your judgement. Evi, I think addressing and altering your mindset is the first step to reaching gender equality because it’s about goddamn time for women to start uniting instead of shaming each other.

Evi: You’re just a bunch of crazy feminists. Do me a favor and lose my number. (gets up from table and leaves)

Sasha + Maya: Thank you!

Sasha: I’d rather be a crazy, “happy feminist”\(^4\) than a narrow-minded idiot.

(Lights off) End.

\(^2\) (Valenti 194-196) 
\(^3\) (Valenti 193) 
\(^4\) (Adichie 1)
The Cards You’re Dealt

*Megan Whitwam*

I. Unexpected

“I’m so sorry, kids. I forgot to tell you she would have her bandana on.”

My Grandma has cancer. She has cancer, and I am afraid she is going to die now. Today we went to see her and Papa at their house, and Grandma was wearing a bandana. All her hair is gone. Daddy forgot to tell my brother, my sister, and I that Grandma Barbara is bald now and she was going to have a bandana on. It was pink. I tried not to stare but I kept staring. It was on accident. I just don’t understand. Her hair is all gone.

• • •

I was eight years old.

II. And All God’s People Say

I stand up from the pews of the church and plod along the aisle, clutching my journal and staring at the floor. God, yesterday I was reading over my poem in my freshman biology class. I told myself last night I cannot cry, but I didn’t wear makeup just in case. My dress is light pink and lacy. I hate wearing black to funerals.

I can’t stop shaking. The church’s emotions are in my hands. That’s what Papa told me. If I cry up here, they will all cry. I cannot let them see me break.
I find the courage to look up. I see familiar faces. They all just irritate me. Each face has a
look of pity as they stare up here. Some have wadded up tissues in their hands, and others have
streams of tears racing down their red, blotchy cheeks. But these faces with their worn down eyes
find me and they pity me. I don’t want this pity. Do they pity me because I am a child who lost her
grandmother? Do they express pity towards me even though it is actually for the community as a
whole, losing its long-time benefactor? Do they pity me because they can sense, as I do, that a
cancerous future lies ahead of me?

I place my journal on the podium and open it but my fingers fumble and I lose the page.
Once I find it after what feels like minutes, I run my sweaty palms on my sides, I look at Papa in the
front row, and read my simple, childish, freshman-in-high school quality piece:

Words cannot describe her

I could breathe compassion, feel compassion, see compassion

This made her

She was built on it—strong,

Gentle still—her touch, her voice, her heart

Now guiding us with it from above

Still covering us in blankets

Lost from the community she provided

Asking nothing in return
The difference she made—large and strong as the bricks in her home,

In her heart

With every word spoken, hug embraced, smile, and laugh

She was rich with happiness

Sitting on the porch, beaming at the lake—

All put to shame compared to her,

Her compassion

She loved to love, to joke, cook, decorate, and play

Heaven welcomes my angel

Grandma Barbara—forever engraved in my heart

And her words

“This is not the end, but the beginning.”

I looked into Papa’s eyes before stepping down from the podium. His tired eyes were full of tears. Perhaps it was because I went up and spoke at her funeral, or perhaps it was simply because he lost the love of his life: his high school sweetheart, his angel.

III. The Game of Life

Papa tells me stories about Grandma a lot. He tells many about the games they used to play. Grandma was big into puzzles and card games. I loved doing the puzzles – connecting the final
piece was always so satisfying, even though it was sad to have it be over. There’s nothing left to do but pack it away in a box when its time is up.

But Grandma was a champion when it came to cards. They were her favorite games. All her friends thought she must have cheated, but she couldn’t have. You are dealt certain cards and that cannot be controlled. It is luck, or lack of luck sometimes. She didn’t always win, but still made the best of what she was dealt.

IV. Surrendering

Stage four Pancreatic Cancer. My Great-Aunt Nancy, Grandma Barbara’s sister, finally decided to take treatment. After months of contemplating death, she decided to fight. It was November of 2016.

Once you tell people you have cancer, people usually ask “How advanced?” or “What stage?” When the answer is “Stage four,” the normal response is to say: “Oh no, I’m so sorry.”

God, I’m so sorry. Might as well say: “Hey, I heard you were dying. That sucks.”

Stage four Pancreatic. Damn, it sucks.

V. Celebration

My mom’s mom was dying. I just turned five years old. We brought a cake with us when we went to see her when she was in the rehabilitation center to celebrate my birthday. She was dying. But happy birthday.

VI.

Cancer: uncontrolled cell growth. That is the simple definition. That is what it is, but that is also not what it is. It is much more. It spreads and infects everyone around you.
Cancer: my grandma, your grandma, grandpa, father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, friend, lover, neighbor, teacher.

Cancer: the dark circles and designer bags under your eyes from exhaustion despite the excessive amount of sleep.

Cancer: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, marijuana, shots, finger pricks, pills.

Cancer: the aches and pains and dissatisfaction from food.

Cancer: loss of hair and dignity.

Cancer: depression.

Cancer: death.

Cancer:

VII. Perspective and Persistence

Grandma made it look pretty. She would get chemo or radiation in the morning then go to the Soup Kitchen in the afternoon to volunteer without any of the patrons realizing what she was going through. She served at the Soup Kitchen in our beaten down neighboring city for 30 years. Grandma worked out with a personal trainer every week because she felt fat even though the drugs made her lose weight. She kicked ass every time we played cards. She bought cute wigs and came to all my sporting events. She truly mastered the Art of Having Cancer. With seven years of practice, of course she made it look pretty. She looked good; it was just a matter of perspective. One could either see her cancer or see her beauty.
I watched her die for seven damn years. I saw the darkness seep under her eyes. I remember how often she went to her room to take naps. I noticed how our Sunday night family dinners occurred less often. I knew how often Papa took her to the Mayo Clinic. I saw her barely touch the food on her plate, but tell us all she was “okay.” Bullshit. Grandma pretended to be okay for seven years. She was beautiful, but damn it, she was dying. Now that she is gone, I can only hope that when I’m dying, I make it look as pretty as she did.

• • •

It was Ovarian Cancer. Stage three. Aggressive. It was up in the air how long she would live, perhaps a few months, realistically speaking. But she lived for seven more years. She didn’t beat cancer, but she beat the odds. Seven years and two remissions. I thought she beat cancer two damn times. Then it came back. It kept coming back, and after a while I knew it would never go away. She broke my heart. For as long as I could remember Grandma had cancer. She was made of cancer, and that was just how things were. I didn’t think much of it. It just kept coming back.

VIII. On Living

Grandma Barbara was not into gambling. But had her life been a game of Poker, and our world a casino, she would have gone all-in every moment she could. Despite her cards, she laid it all on the table. And she had a great Poker face. She wanted to live and experience and gain so much from our wonderful world. So when she had the chance, she would go all-in. She would win in Euchre and Monopoly and Skip-Bo, but she couldn’t always win. You can’t control the deck, and sometimes it is unlucky.

• • •
I don’t know what it’s like to be the one who lives. I hope I never have to wake up and look at my wedding ring, knowing my love is packed away like an old shoebox full of memories, like a puzzle stored away.

Papa and Grandma Barbara are high school sweethearts. They have been with each other almost their whole lives, and they lived abundant lives. The summer before their senior year of high school, Papa and Grandma Barbara were on a double date with my Great-Aunt Nancy and her boyfriend. While driving, they were hit by a drunk driver. All the impact went to where Grandma Barbara sat. Papa visited her at the hospital every single day even though she lay there, rigid, and in a coma for over 20 days. Grandma Barbara broke her pelvis, both legs, several ribs, and punctured a lung. Papa sat by her side every single day. She should have died, but I would like to believe that love brought her back. She still had more to do in this life.

Because Papa was a big shot at work, they had to move around and travel all the time. They moved their family to California, New Jersey, Michigan, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and North Carolina. After Papa became a CEO, he and Grandma Barbara got to travel all the time.

She always made a point to spend time learning the native language of the country they visited. Instead of sitting in some fancy hotel room until her husband returned from conferences, she ventured out to markets and to sightsee. She practiced her language skills and always tried to meet new people. On one occasion when they traveled to China, Grandma Barbara even sang karaoke with the Vice Mayor of Beijing. She desired to live.

She desired not only to live, but to constantly live as a servant to others, helping those in need in any way she could. Grandma Barbara knew what it was to be close to death, but she also knew the richness of life. She experienced life in any way she could, and Papa was there with her every step of the way.
IX. On Dying

Papa lost weight. We tried to get him to eat, but when fear and sadness take over the mind, you just can’t eat. Just as he did his senior year of high school, he sat at Grandma Barbara’s bedside for a month. But this time, he watched his high school sweetheart die.

I remember walking into their kitchen on one of those days. Papa asked us what song should be played at her funeral, and showed us pictures of her gravestone, all while Grandma Barbara lay awake in their bedroom down the hall. I noticed how slim Papa was. I noticed how little he smiled anymore. I noticed his bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep and constant tears. I noticed the way he looked at Grandma Barbara, the way he clutched her hands. I saw everything. I saw the love between them and the fire inside of him from the anger of losing his angel, but acceptance that neither of them would be in pain anymore. The cancer was killing them both.

X. Amen

The night before she died I ran at my track meet. I ran so well that night. I ran for her. I wanted to tell her about it the next day.

The night before she died provided an incredible sunset. It was a flower of pink and orange and yellow surrounded by a deep darkness. It was beautiful. I ran to get my phone and took a picture of it. I wanted to show her the next day.

The night before she died I decided to curl my hair the next morning. I set out a cute shirt and my curling iron. I started drawing her a picture with bible verses decorating the edges. It was just something to cheer her up. I wanted to show her my curly hair and give her the drawing the next day.
The next day she never woke up. She lay in bed with her mouth open and her breathing heavy. The next day I showed up at her house in my cute top and my curly hair, ready for a nice talk. The next day was the last day.

The day after she died, my dad told me they brought in her favorite pastors because that is what they do when people die. They said a prayer over her body. That’s what he told me. My Grandma died. I don’t know who shed a tear or what prayer they said or who held her hand as she left us or if anyone said “amen.” I don’t know anything. And she doesn’t know that I curled my hair and drew her a picture and ran well at my track meet. The darkness just took over. It took my flower, my angel.

XI. Genes

I carry cancerous genes. My family has a past of cancer, and there is nothing to do about that. Mom’s dad died when she was 18 years old. Lung Cancer. Her mom died when she was 36 years old. Ovarian Cancer. I was only five when I saw the way Death tears a person apart; the way It tore my mom apart. Grandma Barbara, my dad’s mom, died when she was 71 years old in 2014. Ovarian Cancer.

Maybe I will get cancer, and maybe I won’t. I probably will. But I have to make the best out of my situation. I have to make it look “pretty.” No matter what I am doing, no matter what circumstance or position I find myself in – make the best out of it. I cannot control what cards I’m dealt, and I cannot release the poison in my veins.

XII. Wake Up in the Morning
The night Grandma Barbara died, I was doing homework in bed, waiting for my sister to come back from her junior prom. Dad came into my room and looked at me, and I knew. He really didn’t have to say anything, but he did anyway.

“Megan, sweetie. Your Grandma passed away tonight.”

“Okay. What time did it happen?”

“9:34 PM.”

“Okay.”

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

No. My grandma died tonight. She was unconscious all day, and I had my drawing and sunset photograph for her, something to make her smile amidst the pain. She was my biggest role model. I have cried for days and weeks straight. All I wanted was for her to see me graduate, go to college, get married. But she’s dead. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

I finished my homework and turned off my light. I lie there, numb, in a nightmare I could not wake up from because she would not wake up. I could not cry anymore.

XIII. I Love You, Baby Blanket

Grandma has been dying for seven years. Ovarian Cancer claimed her body for itself. Her body deteriorated slowly. Her bright eyes have dimmed. Her clothes were once filled, but now hang loosely on her limbs.

For one month Grandma has been on her deathbed, quite literally. I sit in her home and next to her bed every day, right after school until I go home at night. Sometimes I lie down next to her and hold her close, I hold Grandma Barbara like a toddler holding her baby blanket.
But baby blankets become worn out and raggedy. At some point we must say goodbye.

There is a picture of us during those days: I am lying next to her in bed, she has on a light pink long sleeve shirt, but her head is bare. She grabbed my hand and rested it on my leg. Her smile is as good as it can be. I won’t say it’s a beautiful smile. It’s a tired smile. Her hands. God, I still remember her hands when that picture was taken. I looked down at them and noticed the yellow tinge, and the way they felt—like someone just lathered them up with lotion and stretched the skin too far.

When she had to use the restroom, someone had to carry her. I have never seen someone so damn helpless. I saw her being carried one day: she was curled up in a ball with her head bobbing around like a doll.

So seven years comes down to this. She made it look pretty before, but she is dying. She has always been dying, but this is Death. Death wages war, and it is armed. It is cold. It is gross. It is the IVs in her arm. It is the thick saliva stuck on her lips and the blood in her gums. It is her head nodding as she falls asleep in the middle of our conversation and it’s lolling from side to side as she naps, and naps, and naps. I guess you need to rest up before you die. It is saying I love you and Goodbye every day before coming home and crying every night at the thought of a world without her. It is a constant battle.

And Death wins. Every damn time.
“LOOK AT WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!”, my father screamed as I hid underneath the coffee table. He had my mother backed into a corner, a crushed beer can in his hand. His black hair was slicked with grease and drunken sweat. I was four years old. My mother who took care of me, who knew everything, who could take on the world in my eyes— she looked so small. Her head in her hands, begging for forgiveness, “Please stop, Patrick. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please stop you’re scaring Briana”. I'll never forget the way he looked at me then. It was almost like he sobered up, if only for a moment. True guilt and true sincerity in his eyes— that was the last time I ever felt any affection from him.

◊

Technology was evil. The government and God knows who else was watching us through the television. Close the blinds, people might see in. These were common phrases in our household from the time I was eight to twelve years old. He lived in fear and he wanted us to be afraid with him. The day my mother remarried was the day I knew our lives were going to take a turn for the worst. When I walked into his house, my heart sunk deep into my stomach. Something was wrong. I looked at my stepfather’s dull gray hair and dead eyes. This is not going to be good, I thought to myself. I was right.

My mother’s Facebook account was to be deleted— how did he know she wasn’t trying to reconnect with old boyfriends from high school? My mother and I kept my Facebook account a
secret from him; she wanted to allow me freedom that she didn’t have. He caught me one night. I quickly attempted to switch over to Microsoft paint, but he wasn’t as naïve as I’d hoped. He knew what I was doing, and he said that God was not happy about it. “No righteous child of The Lord would adhere to such sinful activities”. I wasn’t ashamed; I knew I had nothing to be sorry for. My mother wasn’t allowed the same confidence. She wasn’t allowed a phone call unless it was with him, because who knows who she would try to talk to? A usual night consisted of yelling— so much yelling. “I am enough for you! You’re lucky I brought you and Briana in, I didn’t have to do that you know. A righteous wife obeys her husband without question. Only a Pharisee would….?” I looked at my mom. My mother who took care of me, who I thought knew everything, who I once thought could take on the world— she looked so small.

It took my mother too long to leave my father behind. She wasn’t even the one who broke everything off. I don’t remember a time he wasn’t drunk. I don’t remember a night she didn’t cry while I hid from his rage. When he moved out, I often went to visit him. There was a woman at his house named Hilary. She was always there, and in my four-year-old mind, she was just Daddy’s friend. My mom learned of my dad’s affair from me, and it tore her apart. She could no longer cook for me because she couldn’t find the motivation to do so. I got to pick where I wanted to eat every night, and she ordered water and stopped engaging me in conversation. “Mommy what are you going to eat? I’m not going to finish my spaghetti. Here, try some,” I offered a helping of noodles to her and she said: “That’s okay sweetie I’ll eat something at home.” She never did.

One night I was helping her do dishes, one of my favorite things to do with my mom.

“Mommy I miss Daddy”, I said

“I know honey. I miss him too”
“Why did you make him leave us?”, I said through tears.

“I didn’t. I didn’t. I wanted him to stay as much as you do. He made that decision for himself. I’m so sorry” she responded through sobs.

We sat on the floor in front of the open dishwasher and cried. I looked at my mother who still took care of me even though she was sad, who still knew everything, who could still take on the world— she looked so small.

❖

My mom’s computer dinged; she had a new email. My heart stopped. He whipped his way back into the room, his gray hair bouncing with each step. Oh no… I thought.

“What was that?” His voice was unusually calm.

“Just an email from Bath and Body Works” my mom answered too quickly, “I signed up to get notifications on sales they have. It’s actually a really great deal…”

He then launched into a full interrogation. Was she going somewhere without him? What did she need from Bath and Body Works that he couldn’t give her? She really shouldn’t even have an email if he couldn’t trust her with one. Why was she on the internet anyway? Was she hiding something from him?… and it went on and on and on. I sulked into my room with my dog. We always laid together while they fought. I stroked his silky black fur while we sat on my bed and asked him: “Will it ever get better, Brew?” He turned his ears up and tilted his head to the side. I guess he didn’t know either.

One night my mom padded into my room while I was reading and sat on my bed. She seemed unusually solemn. “I’m going to get a Facebook account.” She said it with conviction, as if this was something that she would seriously need to discuss with me. I can imagine that any other
child might have laughed, or maybe they would’ve acted embarrassed. But I understood why this was a giant step for her. We both knew that there would be repercussions for this. But, right then, she didn’t care. She was breaking away from the constricting hold my stepfather had on her. And because she wasn’t allowed a job or any friends, I was the only person she could share the news with. I looked at my mother who took care of me, my mother who didn’t really know everything, my mother who was taking a step to take on her world— she didn’t seem so small.

I understood the words “drunk” and “alcoholic” at a very young age. I knew that alcohol made you sick, and my dad was really sick. On my scheduled visits with him he would drink, but I was used to that. It wasn’t all bad. We watched Star Wars together, and I enjoyed it until he fell asleep drunk, and when I would attempt to wake him up he would yell at me.

“Briana! I was sleeping, that was rude. Now, leave me alone”

“Daddy, I’m bored. Let’s play something.”

“Watch the movie” he said as he closed his eyes.

My poor mother was at a loss.

“Mommy, I don’t like going to Daddy’s. He drinks his beer and gets mean” I said with crocodile tears in my eyes.

“Baby, I know. Come here, let’s talk.” She sat me on her lap and told me: “Mommy and Daddy are in court right now. If you don’t go see him, I could get in a lot of trouble with the judge. If you don’t see him, he might take you away from me. Do you understand?”
I didn’t. I didn’t understand why I had to go see my dad, but I did understand that I didn’t want to be taken away from my mom. So every other weekend, I went. I watched Star Wars alone, and he slept. I didn’t try to wake him up again.

Things got so much better before they got worse. My dad was in rehab. My mom told me he was there to get better, and I was as happy as I’d ever been in my 5 years of life. When we went to go see him he looked so different, so much happier. He had so much more energy. I’d never seen my dad like this before. He was giving me attention, something I’d wanted from him for as long as I could remember. That time in my life was like a sigh of relief. I assumed my dad would come back home, and I kept asking him when he would come live with us again. He never answered me.

When he graduated from rehab, my life was turned upside down yet again. He went to live with Hilary, not us. I never saw him anymore. He knocked on our door one day and asked to see me. He pulled me outside and said:

“Daddy’s going far, far away, and you’re never going to see me again. I love you from the bottom of my heart, don’t forget that”.

“But where are you going? Why?” I said through tears

“Far, far away. I love you. Goodbye, Briana.”

I watched him drive away.

“I want to get a job. I’m lonely here. I’m by myself all day. I want to make some money so I can buy myself some makeup” my mom said this with hesitation, but she looked into my stepdad’s dead eyes and said it straight to his face. I still admire her initial confidence, but he reacted like he
usually did: by using the Bible to make her feel bad. No dutiful wife would ever want to work, and if she considered herself a righteous woman of God, she shouldn’t want to either.

“Do you realize what you’re asking?” He questioned her.

“I just want some extra money and I want to be around people. Please. I’m sad here by myself.” Her tone was pitiful.

“Oh, so I don’t make you happy? You spend more time with Briana than you do with me! A sinner, that’s all you are. You’ll be lucky if God has mercy on your soul. I gave you this life. You owe me. Where would you go without me? Huh? You’d be on the street is where you’d be. You should be thankful I ever took in a wretch like you…” I looked at my dog, and we started our walk to my room.

His words had a strong influence on my mother. She heard them every day and, soon enough, she believed them. Her days were spent on the couch. She stopped eating.

“Mom I’m making some mac and cheese. Do you want some? I can’t eat it all by myself.”

“No sweetie, I don’t think I can eat anything right now” was her consistent reply.

It felt like I was four years old again, trying to get her to eat some of my spaghetti. I looked at my mother, who no longer took care of me, who didn’t know anything, who couldn’t even take on my stepfather— she looked so small.



Years later my mom told me that she attempted to save her dead marriage with my father at the very end. She made a marriage counseling appointment and he agreed to come. He was late, but that wasn’t surprising. My mom was sitting on the couch in the counselor’s office; she was a pile of tears and dirty tissues. He walked in without looking at her and sat down.
The therapist asked: “What do each of you want from now moving forward?”

“I want to try and save this” my mom answered.

“And what do you want Patrick?”, said the therapist.

“I think it’s time I leave Lynn and Briana and make a new life for myself” my father answered.

The therapist told him to leave; my mom was a wreck. She told my mother in her fifteen years of counseling she had never seen that before. Maybe he felt a twinge of guilt, and that’s why he showed up at our door that night and told me he’d never see me again. I’m not sure, I never will be. But when my mom moved us away, I knew we were going to be okay.

My mom packed up all our things, and we moved in with her sister and my cousins. There were 6 of us total, crammed into a tiny trailer. The place reeked of dog piss and stale cigarettes, and it was far from clean, but my Aunt Lori cooked us dinner every night. I hated living in that box of a house, but I realized that that was what family was supposed to look like. My aunt didn’t make much money, but she brought us in and showed us unconditional love. Soon enough, my mom landed a decent job as an apartment manager; she was making enough money so we could move out of my aunt’s house. I got to help pick where we were going to live. I looked at my mother signing the papers to buy our house; my mother who was taking care of me, my mother who obviously still knew everything, my mother who I knew could take on the world— she looked so strong.

Later on, our lives molded into a routine. We were comfortable and stable. We started attending church and my mother found a single mom’s group she loved. That’s when she found the confidence to start dating. Her friends set up an online dating profile for her, and that’s when she found Dennis. A single man in Warsaw, Indiana. He would become my stepdad three months later.
The night we left my stepfather was the darkest night of my life. Everything was normal; I didn’t expect anything but the usual screaming for the night. It actually seemed like things were getting better for a bit. As a part of survival, humans adapt to their surroundings, and that’s what my mother and I did. We tried to make the best of the emotionally abusive situation we were in.

While she was cooking dinner, my stepdad was joking around with me. It was innocent enough. We were having a thumb war and he grabbed my arm.

“Ow that hurts”, I said through laughter, “Okay you’re really hurting me.”

He didn’t let go.

“Please stop, OW, please you’re hurting me” I begged.

My mom stepped in, “Dennis stop!” She ripped his arm off of mine.

What followed was the usual overreaction. He asked us if we were accusing him of child abuse and said, “What are you going to do, call the cops? They’ll never believe you”. To this day I don’t believe he meant to hurt me, but when he wouldn’t let go of me and he wouldn’t apologize, my anger began to simmer.

We had a prayer request book we passed around every night before dinner- a pitiful attempt by my mother to make things better. I was angry and passive aggressive, so I wrote down: “Pray for my arm”. When he saw what I wrote, what followed was a nightmare. He began screaming like I’ve never seen him scream before. He slammed his hands on the kitchen table; it seemed like the whole house shook. He towered over me and boomed “WHAT?! ARE YOU ACCUSING ME OF HURTING YOU?! THIS IS MY HOUSE AND YOU WILL RESPECT ME!” That’s when he raised his hand; I looked into his eyes and I saw pure rage. He’s going to hit me, I thought to myself.
My mom stepped in front of me and retaliated: “YOU WILL NOT SPEAK TO HER LIKE
THAT! GET AWAY FROM HER! STOP! I’M TIRED OF THIS!”, she turned to me, “Briana get
in the car.”

Sobbing, I ran to our rusty minivan. She got in the driver’s seat minutes later.

“Where are we going?” I asked in between sobs.

“I don’t know yet”, she sounded unsure but calm.

I looked at my mother who was taking care of me, my mother who didn’t know everything, my
mother who was taking on our world— she looked so righteous.
Put in a Box

Libbie Rammage

A toy store contains many gidgets, gadgets, and playthings. In one aisle, numerous types of vehicles, action figures, and Legos stock the shelves. In the next aisle over, pink Barbie dolls boxes sit next to glittery princess dresses and tiaras. A society contains many diverse mindsets, appearances, and people. In one gender, they must “be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability” (Adichie 26). In the other, it is expected they “shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (Adichie 27). There is no grey area, no middle aisle, in which the differing ideologies mix; these stereotypes, like the toys, are stuck in their own boxes.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s book *We Should All Be Feminists* shows that society needs to start thinking outside of these gender boxes. Today, the toys on those shelves have begun to do just that, most notably, Mattel’s Barbie dolls. The growth shown within the world of the boxed up blonde Barbie is drastic and influential, and it is one that can be used to jumpstart a movement and social change concerning women in society today.

By defining the distinct expectations and stereotypes of men and women, Adichie indirectly explains the concept of gender-boxes. She states that by teaching boys to hide who they truly are, it “stifles the humanity,” (Adichie 26) resulting in an extremely severe definition
of masculinity. Thus, a theory has been created to visualize this manliness; it called the man-box. Axe, a leading male grooming brand, wanted to verify modern day masculinity and help men in areas they needed it the most, reasoning that “a world of liberated men is a better place for everyone — both men and women” (Heilman et. al). They decided to run a report on masculinity in society today. The most important take away from this report is that they recognize that the Man Box, and the act of breaking out of it, does not happen solely with one man, or even one gender.

Referring to a “set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society that place pressure on men to be a certain way” (Heilman et. al), the Man Box contains seven main parts of this set of beliefs. For example, in order to be a real man, one must be self-sufficient, tough, physically attractive, abide by rigid gender roles, heterosexual, hyper-sexual, aggressive, and controlling (Heilman et. al). Again, this concept is also addressed in Adichie’s We Should All Be Feminists, yet she introduces it as a “disservice to boys in how we raise them” (26). From a young age, society teaches young boys to be mentally, physically, and emotionally hard. There is no room for the softness that being a human entails. Because of the lack of raw and true emotion in males, Adichie argues that men’s egos become extremely fragile and weak (27). The ego issue is to be solved, according to our society, by women.

In this way, the concept of a Woman Box also exists. Adichie argues that society does a larger disservice to girls because “we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males” (27). By making themselves smaller and shrinking, the male gender automatically feels more superior.
This is why men are normalized as people in power. Society also tells girls they can be strong, smart, and successful, but not too much so, as it intimidates, threatens, or emasculates the man (28). Women are placed in a box just as men are. The defining characteristics here are almost the opposite but have more definite guidelines; women need to be dependent on the man (but not clingy), soft (but not whiny), and sexy (but not slutty). Similar to the characteristics of the Man Box, women must also be physically attractive, abide by rigid gender roles, and be heterosexual. These definitions are culturally created gender stereotypes, and ones society needs to stray from.

Both Adichie and Axe’s report urge people to disregard these definitions and break out of the gender boxes. By stating that breaking out of the Man Box takes “everyone working together to change society’s narrow views about masculinity” (Heilman et. al), the report shows the ultimate goal for gender equality and social justice. Adichie also explains this need for social change. In her concluding remarks, her powerful words reflect on the gender stereotypes:

“Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture” (46). Both pieces of work explain that these gender boxes must be dismantled and broken out of.

Action on this social change has been taken in the form of Mattel’s perfect blonde doll, Barbie. By taking steps to dismantle the ideology of women being defined by this one example, this brand has begun to take baby steps in defying the Women Box stereotype. Barbie has been a household toy for many little girls since its creation but not without criticism of her unrealistic
body measurements and ethnocentric image. Recent years have shown changes in this. In January of 2016, Barbie introduced a line of 33 total new dolls with 4 body types, 7 skin tones, 22 eye colors, and 24 hairstyles (Pearson). Recognizing that women and girls do not come in one size or color, Barbie has now emulated this idea in their dolls. While steps are being taken to improve the physical stereotypes of women, there is a lot of work remaining, especially when it comes to women’s role in society.

Barbie has addressed this concept as well. In 2014, go-getter Barbie added a new career to her already expansive resume of over 150 careers: entrepreneur (Grinberg). The Women Box does not have a spot for powerful, intuitive women; this occupation goes against the expectations of aspects of a female. The hope is that this image of strong, hard-working females in positions of power becomes normalized, eliminating the stereotype that males are the typical CEOs or businessmen. Adichie gives an example of this issue in We Should All Be Feminists, telling of her American friend who took over a managerial position from a male predecessor, who had been a “tough go-getter...blunt and hard-charging and was particularly strict” (22). Adichie’s friend, imagining herself just as strict but a little kinder, took on the role with a more family-friendly aspect.

Because she was a female, this idea backfired on her. When reprimanded an employee on a forged timesheet, exactly as the previous manager would have done, the employee complained to higher people in power, stating she was “aggressive and difficult to work with” (22), and others explained they thought she would have brought “a women’s touch to the job, but she
hadn’t” (22). Adichie explains in simple terms that “it didn’t occur to any of them that she was doing the same thing for which a man had been praised” (23). While Barbie has made steps to reduce the stereotypical image of male-dominated power positions, it is now time for society to change their outlook as well.

By breaking out of gender boxes, the world can become a more equal place, one where men and women are set the same human expectations. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that there is a problem with gender stereotypes, and Barbie is slowly but surely breaking out of her boxes, but it now society’s job to change its mindset and all be feminists. As Adichie concludes on page 48, “All of us, men and women, must do better.” The two genders, like the two aisles in the toy store, must create a middle ground in order to truly break free from their packaging.
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From Dreaming to Living

Emily Horovitz

Sometimes I forget to breathe. My body finds itself tangled, hopelessly lost in the movement. My mind turns silent as something much deeper wins the battle for control. The world fades to a muddled background. I am free. Dance is my freedom. How can I explain a feeling? How can I possibly put into words this completely enigmatic experience, this pure contradiction? Dancing is both escaping life and fully embodying it. To dance is to dream.

I dream with my blistered feet, with my strained arms, my sore legs, my escaping breath. The studio is home to my dream. It is a whole other realm—detached from normal life. I feel the spring of the Marley-covered floor through my shoes as I enter the studio. I feel the cold air strike my skin as I remove my warm ups, air that I know will soon morph into a familiar mugginess and envelop me as the temperature rises and beads of sweat collect and trickle down my skin. Moisture accumulates on the barres and fogs the windows, protecting my dream from the interruptions of outside.

This is where all boundaries and impossibilities disappear, where my world simultaneously widens and narrows. It expands as rules vanish, shrinks as everything else loses significance.
My breath rises and lowers in slow motion. I can feel my lungs inflate with oxygen and my ribcage knit together as it contracts, the air escaping me and warming the room around me. This initiates movement that ripples through my body. Heat accompanies the movement and each muscle reacts to its adjacent partners, rearranging my bones almost involuntarily. It has begun—I have slipped in.

I start slowly as my body releases all the reminders of yesterday’s work. The satisfying pop of my hips on the first plié. The gentle cracking that crawls up my spine, vertebra by vertebra, as I cambré back. The pull of my Achilles and the stretch across my instep. It’s funny how soreness, a form of pain, has become such a comfort. I love the sensation of reawakening my tired body.

Each step is a familiar friend—has grown up with me, been by my side, been a part of me, since age four. Accumulated and strung together, they form a language—a language more innate than anything my mouth has ever spoken. Words are too limiting. No dictionary exists with sufficient pages to encompass the boundless range of expression I have discovered over the past fourteen years through dance.

But I am not the only one who has found this incredible freedom. My artform automatically connects me with other individuals, spanning the globe, who also consider dance to be their first language. Our dreams intertwine.

Several years ago, a girl who had just moved to North Carolina from Japan started taking
classes at my dance studio. Neither one of us ever shared a word that the other could comprehend, but we still became friends. I could tell that she was funny, dedicated, kind, and so wonderfully fearless. We communicated through a common bond, a shared jargon, like an inside joke between old friends.

Dance opened my eyes to this world of nonverbal communication, and subsequently introduced me to hundreds of fellow dreamers. In every class I am both a unique individual and a small portion of one body. As the preparation begins for the first combination at barre, I tune in to the breath of the class— the breath of my peers, my teacher, the walls, and the floor. The whole room inhales.

The years I have devoted to this art have taught me to recognize the subtle hints that precede a new motion. Through my peripheral vision, I spot a gentle rise in the chest and an extra degree or two in the tilt of the head. I know exactly what that means. It is as clear to me as the words, “Ready, and…,” but why waste the breath to speak when there is dancing to be done? We don’t need words when we share this dialect of our common dream.

Ballet is my meditation. It silences my thoughts. It’s my constant in this crazy and ever-changing world. I get to push aside all of the stress and anxiety of life. I no longer worry about the mistakes I made today or the stress tomorrow will bring. I get to forget the world. I can take a break from reality and find refuge in movement. I become the best version of myself when I dance.
If the studio is where I dream, the stage is where I live.

Everything has been building up to this. I have spent months rehearsing the pieces while the shows still seem so far away. Then, all of a sudden the day has snuck up on me, and somehow it is here. When I wake up, I don’t feel nervous or excited—I just feel numb. The performance day routine is ingrained in my body. I am barely aware of the tasks I am completing.

It doesn’t feel like performance day, but it smells like it. The aroma is this mix of cheap stage makeup, heavy-duty hairspray, and worn pointe shoes. I slick my hair back into the picturesque “ballet bun,” secured against my scalp with countless bobby pins. I cake foundation on my face and layer a myriad of shades of eyeshadow. I draw and redraw and reredraw the wings of my eyeliner, and I glue on fake eyelashes that feel more like butterflies fluttering on my eyelids. I head to the stage for a warm-up class. The air is dry. The metal barres are cold. The class moves by so quickly, and it feels more like I am watching it happen than actually participating. Class ends, and I walk back to the dressing room and slide my feet into perfectly worn-in pointe shoes. I carefully selected this exact pair nearly a month ago and haven’t worn them since. I say a little prayer that they are still “perfect.”

I cross my ribbons and momentarily remember a younger version of myself dreaming of the day I would get to tie up my pointe shoes. I hear the fifteen minute call over the intercom. Still no nerves. I sew the pointe shoe ribbons to my tights, remembering the threats of my
director warning against loose ribbons on stage. I pin in my headpiece, which somehow has this magical power of transforming me into my character. I take one last deep breath before my friend snaps up my bodice, restricting the amount of air I can inhale until after the show. I hear the five minute call. Still no nerves. I go back stage. There is a box filled with large rocks of rosin, which I apply to my pointe shoe satin in the hope that it will help prevent me from slipping. I step on the rocks and they crunch into a fine powder under the platform of my shoe. I hear the two minute call. The whole company has gathered on stage. We link pinkies in a circle and say “merde” to one another. This is ballet’s version of “break a leg.” I love this tradition. I feel unified and empowered and excited, but still no fear. Places. The call is places. I go to my wing. The overture begins.

All at once, my body fills with nerves. I feel sick. The boom lights brighten. They are blinding. My stomach flips. What if I fall? What if I blank out? There is no more time for “what ifs.” I watch as the backstage crew pulls the ropes. I clench my eyes shut and reopen them. The curtain is rising. I shake my hands and feet one at a time. This is it. There is no way out; I have to dance.

I step on stage and it’s just me. There is no audience. There is no fear. I get to live. But this is not ordinary living. It is relishing in the biggest adrenaline rush imaginable and savoring every last second of it. It is leaving everything I have and everything I am sprawled across the ground. When I finish a performance, I am both the wholest form of myself and broken pieces on
the floor. A good performance is exceptionally satisfying, yet completely draining.

I am addicted to dance. I cling to the impossible goal of perfection, and I crave the feeling of performing. I cannot imagine my life without it. It is how I get through my day. It is what I look forward to. Dance is my home. No matter where I am, dance always feels familiar. It grounds me. It is where I find myself and where I lose myself.

I step into the wing and it is over. While I was on stage, time moved in slow motion. Every second felt like minutes, and now that it is done, it feels like it flew by in a blink. I am left with an emptiness in my stomach. I am not sure if it is because I am drained from performing or because the rush left me craving more.

As life moves on past performance day, it becomes clear that the void is not exhaustion—it is desire. It is the need to return to the stage, to experience the rush, the adrenaline, the freedom.

So I spend nearly every day at the studio, dedicating hundreds of hours to meditating and preparing so that I might have the privilege to experience that feeling again, even if only briefly. I step onto the sprung Marley and place my hand on the wooden barre. I forget to breathe, I get lost in the movement—I welcome the freedom of dance as my body begins to move and my mind slips into a new dream.
Art's Beautiful Power

_Jack Fuller_

Science is a system. A system that describes the natural world humanity resides in so that they can better understand the complexity of it. The goal of science is to express the truth of the world in the form of compact theories and equations based on observation and experimentation. Day by day, science is becoming more and more precise, but some people are incapable of understanding aspects of science because it describes unimaginably complex phenomena. In John Timpane's essay, "The Poetry of Science", he states, "If science explicates the surprising, complex, undreamed of truth, poetry [art] enacts the full impact of that truth on the human consciousness."

Art communicates in a way science cannot. Through poetry, brush strokes, rhythm and other artistic devices, the arts connect with the human mind to translate complex topics, such as the independence and dependence of pure and applied mathematics, space phenomena, the nature of humans, or the chaos theory, in a more relatable and easy-to-understand form.

Condensing the overwhelming complexities of the world, such as space and time, into simpler definitions and equations is a way to cope with the chaos around them. Humans have been working on understanding the universe for as long as they have been around. This sense of wonder and desire to know is how science has evolved into what it is today. Alan Lightman is a scientist and writer that has explored this evolution of wonder within the human conscience. He describes science to be "another human language" which defines the natural world (Lightman, 80). Any language is difficult to master. Therefore, it makes sense that science is difficult to comprehend for people unfamiliar with it, but even a slight understanding of this language can fulfill one's desire to
understand. Alan Lightman's book, A Sense of the Mysterious, is a great source for those unfamiliar with science to gain some appreciation and understanding of how it works.

In A Sense of the Mysterious, Lightman describes the generalities of science, such as the independence and dependence contained in pure mathematics and science. Some mathematicians realize that "the powdery chalk on their blackboards is all they want of material reality," thus, to them, the world of pure mathematics exists alone: independent (Lightman, 67). A physics major may spend a large amount of time becoming familiar with the world of pure mathematics. But to be a physicist, one must be curious as to how the imaginary world of pure mathematics congeals into the real world. Their work furthers the language of the universe: science. One example of the process of application in physics is Newton's invention of Calculus "to aid his study of motions, the velocities and accelerations of pendulums and planets" (Lightman, 68). One could choose to study Calculus alone, but Newton furthered the understanding of the natural world through the use of Calculus' equations and formulas.

Though applied mathematics are used to understand some of the most complex and undreamed realities of the world, they are also used by everyone daily. For example, when children count their fingers, they are using algebra to understand their bodies. When people take shortcuts on their way to work, they are applying math into their lives for efficiency.

The reliance between pure and complex for existence is a theme that is seen in many scientific novels. It appears in The Complete Cosmicomics, by Italo Calvino. In the chapter, "Without Colours", two characters, Qfwfq and Ayl, argue over which is beautiful: the colorful or the colorless. Qfwfq's interest in color is a metaphor for the interest in complexity and applied mathematics, while Ayl's desperation for the colorless mirrors the need for simplicity and pure mathematics. Although, the characters are very different, the one that adores complexity falls in love
with the one that desires purity. This replicates the dependence of applied mathematics to pure mathematics.

The dependence and independence of something pure and something applied extends beyond mathematics. All pure ideas or states of being in the world are only pure because complexity exists, and vice versa. This statement proves that there is a dependence by each thing to everything else in order to exist. In the poem "The Leaves of a Dream are the Leaves of an Onion" by Arthur Sze, he expresses this dependence of all things to one another. He says that "a Galapagos turtle has nothing to do with the world of the neutrino" and states that other seemingly irrelevant things have nothing to do with each other (Sze, 130). Then he says, "No. The invention of the scissors has everything to do with the invention of the telescope" (Sze, 130). He follows this statement with more comparisons of random things. The purpose was to influence the reader to feel as though everything is connected. For example, interests may vary from person to person, as seen in the differing personalities in "Without Colours", but without these separate interests, society would lack the variety of attributes which the diversity of people fulfills. For example, a sales company requires accountants, salesmen, managers, etcetera in order to function, just as applied mathematicians require pure mathematicians to function. Art can better explain this than science due to its freedom in ways of explaining. Art can explain through a fictional story, such as The Complete Cosmicomics, through paintings, through music, or through poetry, such as "The Leaves of a Dream..."

Phenomena in space can be difficult to understand due to its infinite size and long history, but poetry and literature provide a key to understand the universe through the use of imagery. The Complete Cosmicomics is brilliantly creative and paints a realistic image of the universe through its fictional plotline of humanoid characters. This book describes many unimaginable truths that science explicates, including the big bang and the nothingness that existed before. In the chapter
"Nothing and Not Much", the main character, Qfwfq, experiences the instant the big bang occurred -- the moment the universe was created. An infinitely dense atom exploded into the universe that has expanded into what it is now. Nobody knows what this event looked like, but scientists have concluded that far more occurred in this fraction of a second than in the billions of years succeeding it. Qfwfq's imagery of this moment helps to illustrate the beauty of this moment. He says:

"to tell everything that happened in the first second of the history of the universe, I should have to put together an account so long that the whole subsequent duration of the universe... would not be enough; whereas everything that came afterwards I could polish off in five minutes" (Calvino, 377).

In the language of science, this complex topic would be incredibly difficult to picture, but through Calvino's description, any common man or woman can imagine the incredible power of the big bang.

Qfwfq speaks about a time before the bang when there was nothing: no science, no life, no light. He says that the only thing existing was "an infinitesimal pimple in the smoothness of nothing" which eventually would explode into our universe (Calvino, 76). The character has difficulty describing the nothingness that came before because, though he was there, he did not "exist". Calvino uses Qfwfq's difficulty explaining what was before to insinuate that it is impossible to know what happened before the big bang. Science can only translate truth of the world, but art has no bounds to what can be enacted. Therefore, art can describe infinite possibilities of what came before the big bang, but science cannot say anything about what came before because there are no facts. Artists play with this unknowingness and create stories based purely off the wonder of what could have been.
McNeill's poem, "Flaming Forth the Worlds", is another piece of art describing the big bang. She wrote, "one utter density, lost as a seed, but concentrated down to heaviness and potency, its weight hung in the virgin night, and outward burst, and burst again and farther, bursting still..." (McNeill, 23). She encapsulates the reader in the outward expansion of the universe while expressing the beauty of the moment through carefully chosen diction. The ability of literature to enact a moment or concept, such as the big bang, is what allows literature to spread understanding to a broader audience than science can. The reader can use the descriptions in literature as a model to think about when attempting to further understand difficult topics.

Human nature is a topic to which all humans can relate. Science describes human nature through the functionality of the human brain, hormones, the nervous system, etcetera. Human beings are extremely complex, and even though they exist as humans, they may not fully understand humanity. Much of literature is centered around mankind and their actions. Lucretius was a philosophical thinker around 50 BC. He wrote a book called De Rerum Natura, which expressed his observational reasoning about the universe, motion, and human nature. In his explanation of human nature, Lucretius describes mankind as applying constant effort to their evolution. For example, he says that language "must have been a collective venture, with one and another adding words and then phrases that came into common usage" (DRN, V 912-913). Although science provides a detailed explanation of how man thinks, why man acts, and what mankind is, De Rerum Natura goes a step further and causes the reader to reimagine the whole human development.

The focus of mankind to improve themselves is captured in The Complete Cosmicomics. Calvino explains that as the human timeline develops, the past is less and less comprehensible. He states, "Our destiny lay in more, more and more, and we couldn't think, even fleetingly, of less" (Calvino, 377). Because mankind has only ever known complexity, it will never be capable of even a
slight comprehension of the pure nothingness of the void prior to big bang. He even says that as we develop there is "an underlying insecurity in this excitement, a craving almost to cancel out the shadow of our so recent origins" (Calvino, 377). Through specific diction, Calvino captures the "insecurity" certain people might feel because they will never be able to understand what took place before. This ability to influence the reader's emotion can only occur in art. The enactment of a character with feelings causes a reader to feel those same feelings for the same reasons, in this case due to unknowingness.

Another scientific topic explained further through art is the chaos theory. This is the idea that the accumulation of all chaos shapes each moment of our existence. This is a major subject discussed in the play Arcadia, by Tom Stoppard. A character, named Valentine, compares the cooling of hot tea to the universe. As chaos continues to shape the future, heat is released and cannot be returned, thus one day it will cool. Valentine explains that when the universe cools, it will be doomed. He soon after says that "if this is how we started, perhaps it's how the next [world] will come" (Stoppard, 82). In this play, there are two different plotline threads, a present and past, that converge. The present individuals are meant to represent the "next world", born from the same chaos and being shaped by the same chaos. By using the individuals as a metaphor for the chaos theory, Arcadia provides multiple ways to achieve a higher level of understanding about this difficult theory. Upon understanding the chaos theory, the reader may begin to have realizations about it, such as the fact that time cannot be reversed because the heat lost cannot be returned.

This idea regarding chaos is similar to K.C. Cole's description of wind in Mind Over Matter. She describes Wind to be affecting everything. For example, "The universe began when the Big Bang blew space and time into being; that wind of ever-expanding space still blows, sweeping distant galaxies farther away from us, maybe even picking up speed" (Cole, 85). This mirrors the chaos
theory. Cole describes everything to be wind, just as the chaos theory describes everything to be chaos. Cole says that everything creates wind, even roast beef creates a "wind" of aroma and a glacier creates a "wind" of ice. She says, "the winds of dying stars create some of the most beautiful objects in the sky: planetary nebulae" (Cole, 84). This mirrors the idea Valentine, in Arcadia, suggests when he describes how all things are created from chaos, thus the next world may come from chaos, or "wind".

Both Arcadia and Mind Over Matter discuss the complicated idea that all existence occurs because of what occurred in the past. This is similar to the idea discussed earlier that all things in existence, whether complex or simple, depend on one another, but it goes a step farther by saying all things that have ever existed impact one another. Science has explained this concept in the form of the chaos theory; however, these pieces of literature make these topics easier to understand and certain people may find it more interesting to learn about the theory in the form of literature. Arcadia creates a story to which reader can relate to and feel the truth of the chaos theory, while Mind Over Matter explains this theory in a way that is easy to understand and uses imagery to create a deeper understanding.

The existence of both Science and Art is important because the combination of the two provide for a wider acceptance and understanding of the topics, such as the interdependence of all things, space phenomena, the nature of humans, or the chaos theory. Without Art, science would only impact those willing to put in the effort to study sciences. The combination of the two molds a mankind that is more knowledgeable of the natural world.
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Utopian Suggestion

Frannie Peabody

Utopia is restaurant choosing.

Everyone is always losing.

With your family you convene

to pick a place to eat the best cuisine.

Everyone makes informed decisions

based on what works best for themselves and their own visions.

Without a doubt the thoughts are in a divide,

the evening is in danger because of everyone’s pride.

The utopian parallel comes into play,

when Mom steps in to say,

“We are just going to stay home to eat.”

Everyone is faced with defeat.

The same is true in utopian societies.

The reason is because people come in all different varieties.

There is no possible way for everyone to be in accord.

However, something that we can all work toward

is greater communication and appreciation

As well as mutual respect and cooperation

With these things a restaurant can be selected

As well as a utopia can be expected.
Cultural Transgression and Subversion: The Abject Slasher Subgenre

Aisha Bab

“Horror film hates women. I have concluded that there is no other explanation for the explicit and cold-hearted treatment of women and the female body in fictional stories.” This is how I began my very first informal writing assignment. I began by expressing blatant exasperation after only one movie and roughly two classes discussing the gender binary. “I literally don’t know what this is supposed to reflect,” I complained. I wrestled with the pragmatic part of me that generally feels the need to attribute everything to some secular purpose or meaning, but instead, what I found was myself at a loss for explanation. Granted, of course, my claims were premature. I was only just beginning to become aware of the abusive role the slasher-horror genre plays in the sustenance of the gender binary. But, now, filled with more coherent and comprehensive knowledge on the topic, I am stuck competing theories. It is a question that has plagued me since that first writing assignment: why do people watch horror? It seems insufficient to relegate the answer to some carnal desire to see guts and gore. Sure, on the surface, those attributes particular to the genre possess their own distinct appeal, but I now believe that there is another reason we indulge in a subgenre that is literally popular for its repetitive and predictable storylines. How does that one phrase go? If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all? How appropriate.

In general, slasher film partly has a bad rap for its characteristically foreseeable plot, plot twists, climaxes, and resolutions. It is quite rare that the subgenre strays from that characteristic because most of its movies tend to pay homage to iconic classics, or feature prominent themes from older films. Although, still, Sarah Trencansky and Jody Keisner both agree that the chief reason for
its being labeled as “hyper-sensational low culture art” is primarily due to its consistently poor depiction of targeted female victims (Keisner 421). Not to mention, excessive murder or torture stamp the horror genre so it is regularly dubbed over-the-top, as well as a grueling experience to sit through particularly for older age groups. Then, there are the concerning, yet staple tropes of the subgenre such as the seemingly obligatory air of rampant misogyny, an uncanny tendency to punish any sexual deviance, and the troubling ‘Final Girl’ archetype (coupled with the excluded ‘Other’) which also exist. So, it becomes fairly easy to see what critics of the genre are able to point to if one wanted to criticize slasher-horror’s vices. However, just like relegating the reason for watching horror to a frivolous desire for carnage, it seems impetuous to subject slasher to the “bottom of the horror heap” (Clover 20), undeserving of any real academic interpretation or critical consideration due to these qualities. Slasher films have importance as cultural texts in part because of their “firmly entrenched status as ‘outsider’ cinema” (Trencansky 64). Dismissing these films as low culture is too simplistic. It glosses over the issues that films in general have the ability to highlight in ways that only film can. But, alas, I cannot completely criticize this viewpoint because prior to studying the components and cultural implications of slasher-horror, I, too, was guilty of having regarded the genre as superficial, silly, and quite frankly, undeserving of any real academic interpretation. But, just like my rash conclusions of horror film’s depiction of women, this, too, deserved to be revaluated.

In “Do You Want to Watch?”, Jody Keisner explores the thesis that (horror) movies are narratives in that they tell us about ourselves by exploring perceptions of reality. Of course, it is certainly odd to invite the idea that there could be anything even remotely real (or even theoretically) worth reflecting in slasher-horrors because of the simple fact that they are so cruel. However, this is exactly where the slasher-horror film meets postmodernism. Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes, “Postmodern horror constructs a nihilistic universe in which causal logic collapses and one cannot rely on the efficacy of science or authority figures” (5). It includes the usual abject ‘Other’ who
threatens a social order; it occurs in a world where the likeliness of survival is contingent upon how privy and different a character is to previously determined unacceptable societal norms; and it erases binary logic by blurring the lines between good and evil, real and not real. All of these attributes of postmodern horror exist so as to create an environment where all order seems to be thrown out of the window. It ends up that the audience’s only connection to some modicum of normalcy is flaunted through the characters’ suddenly brazen—and questionable—survival instincts.

Pinedo emphasizes that postmodernism is tricky because it involves the transgressing of genres and an “aggressive blurring of boundaries” (10), hence resulting in the creation of a general “incoherence” (14). Yet, perhaps this may be why it thrives so well in the horror universe—because what better place to have oddity and to indulge in abject impulses (and furthermore, reflect something in ourselves) than in a genre where it is already the norm and actually expected? In other words, it becomes safe to entertain generally deemed unacceptable feelings and anchor it in something fictional. As English professor Mark Edmundson explains: “The [horror film] ... gathers up anxiety that is free-floating in the reader or viewer and binds it to a narrative. Thus the anxiety is displaced and brought under temporary, tenuous control” (Keisner 413). Consider it a cathartic release?

The best example of a film that utilized all of the elements of postmodern horror and its generally low culture status, tinkered with it, and generated a multimillion dollar cult classic can only be known as Scream. In 111 minutes, Wes Craven’s 1996 slasher movie managed to reinvent several significant horror tropes and became responsible for helping to inspire a new wave of slasher-horror films. A little bit prior to the mid-1990s and Scream’s release, teen slasher’s popularity had waned considerably after the success of movies like Friday the 13th and A Nightmare on Elm Street. Tired was the genre’s formulaic nature and excessive repetition; audiences had grown bored and
overfamiliar with its plots (of course ironic because the audience’s familiarity of its conventions is partially what made it popular in the first place). Dimension chief Bob Weinstein explained that just prior to Scream’s 1996 release, “There were no movies being made for teenagers. It had become an adult-oriented business. I knew there was an audience that was not being satisfied” (Wee 53).

Additionally, by the mid-1990s in the real world, America was standing witness to the sudden rise in spending power by its teens. Teenagers craved a way to assert their independence and found what better way to do so than by establishing a distinct economic presence. However, Weinstein knew that “media obsessed,” as well as “pop culture literate, extremely self-aware and cynical,” this new and perfectly viable niche market “would never accept a mere retread of the old genre” (Wee 54). “Furthermore,” Valerie Wee adds, “while the previous conventional target audience for slasher films was adolescent boys, in the mid-1990s, adolescent girls were emerging as the more significant film-going demographic” (54). Rom-coms such as William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (1996) and Clueless (1995) grossed well over $40 and $50 million each and revealed that there was a new audience to be considered if a film desired success. It was these social changes which signaled that, for movie producers and directors looking to find a gold mine amongst an audience, there was no better time to cater to the freshly exposed and eager age group.

There is undoubtedly a certain charm to the 1996 Scream movie that even its sequels and imitators could not quite capture. In order to reinvent the genre, Wes Craven and screenwriter Kevin Williamson decided they needed to create a film that would comment on the genre’s highly formulaic nature (and low culture status) while also playing off of its established traditions (Wee 54). Of course, this was chiefly done with the help of postmodern elements. As stated previously, postmodernism exists as an unstable, paranoid universe. It exudes pluralism and cultural diversity; it is one in which “traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall
into question, Enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates” (Pinedo 11).

Scream has a similar plot to most other slasher films by featuring an unknown killer who terrorizes a small town. The slight difference, though, is that in Scream, the characters/victims have seen slasher films before. Several times do the teenagers in the movie demonstrate their knowledge on the tropes of the genre (thus indicating self-awareness similarly to their young viewer demographic). And second, the movie also breaks down the cultural divide between high and low art as Edvard Munch’s avant-garde expressionist painting “The Scream” is reimagined by Craven and Williamson in a mainstream slasher film. Then, quite notably, the film hints at a particularly reprehensible blurring of reality and fiction first when Ghostface spurs copycats in his wake; and second, when the boys behind his identity, Stu and Billy, explain that they learned everything they know from the horror films they watch. It appears that Craven and Williamson knew they would be catering to an audience of cinephiles and sudden fandom craze which meant that if they wanted to satisfy their viewers, it would mean enhancing the conventions of the genre and updating their content.

Nevertheless, it was not just postmodernism’s guiding themes that contributed to the film’s reinvention and ultimate success. The film can also be recognized for its integration of social issues into its plot. Valerie Wee argues that the film’s reconsideration of the slasher villain helped to reshape the genre and offered “interesting insights into contemporary social and cultural concerns and ideologies” (54).

It is typical of slasher-horror to depict its villains as “indestructible beings who seem able to be everywhere and do anything” (Gill 24). More often than not, the wretched monster will
transgress binary logic by ignoring the boundaries that separate living from dead, human from supernatural, male from female, et cetera . . . Craven and Williamson decided to do away with this tradition by gracing its viewers with very mortal villains and added mystery. In Scream, the identity behind the masked villain is not immediately known to the audience. In fact, the audience is in the same boat as the movie’s victims as they all come to find out the identity of the killer together. Once the identity is revealed, it becomes all the more shocking that the killers! were someone from the “inside” rather than the “outside.” This time, the ‘Other’ are attractive, popular, and seemingly normal people. Instead of being the “marginalized monsters” such that of Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers, the killers are revealed to be an evil within (Wee 55). To Wee, this reinterpretation of the villain to be indecipherable amongst a group of friends seemed particularly “contemporary and relevant” in the midst of incidents of high school violence occurring across the country in real life (55). As Trencansky explains, “Each decade embraces the monsters that speak to it: If the villains of popular late 1990s slashers are embraced by the adolescents today, perhaps it is because, in a culture of sudden random violence, exemplified in the school shootings that originate from one of their own, a villain that looks just like them makes sense” (73).

So, indeed, the movie captured the evil within essence that plagued the time period it stood in, however it went further than offering its viewers a potentially recognizable and terrifyingly familiar villain. Its portrayal of the seemingly ordinary teen turned serial killer (with no clear motive!) is a direct commentary on the demons that impacted actual teen life in the wake of such senseless violence in American schools (Wee 55). Therefore, Scream can be recognized for offering its viewers a form of cathartic release by exploring very real fears and paranoia rampant at the time.

This instance of slasher-horror alluding to actual fears is not the only indication that slasher-horror was reacting to contemporary cultural issues either. Take, for example, the increased desire of
self-fulfillment, individual growth, and a newfound “obligation to the self,” which contributed to the skyrocketing divorce rate in the 1960s (Gill 18). Family dynamics were shifted in favor of adults and adolescents seemed to suffer the most in effect. But, television shows such as The Brady Bunch (1969-1974) emerged offering an early example of a blended family working their way through the mild adversity of stitching their families together. Plenty of viewers were dealing with similar situations at the time, also trying to figure out how to join families from disparate parts. Naturally, of course, though, slasher film rejected this ode to comfortability and continued depicting parental ignorance and teen torment. In fact, Pat Gill noticed the delight that slasher film seemed to take in undoing the comfortable and supportive domestic life depiction of the television era, and regressing it to a weak and neglectful family structure. In slasher-horror, authority figures and anything associated with it are depicted negatively. Family is more often a hindrance than a help (A Nightmare on Elm Street), law enforcement proves ridiculously ineffective (Scream), and surviving requires transgressing into and adopting dreaded adult-like characteristics (Gill 22). Slasher films typically see teenagers struggling to survive on their own without adult help or interference. To Gill, this is an indication of the absence of “the family as a resource for coping with growing up” (19). Therefore, the (absent) role of family in slasher, and the consequential inclination of its teens being drawn to fulfill parental roles throughout in order to survive, mirrors a genuine fear of the generation, and the slasher subgenre can be recognized for projecting real cultural issues into its plot.

Moreover, through Sarah Trencansky’s analysis of the Final Girl in early 1980s slashers such as A Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the 13th, she hypothesizes that the slasher that is popular for a specific time period may actually speak to the interests and fears of that particular generation. For example, using 1980s slasher film’s deviation from the original script of the controversial Final Girl archetype, she argues that its divergent path from “renaissance”-like films of the 70s is an
indication of the genre subverting mainstream expectations (which further highlights the genre’s cultural complexity and importance) (Trencansky 64). 1990s slashers such as Scream and I Know What You Did Last Summer are typically lauded for taking slasher in a new direction while its previous decade is regularly wholly dismissed (Trencansky 64). However, Trencansky contends that the 1980s cannot be ignored for it also reinvented a fundamental theme in slasher . . . and what’s more is that it did so in “an era pathologically affirming conservative family values” (73).

Carol Clover explained how the classic Final Girl character seemed to transition from “passive defense” particularly in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), to that of “active defense” in Halloween (1978) just a few short years later (Trencansky 64). Trencansky noticed this evolution further sustain itself in films such as Friday the 13th (1980) and A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984). In these films, the Final Girl is remarkable for her “unflinching determination and strength” (Trencansky 64): where 1970 slasher films depict her as a character mechanically going through the motions necessary to survive, 1980s slashers also keep up with this, but the grander fight for female agency in general more noticeably dominates the narrative. For example, it is typical of the male role in cinema to drive the plot forward; they are the “active” ones, the ones that “advance the story, making things happen” (Mulvey 163). In A Nightmare on Elm Street, that role is “systematically reversed” (Trencansky 67). If Freddy represents the indispensable character of the film who retains most of the power, it is Final Girl Nancy who ultimately gets to “decide how and when the story will end” (Trencansky 67). She proves her cunningness and competence by setting traps for him around her house that he consistently falls victim to. She also learns to control when Freddy can appear either by withholding sleep or inducing it in order to initiate their final battle. Through this, the Final Girl represents a female heroine that refuses to stand secondary or passive to her counterpart.
Additionally, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze is inverted in these early 1980s films to afford its female heroines greater jurisdiction over the narrative. Trencansky explains, “The Final Girl, far from being viewed as a passive ... object, is instead the viewer’s identifying connection to the film” (67). Due to her agency, vigor, and (feminized) gallantry, she is embodied as “the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego” (Mulvey 163). Thus, the audience is encouraged to vicariously live through her and eventually succeed through the film. Trencansky even further points out that the killer’s point-of-view camera technique present in Halloween is absent in the Nightmare films (67). “If anyone in the films is truly the object of the viewer’s gaze, it is the monsters,” says Trencansky (67). Freddy’s and Jason’s monstrous and arresting figures are “looked at and displayed” (Mulvey 162). Freddy’s ugly burned skin is regularly paused on at length, making viewing him all the more uncomfortable. Jason remains masked until his monstrous face is revealed at the climax of the films, what Trencansky calls the “virtual equivalent of a mainstream film’s nude scene” (67). When this scrutiny at their bodies is “extended” to promotional posters of the film, the transference of the greater desire to gawk at the Other more than the female body is accomplished (Trencansky 67).

And lastly, on the same token of not submitting to patriarchal notions, the theme of the Final Girl or female heroine in slasher film being desexualized in order to “subvert their femininity” is absent—unlike Halloween—in the Nightmare series (Trencansky 67). Besides arguably becoming “boyish” (Clover 40) by likening herself to “masculine interests” (Clover 48), the Final Girl of the 1980s is slightly remodeled to not only retain these typical characteristics, but this time, she is granted her sexuality. In the Nightmare on Elm Street series, Final Girls Nancy and Alice are allowed love interests with Alice even becoming pregnant in Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child; Lisa of Nightmare 2 and Kristen of Nightmare 3 die but are still allowed their sexuality as well (Trencansky 67). So, although horror is regularly criticized for featuring female
nudity, 1980s slasher film began the transformation of the Final Girl or female character being allowed to retain her sexuality. A Nightmare on Elm Street rejected the typical female role and decided to place its concerns elsewhere, beyond the purview of punishing sexual deviance.

Therefore, through slasher film’s reimagining of the Final Girl in the 1980s and its reconsideration of the villain in the 1990s, it becomes clear that the genre has undergone transformations in order to stay relevant to its changing viewership. When very real fears of a hidden evil amongst an unsuspecting few were lurking beneath the waters across the nation, slasher validated teenagers’ angsts by anchoring them in fiction. Ultimately, Scream’s refreshing deconstruction of the subgenre’s conventions and the insertion of tongue-in-cheek intertextual and self-reflexive comments were revitalizing, and also helped to successfully establish it in the realm of postmodernism. Furthermore, as Sarah Trencansky pointed out, the 1980s was quite a time to try to establish a refined role for female characters reclaiming their sexuality and asserting their dominance. The political climate at the time was very much conservative, yet she argues that the Final Girl of the 1970s was remodeled in the 80s in order to “provoke ideas often left unstated in more exalted texts” (Trencansky 73). So, it seems that for a genre that is regularly dismissed as “the most disreputable form of the horror film,” it can be credited for going where other particularly more esteemed genres did not wish to go (Pinedo 71). This can attest to slasher-horror’s flexibility which allows it to mold itself to either be a positive or (usually) negative commentary on the times surrounding it. And besides, is that not the goal of film in the first place? To challenge institutions and illustrate what we may or may not yet be ready to consider? Indeed, it appears that horror movies have become postmodern in part because of this. Their exploring and questioning of reality pushes viewers to consider their own notions of what is real. Trencansky elucidates, “Reality for youth is a daily life-or-death struggle, and the nihilism inherent in these films is expressed by the dark, gloom-filled dream
So, the question may be asked again: why do people watch horror? It makes us scream, squeal, hide, nauseous, nervous, anxious, and frightened. In a way, we are obsessed with watching movies that kill us literally and figuratively. Some people may actively seek those feelings, others may not. However, regardless of the feelings people pursue when watching horror, I believe that the more neutral explanation lay in its refusal of ‘normal’ and binary codes, and more exceptionally in its acceptance of the opposite within its narrative. To quote myself earlier, dismissing these films as low culture is too simplistic. Slasher films have importance as cultural texts in part because of their “firmly entrenched status as ‘outsider’ cinema” (Trencansky 64). Thus, it is manifested as an anomaly: just like the malformed, unnatural and deviant monster in its films, horror blurs boundaries and mixes categories; it violates the taken-for-granted “natural” order. Just as the infamous shower scene in Psycho—which was iconic for it presented a shock value that was previously not portrayed in horror film—indicates, slasher films possess the power to drive new narratives forward, stimulating change and inspiring discussion. So, ironically enough, it would seem that after all, it is through slasher film’s undermining of institutions and exploration of what is abject that it becomes welcome in a considerably all-too-complacent culture.
Works Cited


Until December 2016, I had never met the man that cleaned the bathrooms of Bad Daddy’s Burger Bar. Having been a frequent visitor of both the establishment and of public restrooms, however, I was very familiar with his work. The walls of the bathroom were adorned with the wonted black and white pictures of women from decades prior and assorted signs placed haphazardly, finished in wood as the entire restaurant was. I had even seen him performing the task once, providing me the only small glimpse into an even smaller part of this man’s world. At the time, I didn’t speak to him, and his presence didn’t remotely cross my mind as I washed my hands, the cleanliness of which has always been important to me. After all, the hands are essentially the eyes of the arms. I’m sure he didn’t notice me either, I was one of hundreds of patrons that frequented the eatery on a daily basis. As we contemporaneously existed, it was as if we were not in the same place.

My soccer career had come to an unceremonious terminus thirteen years prior at the age of four. Disinterested in a sport in which I could not use the hands that I was so fond of, releasing as much energy as possible became my primary objective. While basking in the glory that was my emancipated sprint of passion, I would be corrected, told to run towards the ball instead of away from it, to at least try to kick it. The indoor field on which the exhibitions took place, surrounded by boards and nets, was reminiscent of a prison, the existence of which I had only recently become aware. It was no wonder then, that I was more interested in the frosty that my father would always share with me after games, or the latest episode of whatever TV show it was that I had recorded that
night. With my mind elsewhere, and no intention of ever making what could be described as a soccer move, I quickly moved on to other sports and on to other things.

Both Bad Daddy’s Burger Bar and XI Soccer World were located in the town in which my childhood resided. Cary, North Carolina is predominantly white and is exclusively upper-middle class. Grocery stores seem to outnumber people there, the parking lots of which inherently bounteous with Mercedes-Benzes, Audis, and BMWs. Every road in Cary is freshly paved, and every building is pristine. The vast majority of the population is in their homes by 10 p.m., and crimes are virtually unheard of there, so in our minds the town belonged to us at night.

The hyperboreanesque wind late on the night of December 23, 2016 prompted the removal of my shirt, for the sole purpose of deviating from the expected attire given the weather. Driving for its own sake, blasting Kidz Bop on its intended maximum volume, onlookers may have mistaken us for annoyances, but we didn’t care. Entering the retail shopping center of Park West Village to check on the made-up parking garage college that had been so cleverly dubbed Park West University, we drove by the adjoining Bad Daddy’s Burger Bar to exit. The parking lot was normally empty at this hour, but tonight it wasn’t. As we approached, however, the image of people, not cars, filled the space. Under the brightly lit parking lot lights, were all of the employees of Bad Daddy’s, more recognizable as we approached. Spread out among a hundred yards or so, they were contained by a dumpster on one side and a rather large cardboard box on the other. A soccer ball lay betwixt them, constantly in motion as they aimed for the makeshift goals on either side. Without vacillation, I turned down the Kidz Bop, and yelled over it, asking if we could join in their game. Begrudgingly one responded sure, garnering looks from the litany of other athletes. I parked my brand new car among the experienced vehicles that were scattered among the remainder of the lot.
The first thing that I noticed upon exiting the vehicle was not the insufferable glacial chill, but the immediate overpowering murmur that collectively beckoned for the adornment of my shirt. I obliged, ready to do anything to partake in this celestial endeavor. After they split me and my friends among the teams, the game continued seamlessly, the disparity in skill level immediately making itself clear. Each team had about two or three members that would simply stand by either goal, engaged in conversation in a foreign language with a fellow athlete, mimicking the level of interest in the game that I had shown so many years prior. It was here that I recognized the man who cleaned the bathrooms, although I was pretty sure that he didn’t recognize me.

Among the crowd of these men in their thirties and even older, all of the same race and socioeconomic status lay two that strayed from the norm set by the rest of them. Two teenaged girls were intermixed in the game, but in a noticeably different dynamic than that of me and my friends. They weren’t accepted begrudgingly, they were embraced as if they were one of their own. These girls were two of the most skilled players in the game, no doubt due to years of Saturday morning soccer games from an early age, surrounded by the suburban parents and the luxury vehicles that populated a substantial proportion of Cary. The setting here could not be any more different, yet they seemed to be excelling both athletically and socially in this strange situation. After one of them scored an impressive goal, she was embraced lovingly by her teammates, all of a different race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status than her, all of these factors seeming far from relevant at this moment. I wondered why she was so accepted here, while we remained outsiders, looked upon begrudgingly as if we were mocking them. I decided that it must have been her athletic prowess, so I became determined to score one goal in this game, in spite of my lack of experience and skill in the sport.
I ran vehemently from side to side, simply following the ball. I touched it a few times, making some good passes, some bad passes, and falling more than once. Eventually, however, I stole the ball, rendering the field open before me. I had to beat only the goalie. As I inched closer to the goal, several of my teammates begged me to pass the ball, but I could not be deterred. The goalie made the mistake of attempting to steal the ball from me before my shot, a maneuver that gave me a clear shot of the goal. Upon hearing the ball bounce off of the dumpster that acted as goal, I was filled with jubilation, and I expected my teammates to feel the same. When I turned around, however, there was no one to congratulate me, no one to partake in the glory that we had achieved as a team together. The man who cleaned the bathroom simply stared me down as I ran back to play defense, alienating me to the point that I could not stay, prompting our exit soon.

I still see all of the members of this game at the restaurant, but the dynamic has not changed. They don’t acknowledge me, and I don’t either. I’ve been known to wave at them now and again, but the hands that I value so highly go unseen and unacknowledged in this world. Sometimes when eating there I wonder if they even remember me and my miraculous goal, but I soon exit the restaurant, back into my own world.
I am just as black as I am white. I remember always trying to explain to people that I am not just black or African American when I was younger. When you mix the shades of black and white you get gray, but for some reason I am not gray. When I first learned about colors and shades I often questioned why it was that I was not gray. It only made sense that if my mother was white, and my father was back, then technically I should be gray. However, I am not gray, I am brown. It is because of the fact that I am brown that people have looked at me differently and it has taken a long time for me to realize that the color of your skin will dictate how society will judge you. I have come to love and except my skin, but I didn’t always feel that way.

I remember the day that I first discovered racism, my great-grandfather called my mother on the phone, drunk, to call my mother a “Nigger Lover” for “bringing a nigger into the family”. He died 14 years later without knowing anything about that "nigger", the only great grandson he shared a birthday with. I was five years old when that happened, but I didn’t fully grasp the situation until I was an adult and she explained to me what happened that night. My mother never forgave him. Being a single mother raising two mixed African-American children, my mother did her best to raise and love my sister and me to the best of her limited knowledge and ability. Growing up my mother taught me what unconditional love was. She told me, “true love sees no color, it is blind”, tears streamed down her warm autumn eyes, each one carrying a universe overflowing with love, all for me, and to this day I live by that principle, and I love by this principle. I love deeply, unconditionally, and colorlessly.
Growing up I was surrounded by my white family. A black boy on the outside, a white boy on the inside; surrounded by a white family, in a white community. I stood out like Sharpie ink on an ivory piece of paper. I remember growing up side by side with my white cousin and at the time we didn’t see color, we saw family. We would spend our weekends at our grandparent’s house and play while they worked contently in the emerald garden of their love, and we would make jokes about insufferable girls and their “cooties” like normal boys do. At the time the world seemed so easy and innocent. I never noticed that I had different skin until someone else pointed it out. I always knew I was different, but I thought that was just because I didn’t have a dad, not because my skin was darker than everyone else in my family. As a kid, you don’t think about those things as much as you do as an adult. Kids are more focused on having fun then how their skin color impacts their life.

But changes came in middle school, when I could be placed into racial and ethnic groups. Somehow my Afro-European race was overlooked and I was just labeled “black”. Naturally, I would be forced to hang out and act like the “black” kids. I tried, I tried very hard; but they didn’t want me. I was too white on the inside to hang out with the “black” kids, and too black on the outside to hang out with the “white” kids. I was an abomination; I asked myself if I really should be ashamed of my beautiful skin color. It was because of this time in my life that I questioned my own self worth because I had no clue where I belonged. So I began to traverse the vast wastelands of racial mutts until I found a group of my own that would not be conscientious and judgmental of society’s racial barriers. It helped me develop my sense of identity to have people like me to hang out with, but it still was a small percentage of the population that I felt could understand how I felt.

High school changed things. In high school the racial groups were not so evident surprisingly. I went to a very diverse high school so it was at this time I decided to branch off and
explore where I felt I belonged. I no longer felt like a fly in milk, I no longer felt like I wasn’t “black” or “white” enough to become friends and socialize with certain people. I began developing my own identity as a person of mixed race. Of course there were people that I would necessarily fit in with, but at this point I began not caring. I realized that I am more than my skin color. Even if society would label me as black, I would remind myself that I am more. I am Teryn. I am more than just some word used to describing my external appearance. I am human. It is hard to love something when you feel like people look down on you for that quality, but I came to realize that it isn’t impossible.

However, I still felt unsure of my identity. I wanted to find a group of mixed people that could relate to my internal struggle. I never really found that group. I tried to talk to my mom and explain how I felt, but she would always get very upset because she felt like I shouldn’t need to identify with anything. It would make her feel as if she had failed as a mother because I had not known my own worth. I think a lot of it has to do with being raised without a black father, but if I were to talk to her about it I know it would break her heart-so I haven’t said anything. She believed that race really isn’t important, and I understand that, but it still feels good to know that there are other people like yourself out in the world and that you are not alone.

Now that I am in college I feel like I don’t need to categorize myself. It seems like everyone, including myself, is too focused on surviving college instead of what group of people they belong to. Luckily Butler is a more diverse and liberal school, so I don’t feel any real racial pressure. I also feel like the students and faculty in this school are mature enough to talk about these racial barriers and how they impact people of color like myself. It makes it much easier for me to accept who I am and what I look like now that I don’t feel judged based on my external appearance. However, I know that the rest of the world is not Butler University and that there are people who will judge me solely
based on the external color of my skin. I guess that is okay, there is nothing I can really do to change that. I think it is more important to be secure with myself and my identity rather than try to change it to be “whiter” or “blacker” just to fit in with a group.

I still feel conflicted when I have to fill out my information and I am asked for my “race” or “ethnicity” it bother me that I still have to fill in the box next to “black” or “African-American”. This frustrates me; is a tiny box supposed to represent me? I am proud to be both European and African-American. So why must I only be represented by one? My ancestors were Kings and Queens of the motherland of all life, they were explorers and settlers of a new world, they were warriors and soldiers, survivors of slavery, and so much more! How can one little box represent thousands of past generations? I wish I could just rip that box up and walk away with a little rebelliousness in my stride, but I can’t. I have to fill one in, I have to identify with something or to everyone else I will be nothing; it doesn’t matter that to myself, I am me. It is times like these that I wonder if my own self identity really matters. If my feelings on the matter don’t matter to someone else, why should they matter to me? I have never taken it so far as to disregard my own self identity, but it makes me wonder if I am just a racial statistic or a person.

I am black, and I am white; no matter how much I may have wanted to change that at time, I realize that I cannot. In ballet there is not a lot of diversity. It is a Eurocentric art form, thus it is predominately made up of Caucasians. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t different races and ethnicities of people that can dance, but majority of dancers are white. Most dancers of color are not really seen as classical dancers unless they work exceptionally hard and land a job in principle roles in big name companies. Like with other aspects of life I fall in the category of being a dancer of color. Other than that dancers of color are not really as popular as their white counterparts. I am not Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela; I am just a dancer on stage; my sole purpose is to
entertain people, not teach them. How is a dancer supposed to change the way the world sees color like his mother once did for him? I don’t think it is possible. It seems all I can really do is accept myself and hope the world learns to love people like me, like I love me.
A Guide to Going Home

*Ntinyari Miriti*

Before you go, don’t become too anxious. And no matter what you do, don’t set any expectations. There won’t be room for them. Not in your suitcase or in most of the houses you will sleep in because they are already pretty crowded. After all, you are going somewhere thousands of miles away to visit people (tons of them) you can’t remember because now you are an adult and last time you were a toddler. But those people are family, so when you meet again for the first time, pretend not to be strangers.

“Welcome home”, the first of the six aunts you meet on the trip will say. This aunt with a shiny straight-haired wig and wide smile will request that you call her “Mama” followed by either of your two cousins names. Try to mask your uneasiness with a smile and a firm handshake. As soon as you enter the house, substitute your sneakers for one of the many pairs of neon-colored flip flops by the front door. Shake the wet hand of the houseworker who just finished washing dishes. Yes, she is a cook and a housekeeper, not a member of the family. She is well respected and jovial even after midnight when you arrive. Be conscious of the way you answer when she asks you for your name so you don’t pronounce it incorrectly. Think of the way you have always heard your dad call you: the accent, the inflection, the precise emphasis on the second to last syllable. Use it as a guide to practice so she doesn’t laugh at you.
“You don’t speak Swahili?” your grandmother will ask you upon meeting her for the first time in 13 years. When you shake your head with shame, know this won’t be the worst you feel about this matter. However, your cousin will be more accepting. “Swahili was my worst subject in school. I don’t know it very well either”, she’ll say. You’ll remember that only an hour before, when you met her, your dad bragged to everyone how she was the at the top of her class and got one of the highest scores on her national exams. But just take her word for it.

“Which one of you is the musician?” your grandfather will ask you and your sisters. This will be after hours of sitting in his rustic home sipping chai and listening to endless conversation unable to comprehend anything but facial expressions and changes in tone. Tell him that you aspire to become a music teacher when you graduate from college. Contrary to your dad’s predisposition towards your career goals, your grandfather will exclaim, “Teaching is a noble profession!” Even though he is an alcoholic and despite the fact your father and him don’t have the best of relationships, appreciate him and the words you share. He will be the only one you meet who appears the slightest bit curious about who you are apart from being your father’s daughter.

“Do you think you’ll come back on your own?” your dad will ask you when it’s just you, him, your mom, and sisters in the car driving from one of his siblings’ houses to the next. Resist the impulse to respond with attitude even though your person and feelings have been suppressed by the very people that are supposed to be a part of you. Try your hardest to ignore the feeling of your stomach sinking after you snap at your dad for the first time in your life during one of the few conversations the both of you have shared throughout the entire trip. Sit in silence for the rest of the ride.
Don’t try to forget, but make your best effort to not get upset or cry when you recollect how your dad became unrecognizable. Forgive him for neglecting to show his siblings and parents that you are worthy of recognition. He gave up being around everything he knew just for you. You know that right? Be grateful for him and everything he endured to create the life you know. Be grateful for the opportunity to take a glance at the place and people that made him who he is. What once was a puzzle with just a frame and very few pieces will begin resemble a picture. Can you see where you fit?

Accept that you don’t, at least not yet.

This will remain unspoken between you and your father, but it’s okay. He’ll return to being his reserved self. He’ll go back to spending evenings watching CNN and college sports in the months afterward. You’ll return to your school and music studies and he’ll acknowledge your hard work after not doing so at the time when you expected it most.

Again, it’s okay. Everything will revert back to normal when you return to the home you know.
Beginning my ascent into the grand bungalow, early-morning dew speckles my lips in sweet serenity. I nestle into the lap of my craggy, maple seat, bark entwining its fingers, holding me. Every inch of the maple tree is a scrapbook, housing days of gleeful laughter, hours of Choose your Own Adventure books, warm hugs only matched by the coziest of blankets, and love. Velvet streams of sunlight weave through long tresses of branches and bathe my mousy-brown hair as the words of R.L Stine and Encyclopedia Brown gaze upon my sun-freckled face. Adorning my surroundings, sweet petals fall and grape hyacinths dot the roots of the Maple in a cornucopia of color. The glazed honey sun rays streak the branches cradling me. Time is trivial in my treasured tree, and hours pass without my knowledge.

Caressing my skin, 8 PM summer breezes carry the crisp scent of freshly mown grass mingling with the leftover balmy, daytime air. Lush, emerald stalks of grass tower from the damp evening ground below me, beckoning for fireflies to emerge from their concealed comfort. Cicadas rest their legs above me, gently humming their songs. I turn the page as the last droplet of sunset fades into the horizon, the sky becoming creamy cotton candy, sweet enough to taste. A yawn escapes from my mouth. A yawn of contentment. The dark draws near, and time takes me away from my bungalow. Bidding it “Good Night,” I glimpse back at the empty Maple like a frame without a photo and begin my descent into my bedroom.

Wind whispers in my petite ears from my open window as I crawl beneath the white cotton sheets, drifting slowly into sleep. Rising to sunlight streaming in my window, like a mother reaching to her child, I gaze through the blinds. The Maple stands tall, reaching out to me, calling me home.
The Strength Instilled Within One’s Name

Adrell Mable

It was the first time that my name was not Adrell Mable, my given name. The name that was on my birth certificate. The name that my parents had so carefully crafted and derived from the name Darrell- my late uncle’s name. Instead, my name was “Black Girl”, “Dog Feces”, or “Ugly Girl”. Second grade was when it all started.

I was so elated to walk into my new second grade class. Even though the move from Gary to Crown Point brought me a lot of sadness and fear, I hoped to make new friends and start a new life. As Principal Carrninghan walked me down the hall to my new classroom, I looked up to her, seeing that we both shared the same eager smile. It was a smile of happiness. We made a right turn down the wide hallway, which consisted of so many square windows on the right side that overlooked to the other side of the school. Although there were many rocks and plants in between the space, the clean, spotless windows clearly revealed my reflection and the morning activities that were happening in the classrooms across the way. I was literally looking straight into the room. It was a window and a mirror at the same time! How could this be? The sun only enhanced the students interactions even more, and surprisingly, the detailed reflection of my beautiful smile.

On November 26, 2006, the sun was shining so bright, almost as if it was a sign from God. I was so fascinated by the windows that I didn’t realize Principal Carrtingham had come to a stop. She informed me that we were finally in front of my new classroom.

“Okay Ad-rell, we are finally here. This is your new classroom and your teacher is Mrs. Baker,” said Principal Carringham with that huge smile on her face. Her smile gave me so much relief, because I was so nervous to see what was behind that door. As she opened the door, my
nervousness was completely noticeable through my hands. My parents described it as “Fussy’s (Fussy is the nickname my parents gave me when I was born) nervous triangle,” because I unconsciously made a big triangle with all the tips on both of my hands. Not only would I make a triangle, but I would separate the tips of my hands, then eventually bring them back together. Principal Carニングham finally opened the door. Straight ahead I saw what appeared to be my new teacher. She was standing in the large space that separated the whiteboard from the desks, in which the students were assigned and grouped into by pairs. Immediately my eyes caught the whiteboard and how breathtaking it was. At my old school, we had chalkboards. Now I wouldn’t have to hear the screeching sound that was so commonly associated with the use of chalk, or have coughing spells when the teacher finally erased the lesson plans she had written on the board for the day. A new learning experience was in store and I was ready. I thought to myself, “this new school is amazing.”

“Hello students, as you all know, I am Principal Carニングham. Today we have a new student with us and her name is A-drell,” she said with so much zeal. I bowed my head immediately, noticing that she had pronounced my name wrong. Her pronunciation was meaningless to me; A-drell and A-dri-ell weren’t the same individuals. I knew it wasn’t her fault, but she didn’t check or take the time to get her mistake right. My new teacher walked over to me, stuck out her hand to shake mine, and introduced herself. She was wearing long blue jean pants, tennis shoes, and a white t-shirt with the “Baker’s Fruit” logo on it. Her height was medium- not too tall and not too short. Her face was framed by her short, bob haircut and square-like, golden glasses. I immediately realized that she was Caucasian, but it was familiar territory since all my teachers had been Caucasian at my old school.

“Hello A-drell. My name is Mrs. Baker, and I am your teacher.” she said.
“Hello Mrs. Baker,” I replied. She too had pronounced my name wrong. I was too afraid to
tell her the real pronunciation of my name. However, the mispronunciation of my name was a minor
issued compared to everything that transpired after that day.

“We are so glad to have you in our class. Your assigned seat is in the back next to Leah,” she
informed me. Since the moment I entered my new classroom, I hadn’t turned to look at my
new classmates. As my teacher guided me to my seat, all I got was stares. No smiles. Just some dirty
looks.

I was forced to play with a different group of girls everyday at recess, but sometimes I would
still end up playing by myself. No one liked me and all they knew was my name- it wasn’t even the
right pronunciation. I was often told “I can’t play with you because you’re Black.” Once the teacher
talked with them, they would just make up more lies. I cried everyday at recess, and in class. Why
was I getting discriminated against based on the color of my skin? What about my personality? What
about A-dri-el, not A-drell? It had to have been something larger than me, I thought. I didn’t bring
this upon myself. I was just born, like you.

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My parents gave me a deeper understanding of why I was being treated the way I was at
the time. I concluded that the children at my new school had no clear understanding of why they
were treating me that way, just as I had no clear understanding as to why I was getting bullied for no
reason. It was not them. They had no say in their beliefs or what they were taught. It was their
parents. Their parents were the ones participating in the KKK, and some were even the leaders.
They had killed and were possibly still killing people that looked just like me. Did the children
watch? Although this questioned quickly popped into my head, I realized that I didn’t want to
know the answer. Their parents had taught them to hate me before I even arrived, which is why I
got discriminated against. I couldn’t blame them. It wasn’t their fault.
Towards the end of the year, the school decided to put on a talent show. The theme of the talent show was “American Idol.” Upon finding out, I immediately ran home and told my parents the good news. I loved singing so much and I was so happy for the chance to get involved, even though I would have only been at the school for a total of six months. However, days after letting my parents know about the talent show, I had changed my mind due to another bad day at school.

“Mom, Dad …..” I sobbed at the dinner table, not able to finish my sentence. Our dinner table was black at the time, and it seated six people. My mom had cooked her famous dish: spinach casserole. She always layered it with spinach, Spanish rice, red sauce, and ground beef. It was my favorite. But I couldn’t enjoy it.

“Oh Fussy–,” said my mother in a high-pitched voice, as she saw the tears flowing down my face. It was the voice that she unconsciously used when she got super sympathetic. “Babydoll, what’s wrong?” my dad asked worriedly, but he and my mom knew something was unclear. Looking back now, my parents tell me that I came home crying everyday.

“Today… to-day at lunch (sniffles) ….Claire (sniffles)…. said I look like poop and she…she… (sniffles) called me poop. I don’t want to.. to…to…(sniffles) do the talent show if I look like poop.” I confessed to my parents. Immediately my mom, dad, brother, and sister came over to the other side of the table and hugged me so tight in the midst of my tears. I felt so bad because I knew my tears were soaking their clothes. But we needed each other’s love. We all were going through something, but I didn’t want to make my problem seem bigger than theirs. My parents had decided to move to Crown Point in order for us to have a better life than they did. They wanted the best, but they didn’t realize how much happiness it would cost us.

My mom and dad were struggling with the idea of us going to a racist school, being that we were so young. They didn’t know it was going to be this bad. They also became immensely disgusted
with the expression “oh.” This was always the response when we were shopping in the grocery, entering the security gate of our subdivision, or telling our close friends and family where we lived. The expression “oh” meant jealousy and hatred, even from the ones that should have been happy about our growth. Did they want us to suffer? My sister wasn’t in school yet, but my brother was suffering more than I was. That’s his story to tell. The point is that we all needed that hug. We needed comfort.

“Fussy, you do not look like poop. You are beautiful. Don’t you DARE believe what they tell you,” said my dad in his strongest voice. This was the first time I saw his military side come out. “My sweet girl, they are jealous and they are practicing hatred. DON’T be like them! You fight with a smile and continue being the sweet little girl you are. We love you and God loves you. YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL.” said my mom. I had started thinking that I was ugly, because when you thought about it deeply, the comparison was true. My skin tone and the color of poop was brown, but I was NOT poop.

“Fussy, you love to sing and I love to hear you sing. You’re my little songbird. God has gifted you with a beautiful voice, use it! They will love your voice.” My dad said, trying his best to cheer me up. He did indeed cheer me up, but I wasn’t ready to formulate my decision just yet. I decided to ponder it more as I tackle my spinach casserole. There was no way I was going to let it go to waste. I don’t know if it was the sensation that the casserole gave me or the talk that my family had with me, but a light bulb suddenly flickered on in my head.

“Okay Daddy! I will sing in the talent show, but I don’t know what to sing.” I said, wiping the last few tears away. I finally had strength.

My mom suddenly chimed in and assured me, “Oh we’ll find one, you always sing to the songs on the radio,” she laughed. When we drove, I sang my heart out, sitting in the front seat of
our blue Dodge van. Sure enough, whenever we drove anywhere after that, we searched for songs that I could sing for the talent show. One day my mom and I were driving to Wise Way to pick up some groceries, and the perfect song came on. It was called “Mama’s Kitchen” by Cece Winans, and it was the perfect song for me.

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In order to be in the talent show, everyone had to audition in front of the talent show coordinators. Since I had decided at the last minute that I wanted to do it again, I had missed all the audition slots. I was scared and sad that I wouldn’t be able to sing, but they made a special time for me to come in one day after school. I sung for them and I got in! Claire, the girl who had said I looked like poop, had also She was doing gymnastics as she always did on the playground.

“Hello A-drell, what are you doing here?” she questioned when she saw me and my mom walking into the gymnasium for rehearsal.

“I’m here to sing!!” I said with so much enthusiasm.

“Oh.” she replied, surprised.

“Yeah, good luck with your performance!” I said.

“Thanks,” she said, squinting her eyes to form a fake, petty smile. Why was she so mad? I was giving her accolades and she couldn’t say anything back? My mom immediately reached down and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tight to remind me that she was there. I looked up to her and smiled so big. She was the only one that liked and loved me in that whole entire room.

“They are going to LOVE your voice.” she said, completely sure. She was right. Only the participants in the show heard my voice that night and they absolutely loved it. It went around the whole school, so all the students couldn’t wait to hear me.

Come performance day, I was really scared. My mom had dressed me up in my favorite outfit. It was a long pink suit with silver buttons that sparkled. I wore a blue jean skirt under and my
mom clipped my braids back with a silver hair clip. My dad had taken off work, because he was going to come hear his babydoll sing. They both drove me to school that day, treating me to breakfast at McDonalds- I know, not the healthiest option, but a treat. They then dropped me off in the waiting room and left to go find their seat in the audience.

“Okay students. Today is the big day. Go out there and shine!” The directors said in the most cheerful voice possible. I wasn’t even able to enjoy their happiness, because I was so surprised by what happened next.

“Good luck A-drell, you have a nice voice.” someone said from behind me. I turned and saw that it was Claire. She was smiling, and she was smiling at me. Was I dreaming?

“Thank you! Good luck to you too!” I replied, trying to contain my happiness. Soon afterwards, we entered into the gymnasium and sat in the brown, metal folding chairs. The operators had done a good job of making us feel as though we were actually on American Idol. They had the logo in the corner of the stage and the whole gymnasium was decorated in blue. When I got called to the stage, I looked out to see the big crowd. Chairs extended to both ends of the gym, but that wasn’t enough. All of the students had to sit on the ground and several parents stood against the wall. The pressure was on. Once the song started, I immediately froze up. All eyes were on me. I tried to escape the embarrassment, but I was challenged both ways. If I looked down, I had to stare at the many eyes of the students sitting on the floor. If I looked up, I was forced to stare at the intimidating adults that lined the walls. People began to whisper about why I hadn’t started singing and I suddenly felt a tear form in my eyelid. But it didn’t roll. The only place I could look was at the microphone. It reminded me of myself, how much I had practiced, and why I was there in the first place. The microphone saved me. They started the music up again and in the midst of the crowd I saw my mom and dad. They were diagonal of the stage, and my dad had his old, black video camera out. Before it was time for me to sing, my dad mouthed out, standing taller than almost anyone in
the room, “Sing Fussy.” This became his usual expression for every time that I would sing from that
day forward. Seeing them gave me so much confidence and I opened my mouth and sang. Halfway
into the song, almost everyone in the audience had stood up. Once I finished, everyone was clapping
and yelling “Whoohoo,” my mom and dad being the loudest. There was never a day that I was so
happy to be at Winfield Elementary. Especially in the bathroom.

“Omg! The talent show was awesome. Who was your favorite?” I heard a voice say.

“Mama’s Kitchen girl!” Another said, and they started singing the lyrics. It only took a
matter of seconds and everyone in the bathroom began singing the lyrics. My dad was right. They
had loved me, but why did it have to take my voice just for them to love me? Did they love me or
my voice?

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Advancing to the third grade at Jerry Ross Elementary didn’t really change anything for
me. Instead, I had a new bully: my teacher. Winfield Elementary only had grades kindergarten
through second, so we had to continue third through fifth grade at Jerry Ross Elementary. By that
time, I had gotten used to my peers bullying me, but not my teacher. Wasn’t she supposed to
support all the children in the class? In order for you to understand what I mean, we need to
backtrack to second grade. In second grade, my teacher, Mrs. Baker knew that I was getting bullied
and she tried her best to help me. By contrast, Ms. Horan believed every lie the girls in the
classroom told her, and she never took the time to help me. I would constantly tell her that the girls
in the class were rolling their eyes, sticking out their tongues, and gossiping about me. I would often
look up from the in-class assignment I was doing at the time and see a group of
girls laughing at me. Tears started rolling down my face as I again realized that I still didn’t fit in.

New school, more children, but the same attitude on an even larger scale. What was I doing
wrong? What was so funny about me? In addition to that, I still wasn’t allowed to play with anyone
at recess, because of my skin color. I eventually went to talk to the principal, Ms. Johanson, about the bullying that was being done to me. I was very surprised because she didn’t say anything. She was the first person that just simply listened to me. She gave me her undivided attention, so I took advantage of that and told her everything. After talking with her, she thought it would be best to have a meeting with all of the girls in my class, and Ms. Horan. I was so happy because someone was going to finally take control of the situation. Later on that week during recess, we traveled down the winding, brick hallway from our classroom to her office. Ms. Johanson’s office was embedded behind the administrative desk and the inside could only be seen through the beige blinds that she opened quite frequently. As we entered the main office, we immediately received alarming looks from the students waiting to be helped by the office ladies. Of course, because everyone that came to the principal’s office was always in trouble.

“Hello ladies,” Ms. Johanson said as she walked around the assistant desk. She always wore beautiful dresses that ranged from all possible colors of the rainbow, and heels to match. On this day, she wore a bright yellow sundress and beige heels. She shook our hands and we immediately walked into her office. It wasn’t like anything I had imagined. It was a small, welcoming environment with multiple inspirational quotes on the walls and music in the background. Her color scheme was beige and blue, and the room smelled of flowers. She instructed us to sit on the multi-colored carpet in front of her desk.

“So I hear that you ladies are going through some issues in your classroom,” she said as she passed out bright colored orange sheets. All of the girls looked at each other confusedly, as if she had spoken a lie. She had noticed.

“Okay well, let’s hear what you all have to say,” she said. She looked over at me and motioned for me to talk first. At that very moment, I had everyone’s attention. I talked about how I was getting bullied in the class and how I felt being there at the school overall. While I was talking,
almost all of the girls had raised their eyebrows at least once. Again, they thought they were innocent little angels.

“Okay well, I’m sure you all heard A-drell. What do you all think? Is this behavior going on?” she asked. All of the girls shook their heads side-to-side, denying everything I had said. They were all against me. The Caucasian girls against the only Black girl. There was no way I was winning this battle.

“Okay well it doesn’t seem as though there are many issues in the classroom. We all need to just be friendly to each other,” she said. What about me? So, it was okay for them to bully me, because majority rules? She too had become my enemy and I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

What started off as a small tear soon turned into a big tear. It hit the bright orange sheet so hard, making an astonishing sound. The tear landed in the bottom corner of the paper, but it’s circular circumference was almost the size of a quarter. Upon hearing the teardrop, everyone turned around, giving surprised looks that soon turned into dirty looks, as if to say, “what are you crying for?” But she didn’t see that. In the midst of the silence, the lyrics “Trying hard to reach out. But when I tried to speak out. Felt like no one could hear me. Wanted to belong here. But something felt so wrong here. So I pray. I could breakaway” soon played over the sound system in her office (Clarkson 2010). It was Breakaway by Kelly Clarkson. There was no song that could better describe that particular moment. Because I too felt like Kelly Clarkson.

Fourth grade was the best year I had at Jerry Ross Elementary. In fourth grade; I had so much help. My teacher, Mrs. Rose, loved me so much and put me in leadership. I was in charge of making sure that students marked down the homework in their agenda books. In addition to that, I was assigned to help one student out during class everyday, depending on what he was struggling in. I don’t know if it was because she was older or if she was a Christian, but she was the first person who saw me as “A-dri-ell,” not “Black Girl.” At that time, more black families had begun to move to
Crown Point, so things were getting better. However, in the fifth grade, I just happen to be placed with almost all the same students from my third grade class. I was very positive about it and prepared. Once again they lied when their evil behavior towards me was brought up to the teacher and principal. Unfortunately, they flipped the situation and blamed it on me. I was excluded from all of the holiday parties and social outings that occurred throughout the year. What was the point of me saying anything? They ruined my reputation. But I didn’t cry. I just took it. Because when I spoke up, I only made the situation worse. But how else would change come about? I had hopes that things would be better, because things were always better in fourth grade.

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Beginning middle school brought forth the chance to meet new people from incorporated Crown Point. In middle school, I got involved with so many extra-curricular activities and I was loved by all my teachers. I had made my first set of friends in the sixth grade, and they accepted me no matter what. I thought to myself, “this journey is finally over,” until the end of eighth grade. One day I was riding the school bus home, and the Lake County Sheriff’s son kept touching my shoulder on purpose. I asked him to stop multiple times and after the third time, he spat on me and told me “I'll hang you from a tree.” That was the first time anyone had threatened me that way, and it was the last. The following day, my dad took me to the Lake County Special Victims Unit. I told my story to the detective three times and he told us that he would take care of the problem. After six months, he obtained a Misdemeanor offense on his record. Prior to that, he had stopped riding the bus and eventually moved out of the subdivision.

My parents were extremely satisfied, as this was the first time someone had dealt with our problems. Today, Crown Point has accumulated more Black people and other minorities since we moved there, many people still consider it a racist city, and others don’t. During my senior year of high school, I did an informal interview with my best friend, Emma. I explained my long journey of
living in Crown Point to her, and she disagreed with everything I said. I tell you, I never felt so hurt in my entire life! I asked her if she thought Crown Point was and still is a racist city. Her explanation was “I never noticed any of that going on, are you sure you went through that? I just don’t believe it. Crown Point has never been racist” (E. Philbin, Personal Communication, 2017). There was nothing else that I needed to ask her. I realized then that some people are just so ashamed that they can’t face the truth. Emma and I had become really close friends, but she just proved to be another example of how racism continued in my life, indirectly. Her comments and mentality showed me that she wasn’t my true friend, so our friendship ended after high school graduation.

By the time I left Middle School, I had learned that no matter how nice or good of a person you may be, people will always look on the outside before even considering the inside. I also learned that not everyone is the same and that there are a handful of those out there that look on the inside. Overall, I learned that not everyone is full of love and capable of embracing change. For example, I couldn’t make any friends because they thought that there was something wrong with me. Being emotionally shattered caused me to distance myself from those around me and resort to being “quiet.” Therefore, it was hard to develop new friends that I could trust. But I still tried to be friendly to others. I was constantly reminded of the lies and false rumors expressed about me. After telling my story to the detective, my dad had severe intentions of getting our stories out for others to hear. He wanted people to know what my brother and I were going through and how no one in the school system did anything about it. My brother was the main reason, because his story is worse than mine. My dad had two news reporters who were eager to hear our stories. But it never happened. I recently found out this year why it hadn’t happened.

My family took a road trip to Michigan for spring break, and our move to Crown Point came up in one of the conversations. I was half asleep, but I clearly heard, “No- Dakota (my brother) didn’t want to share his story with the news reporters. It told him that they were ready to hear, but
he begged me not to. He said he didn’t want to ruin the path that his sisters would have to follow and he wanted to protect the family” (C. Mable, Personal Communication, March 2018). I looked over to my brother and saw that he was sleeping, but I sent him a smile in spite of. He is so courageous. My dad then went on to say how we only got through that hard time in our life because of our relationship with God. Listening to him forced me to reflect on how God brought me through individually.

Throughout the years, I started to develop a closer relationship with God and I realized the concept of forgiveness for everyone. For God has forgiven us for all our sins, so why can’t we forgive others? That was going to be the only way I could get past it and show the world a better way. I wasn’t going to shut down and show them weakness, but I still showed them sincere love, in spite of all the bullying. Now if they took my kindness for weakness, that was on them, but it stood for the power of God and humanity that is within me. During my transition to high school I saw many blacks moving in and moving right back out, because they couldn’t handle it. But in reality, without the strength I gained within myself, through God, I might not have made it either. I have learned to be strong and look on the positive side and not dwell on the situation I’m in, which could result in giving up. When you look to the heights you are able to fight with the strength that was established deep down at birth. You can look through your situation with a smile. I smile because I know I will never give up if I am faced with a hard challenge. I smile because my name is A-dri-el.
To my lifelong partner,

You weren’t a burden until I was fourteen years old. I forget that there was a time when I didn’t resent you. You made me confident. You weren’t constantly on my mind. You were compliant with me for such a long period of time, then you let me down. It broke my heart. I couldn’t understand why this was happening to me. I looked in the mirror and I didn’t like who you were anymore.

You never dismayed me until your existence grew. It felt like you were an elephant in the room; or rather like I was the elephant in the room. You stuck around in the most inconvenient areas. Other people said they didn’t notice you but I always did, and I couldn’t figure out why. I noticed the lack of muscle definition you had, even though you were just as physically capable as everyone. Everyone’s arms were more cut, yours were just big and bulky. Your thighs were also much larger than I wanted. I hated walking onto the pool deck in my swimsuit and feeling your thighs rub together, it felt like everyone was staring at you all the time.

I remember as a freshman at swim practice, I couldn’t help but notice the way you looked against everyone else. I compared you in the locker room. It was humiliating to see how skinny everyone else looked next to you. You protruded in my lower stomach areas; the exact place I didn’t want you to be. You also gave me some serious love handles. I can never find jeans that fit you the right way. They would be way too tight in some areas and way too big in others.

I wondered a lot about what other people thought of you. It was never obsessive until I met Migs. You consumed my thoughts. Migs was the first boy who I truly loved. He had dark hair that swept across his forehead. He was about four inches taller than me, he was tan and muscular; he had the swimmer body. Everyone knew him for his insane gift of swimming. In some ways, dating
him was like dating a local swimming celebrity. People knew me as “Migs Martin’s girlfriend.” I couldn’t believe that a boy like him, was dating a girl like me. Because of you, I convinced myself that he couldn’t ever love me because of the way that you were. That’s when I decided you needed to change.

I needed your presence to diminish. I stopped eating because of you. As I stopped eating you didn’t bother me in the same way you used to. I used to hate you because you made me feel insecure. You bothered me in different ways, now all you said was, “Feed me.” It felt like you were screaming at me every second of the day for more food, but I had to stay strong and ignore it. I couldn’t feed you after all the pain you caused me. I wanted to control you, so I did. People started giving me compliments, telling me how good you looked. My coaches even pulled me aside to let me know that they saw a change in the both of us. Swimming was terrifying because it made me vulnerable. I couldn’t hide you from anyone. Everyone could see you, and that was scary to me. I was worried people would ask questions. They did. I told them that I wasn’t trying to lose weight. It just happened. It wasn’t intentional.

Once Migs started to notice how much you had slimmed down I was content. I finally felt like he could love both of us now because of all the work I put in for you to transform. I felt like an entirely new person. I had a boyfriend, I was swimming well, and I was skinny. I had never been so happy. Migs was a sweet boy, most of the time. Sometimes he’d make some nasty comments about you. He would tell me that you would be easier to show off if you were smaller. Sometimes he would say that we could swim faster if you were stronger and skinnier. It really hurt me sometimes. I did love Migs, but he made me feel like you weren’t good enough. He made me feel like you were unacceptable looks wise, and swimming wise. All I ever did was try to make you look smaller and make you perform well in the pool. I later realized that nothing I did would ever be enough for him. Migs couldn’t understand us because he was in extremely good shape and an extremely talented swimmer without any efforts. He didn’t understand us because we had to work hard to be mediocre. Migs was ignorant, but so was I.

After about a year and a half of dating I found out Migs had been cheating on me. I received a text from my friend. I looked at the blue bubble on my phone and I couldn’t believe the words on the screen. “Sof, Migs has been cheating on you.” This was my first real
heartbreak. I didn’t know that pain like this existed. I felt a huge weight and this sharp tingling in my chest. I cried for hours and after that all I could do was feed you. Even when you weren’t asking for it, I fed you. I didn’t know how to cope with such an immense feeling of emptiness. I didn’t know how to fill the void in my life, so filled it with food. It felt so good to eat whatever I wanted. It was freeing, but it was also burdening. I couldn’t control myself.

Soon enough, I began slipping even more. I was feeding you regularly, but at this point I could hardly wake up. It felt like you had me glued to my bed. This wasn’t just a tired teenager. This was much more than that. I couldn’t understand why nothing would ever go my way. It felt like the world was against me, and I had to fight this battle against you all by myself. Around the winter of my 16th year I felt myself going into a depression. I was quickly losing energy. I remember one day after ten hours of sleep, you made it extremely difficult to leave my bed. I was going to practice everyday, so naturally I thought that was why I was so exhausted. You had felt never this weak before. I confessed these issues to my mom and she said that she thought something was wrong with you. It felt like you were giving up on me and I couldn’t grasp why. That was the beginning of my downfall.

A few weeks later they took some blood from you and found that we had Hashimoto’s disease. Turns out that our thyroid wasn’t working too well and that was probably causing the depression and the extreme fatigue. Hashimoto’s is a form of hypothyroidism, meaning that our thyroid wasn’t producing enough hormones. The doctors wanted me to give you some medication everyday and said it would help with our fatigue. Typically when people go on thyroid medication they will lose a lot of weight. I was excited for this to happen. My enthusiasm was soon diffused. You did the exact opposite. You blew the fuck up. You put on what most people lose. I hated you. I could hardly look at you in the mirror. I felt alone, and I was just stuck with your fat ass everyday. The medication was supposed to make me feel better, but I felt worse. I wasn’t as tired, but I was just as dejected. You were never on my side anymore and I couldn’t figure out why.

I was starting to accept things and the way that you looked until the summer of 2016. I was having my goal meeting with my coach, Derek Howorth, about the things I wanted to achieve in the upcoming season. I expressed my concerns about my performance in the pool
because I wasn’t swimming as fast as I used to. You used to be able to do amazing things, but for some reason you couldn’t do them anymore. I asked Coach Howorth if he had any ideas about as to why this was. He normally talked to me about how I am too hard on myself, and how I need to have more confidence, so I expected for his answer to have something to do with my negative attitude towards myself and you. That’s not at all what he said. He began talking about you. He said that you were getting heavier. He explained himself and at the end of his spiel he nervously muttered, “I’m not saying you’re fat.” If he had to say those words about you, then it didn’t really matter. I felt my face turn red. I had this tingling sensation in my head. I felt my stomach sink. I could hardly look at him. I held back the tears that I so desperately wanted to let out. I had never felt so vulnerable in my life. I looked down at my hands as I sat alone in a chair, in front of Coach Howorth’s desk, and he stared at me waiting for an answer. I felt so small, yet so fat at the same time. I felt him peering down at me. I just nodded. If I had attempted to say anything the tears would have basically made a waterfall out of my face. I was ashamed of you. You ruined me. I hated Coach Howorth for being so fucking concerned about you. His words about you agonized me.

After this conversation, I blamed all my failures on you. When I didn’t feed you, you somehow swam faster than ever. Why was that? Why was it that now you were at a healthy weight that you couldn’t do the things I worked towards everyday of my life. From that point forward, I couldn’t help but think that my swimming performance was a direct correlation of your number on the scale. I’m pissed that Derek ruined the way I looked at both myself and my swimming.

Derek always remind me to put “direction” into my emotions. He would inform me that it is constructive to take negative emotions and put them into swimming. He advised me to take my negative emotions and turn them into something positive. I had done it before. It wasn’t ever easy, but it was effective. I attempted to take the emotions that I had and put them towards a goal. I worked as hard as I could to prove to both him and myself that you didn’t need to be under 140 pounds to swim fast. I tried. I couldn’t. I couldn’t find a way to take my emotions and make them into something worthwhile. I couldn’t do it because I wasn’t angry. I wasn’t sad. I was numb. Numbness can’t be directed.
I couldn’t grasp why the males in my life felt the need to make these comments about you. I don’t know if they realize that I can be sensitive at times. I don’t know if they never realized how insecure I was of you. I always felt like it was so obvious that I was self-conscious of you. No matter, the things that were said about you were unacceptable in that I was already aware of what you look like. I don’t need any other ignorant prick to point it out. I see you everyday when I get ready in the morning. I feel like your flaws are amplified when I’m shopping and it feels like nothing will hide all your bulges. I especially notice you when I see you lined up next to my teammates. I didn’t need to hear anyone else's opinions about you, when my thoughts about you fill my head everyday.

I don’t know why I let the things Derek and Migs said about you hurt me so much. They didn’t understand the way you work. I allowed Derek and Migs to influence my opinion and the way I viewed you. That wasn’t fair to either of us. We are both deserving of something much better than the insight and the comments they had to offer. I valued their opinion far too much, and the my opinion about you is the only one that matters. You're not as skinny, you have wider shoulders, your thyroid doesn’t work as well. I’m not saying that I like the way you look or the way you function. I hate the way that you are. I feel like I had lost years of my life because of the way your thyroid works. I hated that you couldn’t lose weight the way everyone else around me did. I hated that you couldn’t swim as fast as I knew you could. I always felt like I was trapped inside of you. It is hard for me to think that I am going to have to live with you for the rest of my life. You’re the only body I have and I am stuck with you for who knows how long.

Being insecure about you has allowed for me to learn more and more about myself. I’ve found my weaknesses and I have become a stronger person because of you. It is going to be a long journey being able to come to terms with all the pain and troubles you’ve caused me, but I know that everyday is going to get better. It is going to get better because I am learning. While it is troubling to think that I am going to have to deal with the way that you look and the way that you function for the rest of my life, I know that overall it is my responsibility to learn how to cope with you. Every single day I learn more and more about you. Learning more about you is what will make it possible to survive with you. I am still angry that you have been the source of so many of my problems in life but, you have still been able to help me gain so many new
experiences. All of the achievements I have made in swimming have been because of you. You have given me the unbelievable opportunity to swim at the collegiate level at Butler University, and it has been one of the most amazing experiences ever. I may hate the way that you look and hate the lack of control I have over you at times yet, I am still able to be grateful for you at times. Learning to live with you, I have to be able to recognize all the wonderful things you have allowed for me to do. Sometimes you’re pretty lousy and other times, you’re pretty fucking amazing. Even though the lows with you are painful, the highs make it all worth it.

Sincerely,

Your lifelong partner
Am I the Ying or Yang of this Relationship

Anna Bradley

I believe that I became friends with Chyanne Wright thanks to a much higher power than the whims of a coincidence. We were in the same science class in seventh grade, and even though our last names were on opposite ends of the alphabet, we ended up next to each other in the age of assigned seats. I’d known from my other classes with her that she loved to draw, and it wasn’t long before I recognized one of the characters she was working on during class. It was from a video game, Super Mario Galaxy, to be exact, and I spoke up, already over the moon that I’d found something in common with a classmate I’d looked up to for a year.

We’d met for the first time in our sixth-grade P.E. and math classes. Chyanne sat close enough to me that I could see her notes, and they were always covered in doodles. This is what she called her drawings—doodles—but to me they were all pieces of art, from the simplest sketch of a face, real or fiction, to complicated masterpieces of fantastical creatures, all drawn right there in class.

We didn’t sit side by side until that fateful day, and even then, I wasn’t sure if I was going to say anything. It took me three tries to get the words out of my open mouth, and when I finally did speak, my stomach started flipping so many times that I stopped in the middle of my sentence. But Chyanne gave me a smile so bright that it scared away all my doubts. We exchanged numbers and texted each other nonstop about our favorite fictional characters. After Chy, as I quickly christened her, learned how passionate I was about storytelling, she recommended I play the game that would soon become one of my favorites: Super Paper Mario. I played through the story in a matter of days, immersing myself into the world so much that I couldn’t help but cry when I reached the bittersweet end.

That story was all I could talk about for weeks, and when we found that our time together at school wasn’t enough, we developed a routine after Chy suggested I download Skype. We video-chatted for hours after school multiple times a week to work on our homework together. When Chyanne finished her work, or when I grew bored of mine, we stopped studying world
history and started studying the art of storytelling. Chy and I filled pages upon pages with stories, mine told through words, hers through pictures, and we feared nothing, not even the intimidation the blank paper presented.

Chyanne convinced me to create an account and start uploading my stories to an art-sharing website she’d joined at the beginning of the year. To celebrate this advance in our careers, the two of us upgraded from traditional mediums to digital ones. Chy received her first laptop and drawing tablet, and I begged for a wireless keyboard so that I could sit and type in any position I wanted. My favorite was to lie on my stomach on the floor of my bedroom while Chyanne frequently sat at the desk in her parent’s spare bedroom with her feet propped up on a second chair.

If you type in our old usernames today, you can still see the results of two passionate seventh-graders using their gifts to create new worlds every day. To practice our crafts, I started writing scenes involving her characters, and she would draw mine for me. The stories we wanted to tell were so similar, inspired by the same things, that we began to work together on them. Everything clicked when we worked together; we covered every plot hole, looked over each minor detail, and filled the gaps that sat open in our stories. Chy listened to every one of my ideas, even the terrible ones, and I started looking up to her like a flower looking to the sun. For my worst ideas, she helped me dissect them and salvage the best parts; for my worst grades, she helped me create a study schedule and kept me on task when we worked together. We spent an entire year this way, crafting stories over texts or Skype calls and playing as many Nintendo games as possible in person. But nothing, not even our perfect world, could last forever. After only a quarter of the way through eighth grade, Chyanne’s father lost his job, forcing him to move from a small town in Indiana to an even smaller one in South Dakota, half a country away. It might as well have been another planet.

Her last day attending the same school as me was the last day of class before our fall break. While everyone else celebrated the last bell of the day, I met Chy at her locker and pressed my lips together, willing myself not to cry. She handed me a box of tissues and a piece of paper I couldn’t even look at. If I had, I would’ve burst into tears in the middle of the hallway. We hugged goodbye, and that was that. Chy had more people she wanted to say goodbye
to before she left, so I walked to my bus alone. I got off at my stop alone. I cried in my bathroom alone behind the locked door, and when I thought I had my emotions under control, I walked downstairs to hear my mom ask how my day at school went, and I broke down all over again. I didn’t look at the picture Chyanne had given me until later that evening when I saw the notification that she’d posted a new piece online. Before pulling up her art page, I grabbed the paper and box of tissues from my backpack. Chy had drawn two video game characters for me, and at the bottom, in her own handwriting, Chy wrote, “Anna—I can honestly say school wouldn’t have been as bearable without you. You support every art piece or fangirlism. Thank you for that.” I hung the picture on my wall, where it still sits to this day, and wiped away the fresh tears with her gifted tissue box.

It was hard at first not seeing each other in person every day, but over the next year, her move strengthened our friendship. I continued to talk to Chy every day, even when the rest of her friends from before the move stopped replying. I asked her about new friends she was making, new classes she was taking, and she told me how South Dakota’s academic standards couldn’t compete with Indiana’s. I laughed, asking how she would manage in a less intellectually stimulating school. Chy was, and still is, the type of student to always finish her work early, settle for nothing less than an A, and never quit until every teacher in the school knew she loved learning more than any of her classmates.

When she moved, we continued our Skype conversations, but she talked less, studied more. When she did talk, it was usually about how nervous she was to be a freshman, even though she, as an eighth-grader, already took some of her advanced classes at the high school. When in doubt, I always told Chy that she was smarter than half the kids at that school. On a good week, she’d smile and concede my point. On every other week, she’d point to her grades and let whatever letter appeared on her report card define her.

Nevertheless, she persisted, and we graduated middle school 750 miles apart. I closed the gap over that summer, flying by myself to South Dakota to spend a week at Chyanne’s house. When we weren’t swimming in her backyard pool or watching anime, we were glued to the soft brown couch in her basement playing video games. That couch was the kind where each seat reclined on its own, and I was over the moon to find out that it had survived the move. That
couch had been my bed the first time I’d spent the night at Chy’s house in Indiana, and I wouldn’t have wanted to sit anywhere else as we played through Super Paper Mario, start to finish, in only a handful of days. I cried when we reached the ending, and even though I’d warned Chy that it would happen, she still laughed when she saw the tears glistening in my eyes. It wasn’t a mocking laugh, rather a warm one that brought a smile to my face.

For two days out of the week, we took a trip to the Mall of America in Minnesota. We picked this destination over visiting Mount Rushmore—my reason was to spend a day shopping at America’s largest mall, but Chyanne wanted to go to the indoor amusement park. Her wish won the first day, so for almost six hours, she pulled me along onto the tallest rides, the fastest, and the ones that turned upside down so many times I couldn’t tell right from left anymore. But on the second day, Chy let me drag her around to at least poke our heads inside every store in the mall. She never once protested, not when I tried on dresses I had no hope of affording, not when I marched to Claire’s on the hunt for new jewelry. Even though Chy balked at the amount of purple and pink glitter the store threw in her face, she found up a friendship necklace right away that she thought would be perfect for us.

The necklace was one of those that split into two magnetic pieces on two separate chains, but instead of a rainbow heart, as was the trend when we were in middle school, this necklace formed the yin and yang symbol. Chyanne, ever the better student, explained to me the basic characteristics of the yin and the yang, the former being emotional, passive, and introverted with the latter being more stoic, assertive, and extroverted. At the time, it was clear that I would take home the black yin piece while Chy wore the white yang piece. At the time, the analogy perfectly summed up our relationship, and at the time, our two halves made a whole, we completed each other, and our world was in balance.

I knew of the yin and yang from my seventh-grade world history class, but all I could remember was that the symbol originated in China and is closely connected with Daoism. I faithfully wore my yin necklace for years until it was tragically stolen from me in the high school gym locker room. Now, almost five years after first purchasing that necklace, I finally took it upon myself to research the symbol I had let define me for years. Right away, I realized this search wouldn’t give me a concrete answer on whether I was the yin or yang of my friendship with Chyanne;
Robin R. Wang, the Director of Asian Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University, stated in a journal on international philosophy that “the study of Daoism is a complicated field that challenges our conceptual interpretations and understanding” (2010, p. 243). In my suburban middle school, Daoism had been simplified and written off as mostly unimportant for seventh-grade curriculum; even the name had been changed to read easier. Traditionally, the word is spelled “Taoism,” but the “T” still sounds like a “D,” hence the change to Daoism, which today is considered a correct spelling.

I learned about Daoism alongside Confucianism, and together my teacher presented them as religions or philosophies that began in ancient China. In the simplest terms possible, Daoism is about being in harmony with the Dao, or the Way. The Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tzu, a sort of Bible for Daoism, describes the ideas of Daoism through over eighty short poems. The second poem, as translated by Stephen Mitchell, describes how:

Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other.

The theme of balance is already at play in the text, which is what Chyanne explained to me in the middle of Claire’s; the Way is balanced, the yin and yang balance each other, and Chy and I had strengths to compliment the other’s weaknesses.

Thanks to my world history courses in middle and high school, I had been under the impression that Daoism was nothing but an ancient idea. To prove me wrong, Lai Chi-Tim in an article titled “Daoism in China Today, 1980-2002” writes that “Daoism has remained a central part of the daily life of the Chinese people.” Chi-Tim continues to describe how, after the Cultural Revolution, the National Daoist Association re-established itself in 1980 with the goal of restoring historic Daoist temples, opening them to the public, and receiving government approval to protect them nationally as religious centers. The religion is still relevant today in Asia, even though my previous history courses taught me otherwise. While this was all helpful for me to understand the context behind Daoism, I could not
find the words yin or yang stated explicitly in Mitchell’s translation of Tao Te Ching.
When describing Chinese cosmogony, or the study of the origin, Charles Williams, the author of multiple textbooks on Chinese art and writing, explains, “The yin and yang are the negative and positive principles of universal life, and are pictorially represented by the symbol

…the dark and light colours distinguishing the two principles”. This text explains yin and yang in the same manner that Chyanne did: yin is the dark, emotional half compared to the light, extroverted yang.

Little did I know that the yin and yang had more applications than simply explaining that light cannot exist without darkness, and vice versa. In the introduction to his textbook devoted to the symbol, Robin Wang explains that the symbol has been oversimplified due to its ease of recognition: “Because yin and yang are the most commonly known concepts from Chinese philosophy, they have practically become English words themselves” (2012, p. 1). To further his point, many students who can’t remember every detail they learned in their seventh-grade world history class forget that “yang” doesn’t rhyme with “sang,” rather “song.” Wang continues to explain how the symbol relates to Daoism’s teachings:

Second, yinyang offers a normative model with balance, harmony, and sustainability as ideals. When one compares something to yin or yang, this usually suggests a way of dealing with things through the balance or harmony between two elements. Such advice is popularly applied to almost all fields of action: leadership, business, art, media, sports, and psychoanalysis.

There was the explanation I needed to understand what it meant to be the yin of my friendship. I brought my softer, passive, emotional personality to the table, and Chyanne balanced it out with her assertive, blunter way of acting. I brought my wild ideas, soaring with my head in the clouds, and Chy balanced me by remaining grounded, offering her rational thoughts to counter mine. It was with this perfect blend of give and take, push and pull, that we wrote thousands of words and drew hundreds of pictures. I wore my black yin necklace as a constant reminder of my role in this relationship; as Tao Te Ching describes,

Know the white,
Yet keep to the black;
Be a pattern for the world.
If you are a pattern for the world,
The Tao will be strong inside you
And there will be nothing you can’t do.

I want to end the story here, with Chy and I drawing and writing every single day, always improving, always working in harmony, but humanity is not that perfect.

The next time we saw each other in person, she came back to Indiana for a week. All the tension of a long-distance relationship melted away for those seven days. As per tradition, we played through Super Paper Mario, this time at my house, and even though over a year had passed, I still cried at the end. Listening to the music, reading the dialogue as Chy defeated the final boss with nothing but muscle memory, the ending transported me back to when we didn’t worry about anything but our next piece of the story we were both still writing.

Both of us grew up to be chronic worriers in high school. We worried about the weather and our grades and college and our future majors and jobs and everything else we could come up with. Around the same time that she began to draw into herself, I started to reach out. I found relief from my worrying externally while she sought solace internally. I didn’t realize until it was too late, but she’d begun building walls I didn’t know how to break down.

I hit the first wall the second semester of our junior year. We continued to discuss our stories, but her plot grew darker, her ending more bitter than sweet, until she stopped wanting to talk about her story altogether. Every day when I arrived home from school, I sent her a message hoping she’d had a better day than yesterday, but if it was worse, I’d be there waiting if she wanted to talk about it.

She almost never wanted to talk about it. Instead, she asked me to tell her everything that went on in my day. My messages grew longer as hers shortened, sometimes only responding with an emoji instead of actual words. I tried to ask her what she wanted to talk about, how she was doing, how her story was coming along, but the more I showed I cared about her, the less she cared.

We began going days without speaking. Maybe because our schoolwork grew more demanding, maybe because we were both losing our muses, she drew less, and I wrote less. I still
looked up to her as the yang to my yin, the sun to my moon, even when her messages, when they finally did arrive, gave no excuse as to where she’d been or why she never wanted to talk anymore.

Chyanne visited me in person the summer before our senior year. The trip wasn’t even for me, but since she was staying in a hotel in our hometown, she took a few hours out of her day to sit with me in Starbucks. Chy looked exactly the same as I’d remembered; her hair was even the same length. She was only in town to tour Ball State, a university she didn’t end up attending. I didn’t know it at the time, but that would be the last time I’d see her again in person. Inspired by our reunion, however brief, I spent a few days that summer replaying Super Paper Mario yet again, this time, all alone. Even after all those years, the ending still hadn’t lost its magic; I still shed a few tears when the ending sequence started.

Mario’s goal in the game is to stop the villain, Count Bleck, from using an ancient spell known as The Void to destroy everything in existence. Mario receives help from a human-turned-butterfly nicknamed Tippi who acts as a guide and sidekick. Throughout the game, the player receives hints as to who Tippi and Count Bleck were before the events of the story. It isn’t until the final battle that the game reveals their identities as Timpani, a human in the Tribe of Light, and Lord Blumiere, a ruler of the Tribe of Darkness. These two tribes were never living in harmony, yet Timpani and Blumiere fell in love. Before their plan to run away to a world where they could live together in peace came to fruition, Timpani received a curse for attempting to dilute the bloodline of the Tribe of Darkness, leading Blumiere to believe her dead. Blumiere, blinded by the loss of his love, had set out to destroy everything that had taken away Timpani by using The Void. When the two reunite at the end, he realizes that their separation was temporary instead of permanent like he’d been led to believe. To stop the spell, the two must sacrifice themselves just moments after they found each other, after they believed they could live happily ever after. At the end of the credits, a silhouette of the two on a grassy hill covers the screen, along with the words “The End” and a simple music-box melody called “Memory.” It always manages to move me to tears.

The end of my friendship with Chyanne brought me back to the very first time I’d finished the game. I’d cried for Blumiere and Timpani’s tragedy, their selflessness, and their
hope at the very end that even though they’d given up everything else, they still had each other. When my other half, the yang to my yin, severed the bond completely, I cried for my own tragedy, but unlike with my favorite game, I saw no hope after the credits. I stopped enjoying writing because I saw her in every word. When I tried cutting her out of what was left of my fractured world, I watched my creation crumble to pieces.

Accompanying the sudden silence in my head, the loneliness that gripped my heart and wouldn’t let go, was a new fear I’d never faced before, not with Chy at my side. Without her to support my never-ending ideas, I grew to fear the blank page, the blinking cursor, and the possibility that I’d never create anything as beautiful as I’d written before Chyanne denied me access to our shared world.

I wanted to throw all of my writing, all of my characters, my worlds, my ideas, into a Void that could take them away. But I didn’t have a Void. All I had were my thoughts, my keyboard, and a yang-shaped hole beside my yin. The change didn’t happen overnight, but I kept writing, and the more I did, the more I learned to enjoy the process again. When I stopped wishing for the past, I looked around at my present and found the hope after the credits. At the time, I couldn’t put the feeling into words, but I found the description in Wang’s writing:

Because of this dependence on context, a single thing can be yin in one way and yang in another…. These are not contradictory labels, and it would be absurd to argue whether the right hand is really yang or really yin. The qualities only make sense when one specifies a certain context. The fact that anything is simultaneously yin and yang mirrors the fact that things are always implicated in multiple relations at once.

There it is: I may be wasting my time trying to argue whether I’m really the yin or yang. In the context of my life, I exhibit qualities of both. But perhaps more importantly, because I don’t have to define myself as just the yin or yang of my relationship with Chyanne, I also don’t have to rely on her to complete me.

There are still pieces of my writing that I can point to and see her in immediately. I don’t think that will ever fade like the pain of her leaving did, but at the same time, I don’t want it to. If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to.
If you aren’t afraid of dying,
there is nothing you can’t achieve.

Trying to control the future
is like trying to take the master carpenter’s place.

When you handle the master carpenter’s tools,
chances are that you’ll cut yourself.
ACT 5

SCENE 3.5

TARTUFFE, KING, PALACE GUARD, OFFICER

Lights fade out as purple curtains drop over different sections of the house set. At the same time, stagehands wheel off the different furniture pieces and place two thrones center stage. In addition, a table and a few chairs are placed stage right. Then the PALACE GUARD will stand with perfect posture stage right with his hands ready to grab his sheathed sword. Once the setup is finished, a golden-yellow light will shine upon the stage as the scene unfolds.

TARTUFFE

(Frantically rushes onto stage and almost runs into the PALACE GUARD:)

PALACE GUARD

(Draws weapon:)

Hault! What do you think you’re doing?

TARTUFFE

I’m sorry good sir for the scare,
But are you aware
That there is an imposter lurking about.

PALACE GUARD

(Slight pause to show that he is thinking:)
I really do have some doubts.
Is there a way you can prove that what you say is true?
If not we are through.

TARTUFFE

You see these documents in my hand.
They carry the weight for a family to be banned.

PALACE GUARD

(Leans over to glance at the documents:)

TARTUFFE

For how do I know you are not a spy?
These papers are the reason why
I came here in the first place
To speak to Your majesty, Your Grace.

PALACE GUARD

Ah now it all makes sense.
Please wait here and do not be tense.
I will go and get Your Majesty,
So you two can talk about this travesty
(Exits stage right:)

TARTUFFE

(Aside:)
And now that my plan is underway
This time tomorrow, midday.
The roles will switch
And Orgon will no longer be rich.
Here as I wait, I must keep up my charade
And make it look like I just prayed.
In order for my scheme to succeeded
I must let my false sainthood take the lead.
So that I can keep up my facade
I'll get down on my knees and pretend to ask God.
To help and guide me through this rough time
And ask for forgiveness on behalf of my friends for their crimes.
(TARTUFFE then gets on his knees and puts his hands together in a praying position.)
(Footsteps can be heard and the KING and PALACE GUARD enter stage right.)
TARTUFFE
(Loudly:)
Oh God please help me
For my friends have been acting quite beastly.
I struggle because I want to protect them,
But I do not want to be dragged down by the sins of scum.
Please show me that what I have done is just.
That is why I have given You all my trust.
KING
(Coughing to clear his throat:)
TARTUFFE
(Frantically stands up and brushes the dust/dirt off his pants:)
KING
Please forgive me for disturbing your prayer.
TARTUFFE
Oh no worries! I just did not hear you come in there.
(Gestures stage right:)
Pardon my lack of manners, I am Tartuffe of Paris
And I’ve come here quite embarrassed.
You see I found these papers in the house where I’m staying
And they seem to be a bit dismaying.
KING
(Aside:)
Strange that he claims he is from Paris, but yet
His accents suggests that
He comes from the Southern part of France…
(Slight pause to show he is thinking:)

I think that I will give this Tartuffe a chance
To save himself from unintentional deceit.
I just hope I can be discreet.

(To TARTUFFE,)
From Paris you say,
Have you always lived there or are you from farther away?

TARTUFFE
No I am a Parisian, born and raised.
I do not want to sound crazed,
But I am quite distressed about these documents
And what it means for the house’s occupants.

KING
Ah yes let me take a look,
So I can figure out if your friends are crooks.
It seems to me that these are an exile’s documents.
Would you mind if I take these and discuss them
With an Officer, so we can decide an outcome
For your friends that is worthy and just?
You can wait here it shouldn’t take long.

TARTUFFE
Would you mind if I tagged along?

KING
I think it would best.
If you let me do the rest.
Here take a seat.
(Motions to a nearby chair.)
And I’ll have my servant bring you a treat.

TARTUFFE
I guess that will have to do.
I'll bid you adieu.

(Lights fade out on the stage as all the actors exit stage right. Once offstage, golden-yellow lights shine across the stage as the KING, PALACE GUARD, and OFFICER enter stage left and huddle around a table inspecting the documents:)

OFFICER
It looks like these documents are real.
KING
I mean I could have told you that. You can tell by the seal.
OFFICER
Your majesty then why did you call me here?
KING
Well you see I have a few fears.
OFFICER
What do you mean?
KING
I do not want to be obscene,
But I have reason to believe
That this man, Tartuffe, is trying to deceive
Us. I have to admit
He seems like a hypocrite.
OFFICER
Your majesty, even for you, these accusations
Seem a bit extreme for these situations.
KING
No, no, you do not understand
I think Tartuffe had this all planned
For when I went to meet him
He appeared to be saying some sort of hymn
Normally I would not find this odd,
But his prayers were quite loud. It seems like a facade.

OFFICER
Maybe he just doesn’t know how to lower his voice?

KING
I guess that could be
But it seems to me
That he wanted me to hear his intercessions,
So that I would believe him without any questions.
While a true Saint
Would not be so quaint.
Later on he stated that he was from the city of Paris.
This lie was pretty careless
Because his accent suggests he’s from the South.
(Dramatic pause:)
Officier. Do you remember,
A few months ago, last September,
You were trying to chase
A criminal who was near impossible to trace.

OFFICER
You mean the one who ran around the South?
The one with a charismatic mouth?

KING
Yes, yes him!
It seems to me that Tartuffe resembles
That treacherous man who makes me tremble.

OFFICER
Oh wow.
I see it now.
(Loudy sighs:)
What are we going to do?
We cannot let him get away this time too.
KING
I know. We will have to be cunning
To keep him from running.
I propose we let him think
That we trust his every word.
But once he leads you back to his estate
You will state
How I figured out his true identity.
You shall then arrest him and there shall be, finally, amenity.
OFFICER
Your majesty this plan is foolproof,
But what are we going to do about the family he dooped?
KING
I do not believe they should take a fall
When their crimes are rather small.
I mean after all their treachery helped us find
The criminal who would not think twice about deceiving the blind.
Therefore, tell them that I pardoned their mistakes
And then you shall arrest this fake.
OFFICER
Shall I leave now
So that I can be back by sundown?
KING
Yes. Yes. Have haste
And be careful not to make a mistake.
For we cannot let him be away.
This villain needs to pay
I’ve been in school for 13 years of my 18 years of life. Most of what I’ve learned has come from outside of the classroom.

* “Come on Molly!” Mom shouted. “We have to take your brother to school.”
  “I wanna go to school too!” I replied.
  “You will. Just not now; you’re not old enough.” We all piled into the car, Mom strapping me into my car seat. As the buildings flashed past, I thought about what school would be like. I imagined it was a wonderful collection of people who made friends and did cool stuff. I bet it would be like a form of heaven – complete with every good thing: cupcakes, crayons, friends, and finger paint.

We stopped in front of a tall brick building not too far away from our apartment in Baltimore. Mom unbuckled herself and then came around to my side. We walked in side-by-side. Josiah, Mom, then me. Josiah was carrying a backpack, oh how I longed for a backpack! Mom talked to some adults, and they introduced Josiah to some kids.

  “Molly, say bye to Josiah, we have to leave now!”
  “Bye, Siah!” I said as I waved.
  “Bye!” replied the bright-eyed 5 yr. old boy. His back turned to us as he entered a room filled with books, colors, and young minds.

  The car ride back felt empty. “Mom, when is Siah coming back?” The past 5 minutes had felt like 5 years without him.

  “We pick him up in a few hours,” she replied.
  “How about we go to Dunkin Donuts?”
  “Yay! Can I get a jelly donut?”

*
I lay on the floor of our apartment in King of Prussia, PA uncontrollably sobbing. My brother ran around looking for random items he’d forgotten to pack earlier. The reality of the situation hadn’t hit me until now – and apparently, I wasn’t ready for it.

“Come on, Molly. Get off the floor,” My mom had been consoling me this whole time, but even she had had enough.

Josiah came into the room. “Hey Molly, do you want these sunglasses?” He handed me a pair of multicolored sunglasses.

“Do you not want them anymore?” I asked as I wiped the tears from my face.

“No. I think I got them in Germany, but they’re yours if you want them.”

“Thanks. You know I’m going to miss you.” I said.

“I knowww. I won’t miss you though.” He said, jokingly.

“I know that too,” I chuckled.

Tomorrow was the day that we took my brother to college. He would only be a three hour drive away (he was going back to Maryland), but I still didn’t like the idea of being the only child at home. Josiah and I had a weird relationship. We haven’t always been super close, we were at one point, but we’ve sort of drifted apart as we got older. Yet no matter how little we interact, there’s always been a bond between us. Maybe it’s just because we’re related. I think it’s because we’ve grown up in the same environment. We’ve experienced a lot of the same ups and downs. Although, often, he experienced the downs before I did because he’s older.

I put on the sunglasses to hide the tears.

*I loved the smell of Dunkin Donuts. I always got a jelly donut and never wanted to try anything else. I knew what I liked. Why would I risk finding something I didn’t like?*

Mom and I were sitting at a table by the window when someone ran in and said, “Turn on the TV.” I thought this was strange but didn’t pay any attention to it. However, the workers turned the TV on, and I heard gasps as hands flew to mouths.

The Dunkin Donuts got dead silent, and I didn’t know why. I just kept eating my jelly donut. Mom hurriedly gathered our things and shuffled me outside to the car. She called my dad, but he didn’t pick up, because he was at work.
“Mommy, what’s wrong?” I asked, unsure of what to do.
“T’m not quite sure yet, Molly. We just have to get home.”

* 

My brother’s first day of preschool was on 9/11/01. I remember dropping my brother off, but not seeing the Twin Towers fall to the ground on the flat screen TV. People all over the world were concerned for their loved ones; I just wanted to go to school. It’s crazy how the world works that way.

* 

Familial love is something very complex. Most people have a love-hate relationship with their family members. But no matter how much we may hate them in the moment, we realize in our core that we love them. It is a layered love.

* 

I’ve never been in love.

* 

“Who do you like?! If you tell me, I promise I won’t tell anyone.” I assured my best-friend, Molly H.

“Ugh, fine.” A moment of silence.

“It’s Nathan,” she said. I gasped then giggled.

“No way! Guess what?” I asked.

“What?”

“I like Nathan too!” Go figure we like the same person. Our school of 22 people only had 2 guys in grades 5-7.

“Really?” Molly looked at me with wide eyes. We both burst out laughing.

“Hey, Molly? I want you to know though that if he likes you too, I won’t be mad. I’d want you to be happy.” The words were hard to get out, but they were out now, and that’s what mattered.

“Thanks. I want the same for you too,” Molly replied.

* 

My friends and I joke about how we just want a nice guy to date. But in reality, we want
more than that. We want to fall uncontrollably in love with someone who loves us unconditionally. I’m not even sure that exists. I think it’s possible to love someone through thick and thin, but love is not always pretty. I’m looking for someone who is willing to go through the ugly with me and come out real on the other side, much like what God has done for us through Jesus’ death.

* 

Molly and Nathan “dated” in 6th grade. Nathan and I “dated” in 9th grade. I don’t think it was love on either side.

* 

I’ve always loved the Twilight series. I get a lot of crap for it, but there’s something beautiful about the love shared between Bella and Edward. I’ll admit the writing isn’t the greatest, the acting can be cheesy, and it is entirely strange that Jacob falls in love with Bella’s baby. However, the love that Edward and Bella have is unbreakable, no matter what they do. I’ve fallen in love with their love story.

* 

The nerves were bubbling up inside me. I took a deep breath.

“You’re going to be great, Molly. Don’t worry about it.” My friend reassured me.

“Thanks, Melody.” It was opening night of the ballet, Sleeping Beauty, and I was Aurora that performance.

“Can I see everyone in Jewels over here for a second?” One of our dance instructors shouted backstage. Melody and I, along with the other girls in Jewels headed over towards her voice.

“Guys. The ending in Jewels is not good. I mean it looks like… poop. We’re changing it and making it easier. Girls on the end, do a sousu instead of an attitude.” We all knew she was down-playing how she really felt, which made things worse. This was not what I wanted to hear 15 minutes before I went on stage. To hear that some of my dancing looks like shit is never a good thing to hear before a performance. This teacher had always been passive-aggressive, but to say something like that to a graduating senior right before she performs one of the biggest roles she’s ever danced seemed a little too far. The nerves burst.
It was then that I learned to not let everything go to my head. If I hadn’t chosen to ignore the negativity that accompanied what she said, the show probably wouldn’t have gone as well as it did.

I understand that constructive criticism is a good thing, and I’ll take all the corrections I can get. However, if I dwell on my shortcomings too much, my life begins to feel like just that – a shortcoming. Then I lose motivation to try and improve, because it feels impossible. As soon as I decided not to care what my dance instructor thought of me, I felt a wave of relief. I could now work on the corrections for myself rather than for her. This has been a continual struggle – one which has followed me to college. Every day, I have to remind myself that I’m dancing for myself and the audience, not my teachers. After all, who cares what they think when I am accepted by the God of the universe?

“Got it.” I said.

*

Dance is one of my passions, one of my loves. I have a relationship with it just like I have relationships with people. Dance and I define a love-hate relationship. Yet, just as with familial love, at the core it is pure love.

*

A lot of my most memorable moments in life involve tears. I realized this as the tears streamed down my face for the thousandth time.

“I just don’t see a hunger for dance in you,” One of my dance professors said.

I couldn’t respond to this partly because I was hyperventilating with snot coming out of my nose, partly because I couldn’t understand how this professor didn’t see the obvious love and passion that fills me when I dance.

“I mean, you have to ask yourself this question, Molly. You have to ask yourself if dance fulfills you. You need to be satisfied when you dance.” This last part threw me for a loop. I have always loved dancing. I feel right when I dance. I feel at home. But I do not see dance as the end-all-be-all. If it was, then my life would be pretty depressing.

“I’m sorry, I feel like the room is spinning. I just wasn’t expecting to talk about this kind of stuff today. What time is it?” I managed to say.
“Um, 12:59. You better get to rehearsal.”
*
In my life, the greatest love of all is not love of family, friends, significant others, or passions. All of these loves stem from one greater love. This love is not a love-hate relationship. This love is all love. It is the love of God.
*
“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” John 15:12
*
The most important thing I’ve learned in my eighteen years is love.
Maxine Hong Kingston’s name is settled innocently just above the title of her short story “No Name Woman.” The narrator is assumed to be Kingston herself, as the text was pulled from a larger collection of stories fitted together to create Kingston’s autobiography. Not once in the dense pages, however, do letters ever string together to form the name of the author, or any other character, for that matter, hence the title: “No Name Woman.” The nomenclature was not chosen coincidentally, but rather is used as part of Kingston’s strategy to transform her narrative of a maturing, second generation immigrant possessing a fascination with the mystery of her aunt into a story that is full of depth and guidance and is relatable to every reader. Through the narrator’s imagination leading to a recognition of self within her aunt’s story, accompanied by the omission of character names, Kingston creates her own no name story to which readers can connect, and uses it to encourage readers to confront and combat the continuation of oppressive, customary gender roles so her desire for freedom and humanity for all can be realized.

Kingston’s memoir begins with the narrator’s recollection of the story of her aunt, as told by her mother, who releases only the bare minimum plot points of the aunt’s story. Kingston writes: “In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she has never been born” (383). The mother also includes the fact that the aunt was pregnant out of wedlock, and consequently, the villagers cast a net of shame upon the woman and beat her family’s house to a pulp (Kingston 383-385). The cropped information is shared with the sole purpose of terrifying the narrator into running miles away from her aunt’s “rebellious” footsteps, and toward conformity to gender roles, as Kingston confirms when, from the stance of the mother, she declares, “What happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (385). The mother glues her mouth shut then, and the narrator does not ask
questions. However, the narrator also does not settle with solely the darkest part of her aunt’s life uncovered. Instead, she moves on to piece together her aunt’s story like a puzzle and build a life of human experiences out of the ash of the no name story.

Leading with the scraps her mother has laid out, the narrator embarks on her detective quest to know her aunt. The narrator is warned that her aunt conceived a child with a man who was not her husband (Kingston 383), and her first steps to solving the puzzle include imagining her aunt’s relationship with the man, using guessing words: “perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain” (Kingston 390). The narrator furthers her investigation by figuring in speculations based on what she knows about the customs and culture of her aunt’s time, reckoning that her aunt performed chores on the mountain and “always did as she was told” (Kingston 383). At this point, the narrator has established a basic framework of the story, and she dives into specifics of the affair as if she had been trembling alongside her aunt in the same moment: “the first night she saw him, he had sex with her” (Kingston 386). The narrator was not even alive at this point in time, yet she makes assertions as if they are the truth. Finally, the narrator goes beyond all limits and she steps into her aunt’s mind, reading her thoughts: “When she tried to envision him, she only saw the black and white face in the group photograph” (Kingston 386). Kingston repeats the cycle of known facts, traditions, and guesses throughout the story, adding substance to the narrator’s image of her aunt while slyly feeding the reader’s suspicion of the tale created by the narrator.

In particular instances, the narrator takes her personal experiences and blends them with her aunt’s story; as a result, Kingston proves to the reader that the gaps of the no name story are only filled due to the gender roles that have successfully transcended time and space into the narrator’s own life. Towards the middle of the story, the narrator recounts a painstakingly distinct occasion of her aunt’s life: “Once my aunt found a freckle on her chin, at a spot that the almanac said predestined her for unhappiness. She dug it out with a hot needle and washed the wound with peroxide” (Kingston 388). The recollection is so astonishingly specific, right down to the needlepoint, that the narrator could never have truly known whether it occurred or not, let alone have been aware of her aunt’s reasoning and cognition throughout the event. She states the story as fact, regardless. Kingston has positioned this situation directly after a section dedicated
to the narrator’s own experience with agonizing tactics to rise to beauty standards, as well as a
story of her ancestors facing similar challenges (388). Thus, Kingston reveals that the narrator’s
window to her aunt’s life is found in the form of a mirror, as the narrator feels the same pain as
hairs are ripped from her skin (388); exhibits the same longing gazes at boys (390); and
demonstrates the same self-deprecating fixation with her beauty (390). Just as her ancestors were
trapped within their gender roles, the narrator’s mother bends down to impose beauty
expectations and warnings of paths mistaken upon her daughters, and the narrator lives out the
story. Through the connections leading back to herself, deep down the narrator knows that
inevitably her aunt not only “might have,” or “must have” (386), but did live the same story.

It isn’t until the conclusion of the narrative, after much reflecting, that Kingston coaxes
the reader into realizing that the narrator, herself, has been part of the perpetuation of the gender
roles that oppress women. The narrator is disgusted with the destruction and death of her aunt, as
evident by her attempt to give her aunt a chance at having existed for more than just a no name
warning. She builds experiences for the woman that have been practically wiped off the face of
the Earth. With the narrator’s digging for humanity in the lost life, Kingston does encourage
readers to fight back against the tradition of devaluing and disowning the shunned and the
betrayers to please onlookers and satisfy the status quo. However, despite her empathy towards
her aunt, the narrator admits regretting spending her whole life living by her aunt’s warning and
accepting her own fabricated version of her aunt’s life as the truth (Kingston 393). It is not until
very late in life that she realizes further courses of action that she could have taken to challenge
her family’s dehumanizing way of life: uncovering the truth and refusing to accept the gender
roles as life rules (391). While Kingston’s account rounds off with a melancholy ode to the
continuation of superficial stories and oppressed ghosts, she also leaves the reader with a spark
of hope. Through the narrator’s regret, Kingston inspires readers to press beyond simply
accepting warnings, adopting gender roles, and imagining humanity and actually take the leap
towards discovering the truth, thus fulfilling the chance of change Kingston missed.

Kingston is, in effect, using her own no name story to liberate readers – not to haunt
future generations into conforming to traditional gender roles, but to encourage readers to turn
away from the customary social constructs before it is too late, and to discourage readers from
telling the suffocating no name stories themselves. Accompanying the narrator’s self-reflection within her aunt’s tragedy, Kingston incorporates the element of anonymity into her writing. Kingston establishes her characters with general familial titles, replacing names unique to the narrator’s story with “aunt,” “mother,” “sister,” “father,” and “brother” (383). The removal of names provides a release of possession – an opportunity for readers to effortlessly fill in the blanks of the story with their own experiences, memories, and family. Instead of the story simply belonging to Kingston, it reflects every reader, male and female, who may recognize themselves in any one of the character’s shoes. Through the story, readers are guided to developing a vicarious awareness of their own place within social constructs, and their role in perpetuating the traditions of gender oppression. Recognizing one’s imprisonment in a life of paper will encourage the reader to steer his or her future down a path Kingston was not able to follow – demanding, telling, and creating stories full of life. To eradicate one’s tendency to uphold the oppressive customs of the past through accepting and passing on no name stories will ultimately allow for Kingston’s hopes of humanity and equality to flourish among all people.

Works Cited

There is a good chance that you, or someone you know, has been defecated on by a pigeon. It’s not that uncommon. Just the other day I was walking to class and heard what I thought was a large rain drop fall from a tree. Yet the sun was shining, so it could not have been. Turns out, I had just narrowly escaped the target zone of one of our feathered friends. Being pooped on by a pigeon, or any bird for that matter, is one of my worst fears. It’s a day ruiner. A good hair day’s nightmare. Sometimes it’s considered good luck, but that’s up to you. I have never really thought much about pigeons. They were always just there.

Sometimes in cities I’d see one that was prettier than the rest and I’d pay a little bit more attention than usual, but other than that, they didn’t serve a huge purpose in my life. So, I didn’t pay attention. However, they recently entered my life, demanding more attention, in a way I had not expected. My friend’s phone died and she needed to text someone. My response was, “send a pigeon.” Boom. Enter the pigeon, strutting its way into my heart. The more I thought about them, the more curious I became. I thought about how pigeons used to make up a significant part of our communication, but now they have become as common and as useless as a sock without its pair.

When we think of pigeons, our minds think of the slick, gray birds who eat crumbs off the pavement and who entertain old men. Yet pigeons had a past life as war heroes. As communicators and as a necessary stepping stone to how we consume news today. They’ve taken a winding path to “retirement.” As the world has evolved, it’s swept communicative technology with it. We now crave instant communication. We want to know what happened as soon as it happens. But if a pigeon hit you in the face, as fast at the last text you sent got to the person you sent it to, I think we’d view pigeons differently.

If you’re looking for a pigeon, you’re more than likely going to find them in a large, densely populated city. Cities cater perfectly to the needs of a pigeon population. They have plenty of food scraps, nooks to live in, and for the most part, they’re not bothersome. Let’s face
it, they are part of every park experience and really add to the “city vibe.” And you tell me, what’s a good St. Mark’s Square picture in Venice without all the pigeons?

Animals have been serving humans since the dawn of recorded history. Donkeys pulled carts in Pompeii. Dogs accompanied many explorers, famously a Newfoundland named Seaman joined Lewis and Clark on their expedition. And the story of Noah and the Arc is one of the first stories that mentions birds. As the story goes, Noah releases a dove out in search of dry land, but the dove comes back, indicating that there is none. The dove, a variety of pigeon, returned, displaying the homing instinct that they are famous for. The homing instinct is present in all birds, indicated by their ability to find their way back to their nests. Pigeons have been trained to have a higher degree of homing than most birds, which takes a long time and detailed handling to develop.

Edgar Chamberlain, a pigeon trainer himself, in his 1907 book The Homing Pigeon, say that the raising of pigeons and the development of the homing instinct is a calculated process. The trainer, or as they are also called “fancier,” has to have a deep understanding of the birds as well as an experienced hand to do the job effectively. These trainers are like the Geniuses at the Genius Bar in the Apple stores, they know everything there is to know about the technology and what needs to be done to fix it or make it better.

The carrier pigeon was bred for many years in order to achieve the specific characteristics that make them “Homers.” The Belgians can be attributed for the first variation of homing pigeon. They crossed various breeds of birds for physical characteristics that would make them good homers. This “base model” has been improved upon since then, but because the birds required lots of breeding and training, the earliest ones were kept by the wealthy, which improved their status even further. It’s like how buying the newest iPhone makes someone even cooler than they were before. These wealthy individuals simply had the newest technology, and soon everyone wanted it.

During the early stages of development, there were lots of carrier pigeons bred for optimal results. As Chamberlain says in his book, there were Carriers (Columba tabellaria), Dragons (Columba tabellaria minima), and Horseman pigeons (Columba tabellaria minor), the three basic types of pigeons from which others came. These pigeons were all the improved
version of the one before. However, they all remained part of the same family of birds, the distinctions coming from their physical attributes. Eventually, Horseman pigeons disappeared due to overbreeding, but the others remained part of the family. These pigeons were designed for success, much like technology today is designed to please the masses. Breeders wanted the sleekest, most efficient, and most reliable pigeons they could have. The public today wants the same thing, but with modern technology.

The homing quality in pigeons is actually similar to qualities in humans and other organisms. Pigeons, and all birds, use the topography of their surroundings to develop a mental map of where they are in relation to where their home is located. (Strasser et al., 1998). It’s like craving a midnight McDonald’s run, jumping in your car, and driving there and back without a GPS. You know your way home based on what is surrounding you, or the fact that you may have gone to McDonald’s a few times before. These directions and knowledge of our whereabouts, are functions of the hippocampus, a region of your brain that controls our awareness of surroundings and our ability to know where we are in relation to other places. To complicate things, pigeons also are drawn back to their homes by the earth’s magnetic field, which is different from humans. Pigeons don’t look to their left and know that when they see the Chase Bank they’re five minutes from home like we do. Although landmark recognition is part of it, the farther the distance, the harder to recognize specifics.

Because of the pigeon’s physical characteristics as well as the trainable homing capability, these birds were excellent vehicles for wartime communication. This is probably the first use that comes to mind when carrier pigeons are brought up in conversation. During World War I, soldiers would often shoot pigeons out of the sky for target practice. They feared that they might be carrying a message to enemy lines, so shooting down pigeons was also a way of intercepting them and gaining a potential advantage. However, this would not have been an easy thing to do. Pigeons fly at an average speed of 77.6 miles per hour and have been clocked at speeds up to 92.5 miles per hour. Obviously, it beats having to wait for a messenger on foot or horseback, which are slower and have a higher chance of being caught.

“The Pigeon Express” was the name given to the line of specially trained pigeons working in the field alongside the soldiers. You may be reminded of “The Pony Express,” an
early form of speedy long distance communication. Riders would gallop horses at full speed to different “docking stations” along a route and trade out their tired, worn down horse, for a fresh one, continuing until they reached their destination. The Pigeon Express worked similarly. However, the issue with pigeons is that they only work one way. Pigeons would be “homed” to a determined docking station, one where many other pigeons were also trained to home to and this way when the pigeons came back, the messages would all be in one space. Soldiers would carry pigeons into the field in backpacks, special cages, and in structures attached to the tops of trucks. When the pigeons were tossed, the term used for releasing a pigeon carrying a message, they would find their way back to the docking spot. But trainers were not able to toss a pigeon from the docking building back to the soldier it came from.

Pigeons were extremely valuable during the war, just as much as the people who trained them. In his book Pigeons in the Great War, Lt.-Col. A. H. Osman writes, “On the 17th of August 1928, I received a letter from by old chief under whom I last served on the Headquarter’s Staff at Horse Guards, saying that ‘during the war he scarcely or properly appreciated all that pigeons did for the cause,’ adding, ‘Now I know better.’”

The trainers deserve an equal amount of respect because they were the ones responsible for the pigeons getting where they needed to go. Towards the beginning of WWI, a Voluntary Pigeon War Committee was formed, whose purpose was to train, distribute, and handle the pigeons for the duration of the war (Osman, 1927). They issued permits to soldiers that stated that they were able to carry pigeons, and this permit was required upon inquiry. It may seem bizarre that whether we will start to demand new technologies at any cost After all, that’s what technology is supposed to do, surpass what preceded it.

It’s pretty evident that pigeons have been around for a while, way longer than the Apple products that have taken their places. But in a way, carrier pigeons were our world’s first step towards “instant messaging.” They were able to do what cars could in a fraction of the time, making them faster than anything that we’d had before. Although, after acclimating to this type of “instant” communication, people became impatient when it came to waiting for the “traditional” types of communication (letters, telegrams, etc.). The need for quick communication during wartime changed the playing field for how information was communicated on a daily basis.
Being able to know what was happening as soon as it happened stated to become the world’s new normal. People liked it and they didn’t want to wait if they didn’t have to. Soon writing letters was out and text messages were in.

So, what about if your phone dies, and your less than sympathetic friend tells you to “send a pigeon”? You would no longer have the safe, blanket-like security that lets you know that the message you sent has been received. Yourself and others would be thrown into a panic, not knowing where you are or what you’re doing. You could have been abducted by aliens! Fallen into a well! Been hit by a meteorite! Anything! But you can’t tell anyone, because your phone died, and no one is going to know in that moment what has happened to you. Part of you might feel a little bit cheated. This phone was supposed to have a good battery life, specifically so that this wouldn’t happen. But since when did we have to pay for certainty and is it okay to make us pay for it? Being uncertain is uncomfortable. And people pay for comfort and certainty all the time. Extra leg room on a plane or knowing what you got on your test as soon as you can. We combatted these things with programs that allow you to check your grades and choose your plane seat, but these all still rely of the internet, computers, or phones. Knowing immediately brings comfort to us all, thus we have developed into a population that needs to know. Right. Now.

The technology of today (iPhones, computers, etc.) carries with it a guarantee that the information you send gets to its intended destination. And it should, because that is exactly what they are designed to do: outwit uncertainty (i.e. the recipient will get the message). There are features on phones that let the user know that the message has been received, just in case they didn’t already believe it. The “read receipts” and “delivered” indicators let the sender know that the other side has gotten the message. Coupled with this is the anxiety that we feel if someone doesn’t text us back within five minutes. If we are “left on read,” an overwhelming urge to “double text” comes over us. Not able to wait for the next one and not knowing if that person will or will not get back to you. There is a hope that they will, unlike the certainty that we get with a “read receipt.” We thrive off the immediate acknowledgement and consumption of information and are impatient otherwise.

Just think about what it would be like to wait. To wait and to now know whether what
you’re sending was going to make it, or if you failed that test and won’t pass that class. What if we all had to take a leap of faith and perhaps send a pigeon? Just picture it, waiting outside, blue sky above you, and seeing a bird, coming back to deliver what you’ve been waiting for. Relief washes over you and a smile appears on your face. Our cell phones put us in direct contact with others every day. And even though pigeons were our first “instant messaging,” they still had a whisper of faith that flies alongside them because no one knew for certain whether that pigeon would make it.

This is unnerving because it throws our faith, hope, and trust onto the chopping block. In a time where we had to wait for information, we trusted that we were going to get it eventually. But now, technology is trusted, not other people, and you have to rely on your device. Faith is also thrown into question. When soldiers tossed pigeons, they hoped and prayed that the message it was carrying would make it to where it needed to go, and they had faith that it would get there. And today we need to screenshot texts and send them to our friends before we reply, just to make sure that what we were going to say was okay. But you can’t screenshot a pigeon.

Pigeons were our life lines, our connection to the outside world, to others. Sounds a lot like technology today, doesn’t it? Carrier pigeons shouldn’t be swept under the rug as a minor detail, they should be celebrated and appreciated as a valuable piece of the communication development puzzle. They are the 1st generation iPhone of the 1930s. And this doesn’t mean that I’m going to let a pigeon poop on my head, but maybe if one did, I wouldn’t be quite as mad.
From the instant the Winter Olympics showcased a group of grown men furiously cleaning ice with brushes, I was hooked. I am not too surprised that I developed a fascination with curling at the age of eleven, as I have always been drawn to subjects that I deem peculiar, and, therefore, worthy. From annoying my brother constantly with the cartoon Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat, to choosing to dislike Justin Bieber or the Jonas Brothers because that was expected of every girl in my grade, I wanted to set myself apart from others. Years later, at the age of nineteen, I define myself less by trying to be contrarian, and instead I embrace what captivates me. And curling has remained constant.

My initial penchant to the sport of curling came from the ease at which I could crack jokes. I mean, the premise alone was more than enough for an immature kid to poke fun at while finding enjoyment. Curling was hypnotic. It dominated the television timeslots, and I could not tear my eyes away. While others groaned at the sight of a “filler” sport during the Olympics, which are supposed to be action-packed, I found solace when it was just me watching a sport I knew nothing about. On the outside, my family may have seen a young girl giggling and poking fun at foreign gameplay, but behind that façade was a deeper connection that I veiled with jokes. In the world of sports, curling is an anomaly all on its own that somehow draws in fans with its unique gameplay.

People always find a way to entertain themselves. For instance, I find joy in watching curling, so enjoyment is purely subjective. This may explain why Scottish farmers in the 1500s decided to start sliding granite stones down a frozen bog for fun. They either really liked what they were doing, or winters in Scotland were extremely boring. By some miracle, this game caught on and eventually developed into the great sport we call “curling”. Naturally, curling found its way to Canada in 1759 and then trickled down to the United States in 1832. Curling
continued to slowly gain traction until making its debut at the first Winter Olympics in 1924. However, curling was not a medaling sport at the Olympics again until seventy-two years later in 1998, which just so happens to be the year I was born. Despite what television broadcasters predicted, curling was a moderate success among the viewership and has continued to be a presence at the Winter Olympics to this day.

Curling looks ridiculous. However, when curling is broken down into its fundamental rules, it appears less ridiculous, although not by much. There is only so much I can do to legitimize a sport that includes sweeping the ice as a rule, but I will try my best. In order to fully understand the mechanics behind curling, we have to start from the ground up by analyzing the ice. It is a gripping topic, I know, but the grip of the ice is central to curling. Curlers are passionate about their ice and make sure the conditions are just right. First off, the water has to be pure to minimize contaminants, as the stone will not slide or curl properly if there are rough patches. The surface of the ice itself also has to be level. The most important aspects with curling ice are the small frozen water droplets called “pebbles.”

These pebbles reduce the amount of friction between ice and the curling stone, which is important in the stone’s projection; otherwise, on an untreated surface, the stone would stop halfway down the ice. As the game progresses, the ice will wear unevenly, forcing players have to adapt to any type of ice. How thrilling.

When I hear the word curling, I automatically associate it with the scrubbing of brooms on ice; however, these “brooms” are actually brushes. Depending on the curler’s preference, they can choose from two types of brushes: a cloth-covered brush or a hair brush. The brush functions as a tool to reduce friction between the stone and the ice. The brush slightly warms the ice and clears off any excess debris. This differs from my previous understanding of the brush’s purpose. I had thought the brushes kicked up ice in order to slow the stone down, but in reality, the brushing causes the stone to travel farther and straighter than its original trajectory. The term “curling” comes from “the technique when the deliverer releases the stone with a subtle twist on the handle that causes it to turn as it glides on the ice.” The signature curl, or bend in the stone’s path, comes from the fine-tuned release, and the brushing can smooth out a curl which also causes it to travel farther.
The trick to successful curling is finding the balance between knowing when and how to use the brush.

Curling terminology can be tough to follow simply because you have to stay awake long enough for it to be explained properly. In curling, there are ten rounds called “ends,” and teams can score at the conclusion of each end. During an end, each team alternates throwing the stone eight times, and each of the four players—the lead, the second, and the skip—throws twice. The lead, the second, and third throw the first six stones while the skip stands at the end of the lane and calls the shots, essentially acting as the team’s cheerleader. The skip, or team captain, is responsible for the team’s strategy and delivers the final two stones. When the round finishes, the position of the stones determines which team earns a point.

One aspect even more exciting than curling ice and terminology is the curling scoring system. On each end of the floor are targets called the “house.” The house is where the magic occurs. The curlers aim for the middle of this twelve-foot circle. The scoring occurs at the conclusion of each end, and only one team has a chance to win points. After the players have delivered every stone, the team with the closest stone to the center receives a point for every stone that is closer to the center than their opponent’s stones. If there are no stones on the house, then neither team receives points. That is always a sad occurrence.

The most basic curling strategy, besides not falling face-first on the ice, depends on whichever team delivers the final stone. Stone placement is crucial to scoring, so the team that throws last has the advantage of hitting the center of the house without the chance of the other team knocking it away. The team throwing first then has to place their stones in defense of the house. This is why some teams place their first stones so far in front of the target instead of trying for the center. They want to make it as difficult as they can for their opponent to hit the center at the end and score points. Taking in consideration the placement of each shot, along with the angles and the decision of whether or not to sweep on the shot, curling becomes an intense mental game that depends on communication between teammates.

If you have ever seen photographs of triumphant gold medalists celebrating their victory, they cannot compare to perusing through the United States Men’s Curling gold medal photos from Seoul. Picture this: grown men waving brooms aloft in celebratory shock while wearing
outfits that resemble patriotic pajamas. It is majestic. The United States has never been known as a curling powerhouse (that distinction is saved for Canada and Great Britain). The Americans had never won a gold medal in men’s or women’s curling. In 2006, the American men brought home a bronze medal, but at the next two Olympics, they finished last place and second-to-last place. The gold medal for the men at the 2018 Winter Olympic games, while hard-earned, was an unexpected game-changer. The American men were down in the tournament, and they could not afford to make a single mistake while facing teams like Canada and Sweden. Curling is not a sport that lends itself to underdogs, but the Americans handled the pressure like champs and went on a hot-streak. It was a crazy curling comeback story, which is my kind of curling story.

Tyler George, one of the members of the winning team, said that “We just want our sport to be loved by our country as much as we love it.” With this success story, historical win, and the passion of these men, maybe the tides will change for curling. One can only hope. How could a sport that starts off the Winter Olympics with “the ceremonial blaring of the bagpipes” to honor its Scottish heritage not catch on with the general public?

Like clockwork, curling clubs across the United States experience a spike in public interest after the heavy media coverage of the Winter Olympics. Dean Roth, the leader of Curl NYC, said that with the regularity of the curling broadcasting: “true curling mania first hit the United States back in 2002, during the Vancouver Olympics.”

After the Winter Olympics, curling, sadly, receives little-to-no media coverage and love. Curling is also a sport that many Americans, myself included, think is not as difficult to learn compared to other Winter Olympic sports, such as snowboarding. Curling is exotic in that way, that Scottish way. The combination of an unusual sport and its four-year coverage has generated a small group of admirers. The United States Curling Association has seen its membership numbers double to 20,000 curlers in the past fifteen years. With the recent gold medal victory of the U.S., the Milwaukee Curling club said that in regard to curling interest: “this is an exceptional year with the success of the American team.” Time will only tell if the victory of the Americans will lead to society’s overarching acceptance of curling as a legitimate sport, and not just an outlier on display once every four years.

Fundamentally, a sport is a social spectacle. From a sociological perspective, sports are
composed of the dynamic relationship between its players and fans as they celebrate a cherished pastime. Sports would not flourish without this outside support from the fans. So, write to your local congressman about curling—for the betterment of society. As a society, we make up sports, and sports also make up society. For instance, in order for a sport to increase in popularity, there has to be support from the masses. The shift in sports popularity that is most evident is American baseball. Although baseball was the most popular sport in the early 1900s, by the end of the century football had surpassed baseball in its popularity. This shift reflects the change of the times, whether it be technological or political. Since sports are interwoven with the evolution of society, “sports can be viewed as a microcosm of a larger society.” In 2018, individual voices are amplified and heard through the internet and its many social media sites, like Twitter and YouTube.

Using these platforms, individuals can express their opinions and find their own group in the collective. There are whole sections of the internet devoted to singular topics and this makes otherwise obscure media spread. We pick and choose what becomes popular with viral videos and the passing of information through our social medias. This social advancement of the internet will be reflective in the sports world in the upcoming years. Curling could skyrocket in popularity and recognition. We are in an age where normalization and acceptance are easier to achieve with technological advancements and this societal trend lends itself for curling to become a more popular sport as more people examine it closer. It seems that almost anything can become popular nowadays, so it is time for curling to own the spotlight.

Fascinating is one word I would use to describe curling. Its foreign nature caught my eye and pulled me in, and I have been a fan ever since. What started out as a joking admiration turned into sincere appreciation of the sport. Maybe I should just attribute my inclination toward curling due to my Scottish heritage. Who knows, my ancestors could have been tossing granite stones across the frozen bogs of Scotland, and I could be doing my part to continue their legacy. It could be in my blood—or not. I have been exposed to numerous sports growing up and have always been involved in as many as I can physically manage. I can remember season after season of playing both basketball and volleyball simultaneously. Throughout the eight years I played volleyball, to the brief time I spent on tennis lessons, to that one time I convinced my parents to let me take gymnastics (which is a terrible idea if you cannot do a cartwheel), I have never
experienced a sport like curling.

Curling, an Olympic sport that out of all the others I could see myself being capable of performing at a high caliber level. Curling, a sport where I could empathize with players as they swept as if their lives depended on it. My eleven-year-old self saw a piece of me reflected on that ice while I tried to conceal this connection with as many jokes as possible. Now I laugh because of the way I used to act. I laugh because I know better. I do not laugh because I am embarrassed, I laugh because I am proud of who I am and wish to share it with others. I am passionate about topics that are considered out-there by others and I will not conform to what society considers important. Although, if the popularity of curling rises, I may be part of the majority. I will not mind if curling does not soar in popularity because I will always have a special connection to a sport that has more to it than meets the eye. As a new member of the Butler University Curling Club, I am an advocate for a quirky sport that has some fantastic individuals, myself included.
Waves and Shards

Amber waves shiver above,
Mixed by a rose and indigo glove,
The rays bathe my body and spirit,
Stillness just for a minute.
Not her with knobby fingers stretched,
Not that with wrinkles deeply etched,
Not whore with eyes dancing in flame,
Not ghost with blood-stained knives to maim.
Not traitor which tearing voices guarantee,
Only and forever me.
How I long to frolic in the light,
Soak in the peace come withering night,
Shed my shoes and muddy my toes,
Free my hair from the root it grows,
Run until I reach the sky,
Through the colors my soul will fly,
Fingertips obstructed by only cloud
Until I gently land upon the ground.
Rising as a soldier on the field,
I stand, a weapon my arms wield.
Head pivots up and down and side,
But only forward do I stride.
I take back my pride, my dignity,
Reclaim my vibrant identity,
Define my existence, never to tame
And shout – the world hears my name.
My moment of serenity. All mine.
Beautiful, if only in my mind.
SNAP, the glorious vision shrinks
boom, my tender heart, it sinks
tick, roars echo, splinters crushing
tock, ebbing, manic rushing
I knew they were coming, I'm out of time.
as golden shards of dusk pierce my eyes,
one docile question overwhelms my mind:
how ever did I marvel at the morn's sun rise?

**Music and Me**

Around the table we crunch and sip,
Sharing smiles and an occasional quip.
The wind whips and frigid air bites at our door,
But inside together we are safe, we fear no more.
The plates clank
Chairs scrape
My fingers itch with anticipation,
One two three.
Heads nod
Jaws yawn
My arms twitch towards emancipation,
The notes set me free.
Even if just in my head
The music is a magic, coursing spread
Like water to a riverbed, the music, in my
veins it’s rife:
I’m surging with empowering life.
And then…
My hands flick and twirl like birds in flight,
My feet spring and point, muscles flexing
tight
My dress gently completing the aesthetic
symphony,
At last my joy swells liberally.
But then…
Bam bam bam.
Fists upon the door.
Stamp stamp stamp.
Thundering footsteps roar.
Bump bump bump.
The music cuts to a rest.
Thump thump thump.
A band drums in my chest.
They want to see they want to hear
They want to take they’re drawing near
Nasty smirks creep on their faces,
“Dance:” a chorus of shattering vases.
I stumble, hide my hands and turn,
They tremble where they were once firm.
Just one step is one too far
The knife is sure under my jaw.
The word “dance” is now a growl,
Uttered by minds trained to prowl,
Accompanied by words of condemnation,
They think me an insect of manipulation.
Screams escape my throat and plead,
They don’t hear the rationale I lead,
“I am a woman, a Muslim. Don’t kill me!”
(Yousafzai 147) I say,
They make me pledge my passion away.
But what is life without joy?
What is life without living?
And yet…
What is life without a beating heart?
Do I even have a choice?
Not with the knife digging into my neck,
Not with the gun raising, sights in check,
Not with the grip on my hair,
Not with the cursed role I’m forced to wear.
With my last breath of fury
I affirm my spirit they will never bury
And I dream of a world where I am free:
A world where I can truly be me.

Day
One day I will see my reflection on the other
side of the window, first steps outside as
natural as the rooster’s crow.
Out there where I grew up, where my
brother joked, where my father guided,  
where my mother loved.  
Out there where danger could not be found  
in my dictionary of childhood bliss.  
One day.  
One morning I will wake up in a library,  
“Niloufar” glistening upon my blouse.  
Children with shining bright eyes will  
marvel amongst my field of books.  
Tinkle of the bell, warm words floating in  
the air, venture in with a hunger, venture out  
nourished with stories.  
One morning.  
One autumn afternoon, like leaves after a  
crisp nudge of wind, the ground will be  
covered in sheaths,  
Loosened from their hold to swaying minds,  
distorting the vision of every eye.  
I will bounce about the crunchy street  
One autumn afternoon.  
One evening my head will be bowed in  
prayer,  
Thanking God for miracles so wondrously  
His and those that before lived only in my  
imagination,  
From the turning of the Earth to the growth  
of the trees to the encouraging heart beating,  
reassuring my soul that it is all real to the  
hands that clasp each of mine, entwined
together forever as one.
One evening.
One daybreak the world will be silent, but for the greeting of the birds.
One by one people will give in to the light peeking through shades, and blinds will open.
One smile will transcend panes of glass and venture across open streets. Doors will swing, and feet will tiptoe through dewy islands of grass.
One child will share a giggle with another, imaginations turning in sync. One parent will embrace his elderly neighbor, words bouncing cheerfully. One aunt will lock arms with the uncle across the way, brilliance radiating between the two like waves of heat when the summer clock strikes noon.
All will go about their day in harmony.
And the following day and the day after that and on and on forever until the world exhausts its might to spin and lays down smiling upon the love that lies within.
One daybreak.
Dawn

So here I am.

I awake every morning.

I am the one who gets to tell my story.

Not only mine, but the story of thousands.

The voices call desperately, waiting in every reflection, breeze, whisper, memory, and mountain.

I can either close my eyes and plug my ears in servility

Or take the Earth-shaking leap into the land of possibility.

To those who were left dreaming,

Whose souls lifted up to the sky,

Whose words kindle hope redeeming,

Whose rivers don’t deserve to run dry,

With the life I cherish every day,

The opportunities and education that pave my way,

With the support of fellow dedicated minds,

The stroke of her pen, his respect for humankind,

We can bring sparks of inspiration and learning to wicks freshly sewn,

Guide fires to sustaining themselves all grown,

Absorb insight, allow our own canopies to further unfold,

All together we will be the voice for those whose flames were blown but refuse to lose hold.
Days on Dixie Drive

Mariesa LaRosa

I loved her shaggy orange carpet. Her shaggy orange carpet that was out of style before it was even installed. Her shaggy orange carpet that reeked of mildew and water damage but was somehow strangely inviting. Her shaggy orange carpet that became lava as my brother and I danced around, hitting a balloon across the room, careful not to let our precious cargo (or our feet) touch the floor. Her shaggy orange carpet where my cousin and I used to retreat to avoid the boring talk of adults during family gatherings and instead get lost in our own imaginary world of pirate ships and mermaid tales. Deep within those hideous fibers, her shaggy orange carpet was my favorite place in the whole world.

"Hi, Sugar Bump," she said to me as I leapt into her aged arms to give her a "bone-crushing" hug. At last, it was Friday.

Like every other second grader, my Friday nights were strictly reserved for sleepover parties. I counted down the days until I could sleep in a bed less comfortable than my own, stay up until the wee hours of 10 P.M., and waste the night away with countless hours of giggling. But unlike every other second grader, I didn’t spend these Friday nights at Heather’s house, nor Sarah’s house, and not even at Maddie’s house; instead, Friday nights were spent at Shirley’s house.

There was something magical about my grandmother’s house, and I never could resist spending a weekend on Dixie Drive. Maybe the magic came from her “magically” unending supply of marshmallows. Maybe it was my “magic” superpower to win every game of Old Maid when she crossed her heart that she didn’t let me win. Maybe it was her “magic” ability to burn every single batch of cookies she ever made. Or maybe, the true “magic” came from the overflowing. We sandwiched my hand in between the pieces to make sure the puppet was a perfect fit.

With a silent nod of agreement, Grandma and I moved on to Phase Three of our operation: the surgical stitching. As her official crafting assistant, Grandma put me in charge of threading the
needle, a responsibility she deemed the “hardest task of all.” I felt like VIP personnel as I pridefully used my young and spry eyesight to complete the essential duty Grandma claimed she couldn’t. And now, it was time to bring our creation to life.

Grandma plopped me on her lap as she wrapped her wrinkled arms around me to guide my hands behind her green sewing machine. My feet gently swayed above hers as she used her right foot to step on the machine’s pedal. Slowly, we pushed the shaggy pieces under the bobbing needle. In the past, I often feared I would make a mistake or hurt myself with the deadly needle, and I refused to put my hands near the treacherous monster. Instead, I sat on the floor and pushed the pedal with my hand as my grandmother did the “dirty work.” This time, though, I feared no evil and faced the demon head-on (with my grandmother’s assistance, of course). In a matter of minutes, a little baby bear was born.

We fired up the glue-gun and slapped on some googly eyes, a fuzzy puffball for a snout, a baby blue bow-tie, and a tiny fedora from Grandma’s collection of doll clothes. After a long day of work at the office, our masterpiece was finally complete.

“Bruno,” I declared. “His name is Bruno.”

I went home that day giddy with excitement. Bruno became the newest star of my collection of puppets, stealing the show with his bluesy jazz music. His cockeyed wink instantly stole my heart. While his brown shaggy fur didn’t make him my prettiest puppet, he quickly became my favorite. We “toured” our shows all around the house and shared countless songs, laughs, and smiles together. He was a great friend, and he was even more special because he was my own creation.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I said to my whopping audience of six family members, “thank you for attending tonight’s performance of Puppet Theater. We ask that you please silence all cell phones and refrain from eating or drinking inside the theater. The use of flash photography and video recording is strictly prohibited. Please take a moment and locate the nearest exits for your safety in the case of an emergency. And now… sit back, relax, and enjoy, as Mariesa LaRosa Productions proudly presents…. “Puppet Theater.”
Then I made my brother become my “technical director” as I slid our Fisher Price flashlight in his direction. My puppets obviously deserved a “spotlight,” and clearly, my hands were much too occupied to perform and run the light board.

I dimmed the “house lights” (i.e. two lamps in our basement) and began the opening act. One by one, each of my puppets emerged to perform a variety of acts, from poetry, to musical performances, to the high-quality standup comedy of a seven-year-old. But I always saved the best for last: Bruno.

Probably due to his fedora, I pictured Bruno thriving in a smoky jazz bar set in the 1940s plucking a stand-up bass. His suave exterior required a deep, raspy voice to accompany his outward appearance. Without wanting to disappoint my audience, I had to commit to the part and decided to do what any second grader would do: I sang like a sixty-year-old man who smoked for several years. Groveling my voice and deepening it two octaves, Bruno and I did our best Louis Armstrong impersonation, singing his famous “What a Wonderful World.”

I couldn’t take myself seriously, though, and I kept giggling between each line. I desperately wanted to remain in character, but I inadvertently found myself switching back to my normal voice after practically every word. The broken character, giggles, and rollercoaster of pitches made the scene even better, like a Saturday Night Live skit where the actors can’t control their laughter. We were dedicated to finishing the song to ensure our audience “got what they paid for.” Despite our inability to remain in character, Bruno and I were a crowd favorite. We entertained our faithful fans like this for weeks—months, even—and I fantasized the crowds would scream our names for an encore.

And then one day, it all just stopped.

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Puppet shows were no longer cool. I couldn’t be seen playing with puppets anymore. No matter how much fun I had with Bruno, it was so easy for me to toss him to the side as I moved on to my next “phase.” And there Bruno remained, cold and lifeless in a dusty corner, waiting for me to sing one more jazz song with him. And he stayed like that for years. But I didn’t care. I had already moved on. “Little Miss Reesie” suddenly wasn’t so little. In fact, she wasn’t even “Reesie” anymore. Now I had started using my full name, Mariesa, wiping away any remnants of the person I
used to be. This cute little second grader had grown up in an instant. I became consumed in the outside world, obsessing over how to fit in with the rest of society. I started drowning myself in extracurriculars, schoolwork, and friendships, and I did my best to ensure I was keeping up with all the trending fads. And just like that, my childhood had ended.

I didn’t have time to sing and dance with puppets; now I had to spend my time burying my face in homework and deciphering the petty drama of middle and high school. Little by little, my carefree seven-year-old spirit started to drift away. I was bogged down by my own egocentric problems, and my worries swallowed me whole, blinding me from the bigger problems of the outside world. I didn’t care if I was fading away from the things I used to love; I only cared if I was fitting in.

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Twelve years later, in the middle of my freshman year of college, I found myself cleaning out some of my old toy boxes from my youth. A big smile came across my face as Bruno surfaced, and a flood of nostalgia rushed to my memory. I remembered our five-star sell-out shows, the complex scripts I had written, and that wonderful day with my grandmother in the musty old basement.

As I looked at this ratty old puppet, I started to wonder, “How many things became my ‘Bruno?’” Pondering the question further, I thought to myself, “How many people became my ‘Bruno?’” How many people did I love so dearly that I left so unexpectedly? How many “phases” did I have to go through to realize the treasures I had in my life? When was it “no longer cool” to be with the people I loved the most? When did the shaggy orange carpet go out of style? Because it’s all still there: the green sewing machine, the Sucrets box, and that hideously shaggy orange carpet. And instead of Bruno, now it’s my grandmother who sits there waiting for just one more jazz song. But I haven’t come. I’ve been too selfishly wrapped in my new “phases” of life. Somewhere along the lines, Shirley’s house lost its magic. And I didn’t stick around to find it again. Silently, I stared at Bruno. These thoughts burned in my mind, and for a long while, I didn’t even move; I just stared. I looked at Bruno’s shaggy fur, his cockeyed wink, and his tiny fedora. And I just stared. I was disgusted with myself for letting such a special person slip away from my life. I dropped Shirley just as easily as I dropped a ratty old puppet.
Within a few weeks of finding Bruno, I had gone back to my college campus and carried on with life, business as usual, except now, the guilt of leaving my grandmother behind had been marinating in my mind for several days. Of course, I knew our relationship would never quite be the same as it was back in the good ole days of my childhood; there would be no more puppet shows, no more Shrinky Dinks, and no more bottomless pits of marshmallows, but there had to be something I could do to make up for twelve years of lost time with my grandmother. I just couldn’t let the growing gap between us become a hopeless abyss.

As I tried to stay awake in my 8:00 A.M. statistics class, the answer came to me. Instead of plotting the geometric distribution of a null hypothesis, I started plotting how I could slowly start to amend the broken relationship with my grandmother. I decided I would start calling her on a weekly basis just to chat and catch up about life. True, it was a simple action, but I thought even this small act was a step in the right direction. I pictured my phone call to be like the story of the prodigal son: the lost granddaughter finally returning home and receiving praise from the entire family, even after such a long absence, and all I had to do was dial seven simple little digits.

Leaving class, I headed back to my dorm room, excited to catch up with my old friend. I plopped myself into the sitting chair in my room and dangled my toes over the armrest, just as I had done when I was little, and I called the landline of my favorite place on Dixie Drive. The phone rang once… silence. The phone rang twice… still no answer. The phone rang a third time, and finally, a confused, “Hello?” answered on the other end.

“Grandma!” I chimed in, enthusiastically, “It’s Reesie!” There was a pause.

“Uh, no…” the voice answered, “This is your Aunt Lisa…”

“Oh…” I replied, a little taken aback, “Is Grandma there?”

Another painstakingly long pause.

“Um…” my aunt hesitated, “No…” her voice trembled.

I waited for my aunt to finish her thought or tell me when I could call back, but she gave me nothing but dead air on the phone. Finally, I broke the awkward silence and prompted her,

“Do you know when she’ll be back home?”

“Well…” my aunt said sheepishly, “I don’t think Grandma will be home for a while…”

More dead air.
“H-Have you not heard what happened?” my aunt asked with a tone of surprise. She was picking up on my cluelessness, and I was picking up on her concern.

“Uh…No…” I answered, cautious to hear what “what happened” entailed.

“Grandma’s in the hospital.”

Both ends of the phone fell silent for a while. My heart sunk to the pit of my stomach.

“W-…Wh-…What?”

I managed to spit out in my complete state of shock.

“She called this morning,” my aunt replied wearily. “She thought she was having a heart attack.”

The words lingered in the air and surrounded my mind in a haze. They cut like a knife. My grandmother had a deformed heart. After many heart problems, my family discussed the possibility of correcting her deformity with major surgery, but with her age, we decided the process was too risky. By opting out of surgery, we knew that ultimately, her heart would be her killer. Would today be that day?

The thought was morbid, but it was the only one that raged in my mind.

“Is-Is she gonna be okay?” I stuttered, both my heart and mind racing.

“We think so, but we’re not entirely sure. She started to stabilize a little after we got her to the hospital. But things are under control. Just go back to worrying about being a college kid. Your sister Francesca was here earlier, and your brother Lucas is on his way down right now. It’s going to be alright,” my aunt said, trying to assure me. I knew she was just telling me what I wanted to hear. Dejectedly, I hung up the phone, trying to process the tornado of emotions I had just experienced.

I started to pace the small, confined floorspace of my dorm like a maniac. The news about my grandmother was the main culprit for my anxiety, but as I was letting my aunt’s words sink in, I became furious. At least two of my four siblings were aware of our family emergency and were already rushing over to be by my grandmother’s side. What was worse was that my brother Lucas and I attended the same college, and he had already left with our shared car on campus without any contact with me. For all I knew, my grandmother could be dead, and no one even bothered to give me a phone call. I was left completely in the dark, totally blindsided, but no one seemed to think I
was important enough to know the news. I was left to find out the truth about my grandmother second-hand, frantically pacing around the confinement of a college dorm room.

Even though I was weary about my aunt’s response regarding my grandmother’s health, her predictions proved true: my grandmother was alright. The whole situation was a mere scare, and my grandmother was released from the hospital a few days afterward. Still, I was pretty shaken up about the entire experience. I realized how quickly my grandmother could have left my life. I wasn’t ready for the last game of Aggravation. I wasn’t ready for the final bow of my puppet shows. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to the shaggy orange carpet.

This scare should have prompted me to capitalize on any and all opportunities to reconvene with my grandmother. Strangely, though, I still have not yet found the courage to redial those seven little digits. I guess I’m too afraid someone else will pick up Shirley’s phone again and give me an even worse response than what I received the first time. So I just don’t call. I realized it was always my cowardice that kept me away from Dixie Drive for so many years. I may have convinced myself I was bombarded with homework, or I had practice, or I was too busy with friends. But the truth is, I had the time. I always had the time. I still have the time. But I just can’t go.

As my grandparents are now in their mid-eighties, their health has been on an exponential decline. My grandfather suffers from a severe case of dementia, and his legs are so bad he can barely stand, let alone walk. He never knows what year it is, and I consider it a good day when he guesses my name correctly the first time. My grandmother is now feeble, but she refuses to use her cane in public because she doesn’t want the rest of the world to perceive her as weak and elderly (even though she is eighty-three). Her house is lined with a tube of oxygen connected to her machine that snakes around the doorframes and walls, so she can use her oxygen tank whenever and wherever she needs it.

Whenever I go over to visit, our favorite activity is still the same as it used to be twelve years ago. I scavenge through her closet filled with every type of board game and pull out the classic Aggravation board. But now, instead of a cane, my grandpa comes sliding in very slowly, hunched over his walker. His much-too-long toenails still poke out of his favorite pair of blue,
plastic sandals, and his snow-white chest hair still manages to stick out of his beloved droopy white t-shirt. Now it’s my grandmother who comes teetering into the dining room with her cane, struggling to walk across the room without getting physically winded.

We still keep the marbles in that ancient Sucrets container, and I am always green, Grandma blue, and Grandpa red. Our games remain in silence, but the ticking of the old grandfather clock is no longer soothing; it’s a reminder that this time together is running out. Its daunting ticks have become louder and louder, and at times, it has become so distracting that I no longer want to play. And so I don’t.

But I didn’t stop playing because I grew tired of the game. I stopped playing because my grandparents are dying. And I was slowly witnessing it all occur. It breaks my heart to see my grandfather gradually withdraw from life, his eyes trapped in a gaze somewhere far off in the distance. It breaks my heart to see my grandmother huff and puff to do the simplest tasks, like walk to her refrigerator, teetering and tottering around like a top that’s about to stop spinning. It breaks my heart that I hear the grandfather clock ticking, but I choose instead to stay away. How selfish can I be? They are the ones that are dying, but I am too uncomfortable to be with them when they need me most. Each day, they sit alone on Dixie Drive, waiting for someone, anyone, to come and keep them company. But most days, no one does. And I am no exception.

Just like Bruno, I have left them cold and lifeless in a dusty corner. For years. And I’ve been too selfish to realize it until now. When did Little Miss Reesie become so cold-hearted? When did a ticking grandfather clock become so menacing? When did the shaggy orange carpet go out of style? But maybe it’s finally time to make the phone call. Maybe it’s time find all the “Brunos” I left behind. Maybe it’s time for just one more puppet show.
Growing Up: Advice For My Younger Self

Nick Lewis

Dear Past Nick,

It won’t happen quickly, nor easily. You’re just getting to know yourself, and even as I’m writing this to you there are many things that I still don’t understand. You’ll spend some nights lying awake in bed, staring at the ceiling, pondering life and the complex emotions you’re feeling. Others, you’ll spend playing video games or watching YouTube videos. You haven’t fully realized it yet, but that’s your way of trying to salvage some fun and freedom out of your days, which seem to always be too jam-packed with school and work for you to have any free time. Before you know it, you’ll rarely feel like you have time for you anymore. Sometimes, feeling like your work is stealing your freedom will eat you up inside. But even in your lowest points, you will come to realize that this whole experience is part of growing up. You’ll never truly understand how much the freedom to choose your own path means to you until you’ve lost that freedom and fought to regain it. The value of choice is just one of those things that you can only learn the hard way. And don’t worry, it gets better.

Eventually you’ll drift off to sleep, only to be woken up by Mom a while later to resume the grind. Some mornings will be especially tough – you’ll swear that you’re more tired than you’ve ever been, and work and school will be the last thing you ever want to do. As you brush your teeth in front of that small bathroom mirror on the wall, you’ll stare into your eyes, bloodshot and heavy, and guess how little you slept last night. Many times, your guess will be so pitiful that you’ll just laugh. What else can you do? And then you’ll think back to when you used to have a bedtime – 9:30 every school night. In some ironic twist, what you once disliked with a passion has become something you wish you could relive. Splashing cold water on your face snaps you back to reality. You don’t want to do this.

But why not? You’ve gotten through school days exhausted before, you’ve even worked long hours on little sleep without any break. You’ve made it this far, shouldn’t you keep going? One day you’ll realize that this isn’t you fearing the school day. You’re afraid of the future. You’re afraid
of growing up. Again with the ironic twist, perhaps your greatest want of old has become your greatest fear. When you reach this point, that voice inside your head will tell you: “You just have to do this. It’s for your own good.” You’ll suck it up, grab your backpack and a quick breakfast and walk your way to school. Doing things for your own good, even when you don’t want to. You’ve made it one step closer to adulthood.

As you juggle an ever-increasing workload, you’ll realize that everything has a way of working itself out. No matter how busy you get, as long as you stay focused, prioritize, and take things one at a time, you’ll get your work done. The trick is to not let yourself stress out over your work. Part of growing up is accepting that you’re gonna have tests that you don’t study for, presentations that you don’t practice, papers that you push off until the last minute, and shifts that you show up late for. When you get that grade or performance review back, good or bad, life goes on. Don’t sweat these things, you won’t remember what you got on your geometry test three years ago, last year’s performance review or even your Spanish test from last week. Remember, a grade or review on its own holds no value outside of school or your job. Don’t let your future teachers or employers convince you otherwise. Understanding that whatever happens, life goes on and you’ll be okay – you’re on your way.

What you should care about is effort and the intentions behind your work. If you ever feel burnt out, ask yourself these two questions: are you giving it your best? Are you doing this for yourself or for a grade/for money? Be honest. If you cannot answer with “yes” and “for yourself”, you are wasting your time. If you’re truly working hard and you really do want to improve your life through your work, it will happen. This is why you should not be afraid to chase your dream – it’s easy to do your best when you love what you do. And you’ll naturally want to improve at something that you’re passionate about. And don’t worry, I can confidently say that if you stay on your current path, you’re gonna be a dream chaser. But I guess you always kinda knew that. Refusing to be denied from being/prioritizing yourself and doing what you love – you’re growing up.

But how do you improve at something? Well, eventually you’ll find that taking piano lessons since first grade has taught you things about life and yourself that you would’ve never imagined or learned without taking lessons. Let’s say you’re practicing piano and you want
to expand your repertoire by learning a new song. If you want to learn it properly, is your first priority in playing going to be speed or accuracy? Remember what Mrs. Wright said and how you always had to practice: “Accuracy is the base, without it you can never play a song effectively. If you focus on accuracy first, speed comes naturally once you build that strong base.” Not only is this completely true with piano, but it’s the same way with life. If you want to be great at anything, you have to establish a base in the fundamentals. Set goals, put time into them and practice constantly until you’ve achieved that goal or are satisfied. This is the process of getting good, boiled down to the simplest fundamentals. Learning how to practice – that’s another big step toward growing up.

Junior year, you’re gonna go up onstage for your seventh piano recital and somehow, you’ll forget everything that you practiced. The night before, it was perfect. You were gonna crush it. Where did it all go? How do you play Wild Horseman? Your hands will shake as they touch the coolness of the keys and you frantically try to remember something. “Anything.” Then comes the sinking feeling. This is one of your greatest fears realized – you are about to fail onstage in front of an audience which includes your family. You never believed this would happen to you, not even in a nightmare, but here you are. Backed against a wall, one last thought comes to mind like a gift from God: “Screw it, you got this.” Reality hits you like a freight train. You are actually sitting down to play a piece that you don’t know for an audience who assumes that you know it. You’ve already accepted that you’re going to fail, yet you’re still doing it. That’s badass! This is the day that you’ll discover you grew a pair. All that fear you had turns to warmth and confidence. With that confidence, a memory rushes back to you; “The ‘A’ section!”

Like a magician makes a dollar appear out of thin air, you pound out that ‘A’ section, end the song obviously early, the crowd applauds, and you take a bow. Yah, you failed and everyone knew. But it was damn stylish. You never cracked. Let’s see anyone else in that auditorium pull off a performance like that. Plus, you learned your lesson – better practice more next time. The value of practice and the true power of self-confidence – these are two more things that you will come to understand on your journey to adulthood.

My point with all of this is, don’t be scared. You’re closer to being an adult than you
think, and as you’ve seen from some of your future stories, life has a way of handing you the tools to
success and teaching you the lessons that you need to know along the way. I believe that discovering
your purpose in life is about answering the big questions about yourself. Who are you? And what do
you want?

You don’t have to have a sure answer. I still don’t fully know who I am or what I want,
and that’s okay. Life is fluid, like a river which flows within you, and as I’ve gone with the flow I’ve
learned that discovering and understanding yourself is a process that has no clear beginning or end.
But if you ask yourself these two questions before every decision that you make, you’ll come to
notice and understand things about yourself that you never thought about before. As I’m wrapping
up my freshman year of college, I feel that I have grown up and am closer to knowing myself and
my purpose in life than I’ve ever been before, and I’m stoked to see what the future holds.

One last thing. Unless something is obviously harmful, try everything. You’ll find out
that you regret things that you never try a lot more than things that you do try and end up failing at.
So try out for the Carmel basketball team every year even though you probably won’t make it. Make
a YouTube channel or a podcast, even though you know it probably won’t catch on. Ask Ava on a
date, even though she probably doesn’t like you that way. These are just a few things that maybe
you’ll end up doing, and maybe you won’t. I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.

Sincerely,

Nick
Interview with Tommy

Aubrey Chiu

Boom! The heavy wooden door shut behind me as I walked into the room, illuminated by the lights on the stage. As I continued towards the stage I saw there were two chairs seated across from one another. A couple weeks before leaving the cottages, Keffers gave me a letter he received. The message was quite vague. I was told I was to have an interview in an office building located in Norfolk. I don’t quite understand why I didn’t question it much, but I decided to go. I believed it was possibly part of the process of becoming a donor. The closing of the door must have caught the attention of the older lady approaching me. “Hello, are you Tommy?”

I gave her a quizzical look before I replied, “Yes.” I could see now she was dressed in a suit, a maroon blazer and a matching pencil skirt, attached to the blazer I saw a mic with wires connecting to a tiny black box clipped to the top of the skirt. “Are you interviewing me?”

“Indeed I am. Oh my, I forgot to mention, my name is Diana Williams.” She put out her hand for me to shake. “Why don’t we take a seat?” I followed her up onto the stage and a took a seat across from her. I glanced around and noticed people coming out from behind the stage and large lenses pointed at us. “I work for a news network and I’m doing a story on donors, as a way for others to remember your existence.”

“What do you mean remem—” she cut me off before I could continue.

“You know,” I still didn’t know, “to remember your kind. By the way, this isn’t a live interview, you can be honest with me. Do you need any water or anything before starting? As a forewarning, I’m going to be asking some personal questions, we would really like to get to know you.” Why would she need to know me? This situation reminded me of my time back in Hailsham when students had to be creative as to make masterpieces. Maybe this could have something to do with revealing my soul as Miss Emily once mentioned (Ishiguro 175). I told her I was good and then someone came over and handed me a mic like Diana’s. The man behind the camera gave Diana a thumbs-up and she nodded. “Tommy, let’s start with some basic questions. Where are you from?”

“I am from Hailsham, and I currently reside in the Cottages.” When I said Hailsham her
eyes widened a bit. Why is everyone so intrigued by Hailsham? That was still something I couldn’t wrap my head around.

“Hailsham? Can you tell me more about that? Like friendships, setting, what they made you do?” Diana was really prying for information.

“Friendships?” I laughed a bit thinking of time when I was in one of my tantrums and Kath tried to get my attention to tell me about my shirt (Ishiguro 11). When I get back from the Cottages I will be sure to tell Kath about all this.

“Ah that smile must mean you have someone special.” The comment caught me off guard. Even though I was in a relationship with Ruth, Kath always seemed to be on my mind. To avoid further questioning and confusion, I attempted to go with a more general description.

“Well I made two friends, Kathy and Ruth, who I am still good friends with. Back at Hailsham I used to play football too, but that didn’t really come in handy,” I hesitated to continue on about creativity, but Diana gave me a nod to continue on, “artistic talent is what really mattered at Hailsham.” I looked up at Diana to see a curious look spread across her face. I knew I should have continued, but I’ve only felt comfortable and inclined to talk with Kath about such deep topics. I kept my gaze concentrated on the ground. After a minute of silence Diana spoke up with a more sympathetic tone.

“Tommy, I am here to report on the life of donors. What do you want people to know about your life? How do you want people to remember you? If you were to lose your life tomorrow, what story of your life do you have to tell? We can take a break after this.” Diana appeared to have some knowledge that I didn’t know about. This seemed to occur often, always left in the dark to theorize things myself.

“I was marginalized for my inability to be artistic, which bothered me for quite some time till I met a guardian that told me it was alright to not be artistic. For the most part that kept my tantrums away for the rest of the time I was at Hailsham.” I didn’t want to tell her that Miss Lucy apologized, and told me I still had to time to be creative before leaving for the cottages. “Diana, if I were to die tomorrow,” I smiled before answering “tell Kath I love her.”

With that Diana signaled the cameraman it was time for a break.

I sat in my seat startled. Did I really just say I love Kath out loud? I suppose I did, but
there was Ruth. I mean since Kath has been preparing to leave, Ruth and I have been drifting apart but that was natural, right? We were both going to be carers soon anyways. “Tommy are you well? Why don’t you go to the bathroom, we can start up again whenever you are ready.” As I wandered to the bathroom I questioned why I even began a relationship with Ruth. Why didn’t Kath do anything about it? Why didn’t I do anything about it? Though it seems I already knew the answer, friendship. Kath valued her relationship with Ruth, if Kath and I were to be together, their friendship would break. I wouldn’t want to see a somber Kath, that would break my heart.

Walking back towards the stage I thought back to when Diana mentioned “remembering my kind.” What could she have meant? My kind? I thought for a moment more before coming to a conclusion: clones.

I got back to the stage and told Diana I was ready to start up again. I cut her off before she had the chance to open her mouth, “Why are you trying to remember my kind?” Her tone was harsh as she answered, “Tommy I thought I answered this earlier?”

“No, I mean why do you want to remember us, remember clones.” She nodded her head as if she was formulating what to say next.

“Ahh,” I could see a sense of relief come over her, “So you have an understanding of what you are. Then why haven’t you done anything?”

“What do you mean done anything? What is there to do?” I realized she didn’t know if I knew what I was. Though it seems this understanding had allowed for her to ask more questions, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for it or not.

“Tommy, have you ever considered escaping?”

“Escaping from what?”

“Your situation. You mentioned you were from Hailsham and now you are residing in the place you call the Cottages. Why are you still there?”

“I haven’t got my schedule for training as a carer yet.”

She laughed a bit in confusion before continuing “So you leave the Cottages to become a carer, then what is the next phase of your life.”

“I become a donor.”

“Then what does it mean to be a donor?” I couldn’t tell if she understood the term or was
just trying to get me to talk, but I continued to answer.

“To be a donor means you donate your organs.”

She smiled as if she wanted me to say that, “You know if you were to donate your organs you could die. If you are staring directly at death, why not run? What are you still doing?” I finally understood. Well why haven’t I done anything? She was right. I should have attempted to run, but here I am floating through life. I remembered the time when I went looking for Ruth’s possible, and when we realized that Rodney didn’t actually find Ruth’s possible she was so disappointed, but she had a point. If people knew we were clones we would have been treated differently.

“There’s no way society would accept us. I don’t even know what it takes to function in one.” At Hailsham we did some role play to prepare us on types of people we would meet outside of the school. I’m not sure if that would be sufficient enough. There is still so much I feel that I don’t know. “Everything is futile Diana. Maybe not for you or your kind, but for us clones, even before our birth our lives were planned. Why fight destiny?” I saw a look of sadness appear over Diana’s face, as if she was reflecting on something I said.

“The future isn’t set. Events that occur now can change the future.” Her look of sadness was replaced by what appeared to be irritation. “How long have you known you were going to be a donor?”

“We were always told we were going to be donors.”

“Yet you never thought about rebelling?”

“While that does sound enticing it takes more than one person to rebel, and students at Hailsham weren’t raised that way.” I remember those horror stories told around the students, whether they were true or not I didn’t realize that it was a way for Hailsham to discourage students from wondering about the world beyond and in fact, have fear of it. Even if I were to attempt to rebel I don’t think anyone, but potentially Kath, would join me. “Death is not something we fear. In the end, we are all going to die, so why resist it? Diana, you too are going to die. The difference between you and me is the way in which we live.”

Diana sighed shaking her head in defeat. I don’t think I gave her the answers she was looking for. “Tommy thanks for coming in today. I’m sorry that those like me are not accepting
of you. Hopefully there will come a day where clones like yourself can be a part of society.” She smiled at me then looked over at the cameraman signaling to stop filming. I gazed at the exit wondering how different life would be if I wasn’t born a clone.
It’s No One’s Fault, But I Have My Doubts

Sobia Hyrack

I registered for my first semester of college classes on the very last orientation date. There weren’t a lot of first-year seminar options left, so I pulled the course number for Women Writing the World out of the catalog and put it into my schedule for one reason, really: Women, I thought, I like those. I knew I was a feminist long before I came to the Blue Butler Bubble, but I had been discouraged by my recently estranged father because I’d listened to him, for years, accuse my mother of raising me, their only daughter, to be a feminazi. This, to him, meant that I might become a woman unashamed of her capabilities and unafraid to control her own life, and these accusations were nothing more than a manifestation of his fear that the reign of his type of manipulative man was crumbling. He almost successfully bullied the women in his life into submission based on that fear. Therefore, if there was anything I was lacking in my feminist identity, it was confidence that my feelings on equality and empowerment were allowed. I hoped that a class of students who chose to learn about and discuss global women’s issues would help me build that confidence. In some ways, I am now more in tune with my power as an educated, young, American woman. In many other ways, I have never been more frightened to be an educated, young, American woman. I am left with more to talk about, but also with things I wish I hadn’t heard.

Perhaps my only active display of feminism prior to college was my pride in myself for being able to fearlessly exist in public. Be it in a crowded city, a classroom, the workplace, etcetera, I was typically unafraid. Shortly before I came to Butler, I was walking on a city sidewalk with two friends. We walked in a triangle formation, and I was the leading point. I thought they would appreciate my walking quickly as I knew that they were made nervous by the homeless men, the idle cars, and the alleyways. However, they ran to keep up with me and said that I was risking being ambushed by a man, I wouldn’t have the chance to change my trajectory, and I would inevitably be kidnapped especially because I don’t carry pepper spray. What? These same friends later wouldn’t allow me to lead them up the stairs of a parking garage. Why? Hidden rapists. I’d always rolled my eyes at girls like this. How can you expect to make
it through life as a woman when you carry so much fear? I didn’t realize, until this class, that I was simply privileged enough to not understand. Just because I had been able to escape the dangers of harassment in public does not mean that I should assume the same about any woman. Not my friends behind me, nor the girls across the world.

Most of the texts addressed in our class first semester brought attention to issues of sexism, aggression towards women, and human rights that were far away in terms of either geographical distance or time. It was not until the end of the semester, when we read Everyday Sexism, that I truly understood the magnitude of said issues in the here and now. According to Stop Street Harassment, as cited in Everyday Sexism, “41% of American women have experienced ‘physically aggressive’ forms of harassment or assault in public places, including sexual touching, being followed, or being flashed” (Bates, 160). I was not blind to the issue of harassment, but reading about stories of American women in recent years along with shocking statistics that supported their claims made me understand that our class is not just about other cultures. Oppression does not come only in the form of physical entrapment of women in their homes, but also in women’s inability to exist in public without being harassed. While I have become an advocate for oppressed women across the world, I have also been able to better recognize oppression daily in my own corner of the world.

However, even after all of that, the Blue Butler Bubble still seemed exempt from societal evils. Every time “Have you ever experienced x on campus?” was asked of the class, I found myself at a loss for an example of sexism or predatory behavior. My experiences at parties and in academic settings with men have been shockingly courteous. In fact, I was all but formally asked for a one night stand, and I have been asked many times, by male students, how I feel about topics being discussed in classes. I still believe that we are strangely lucky on this campus to have a high percentage of respectful and educated students that are not blatantly anti-feminist. However, even after nearly a year in this comfortable setting, The Hunting Ground brought me nearly to tears. Had I been missing it? When I hear girls sloppily making their ways down my hallway very late at night on the weekends, could any of them be an Erica Kinsman? Had any of just been dropped off by one of our basketball players after being raped in his apartment? Could I be raped in a basketball player’s apartment? I thought of the allegations that
came up earlier this semester regarding the mishandling by Butler’s administration of a sexual assault. Do we need to file a Title IX complaint, too? I had spent the majority of this year thinking, at least it’s not happening here, but after watching such an eye-opening documentary, how can you deny that it must be? Not even at Butler, it seems, are we safe from the idea that women, college women in particular, are disposable at the hands of men and at the mercy of their academic institutions.

At the conclusion of this class, I was left with a new outlook on safety. I was recently petrified beyond the ability to leave my car of the walk up 100 steps through the woods from I lot to campus. What I once considered to be my most powerful quality has been taken from me because of the information I have gathered from this class. Was I empowered by the texts with which we engaged, or have they left me to cower in fear for the rest of my young, vulnerable, trying-to-make-it-in-the-patriarchy life? I have attempted to use the information constructively. Maybe I’ll avoid the parking garage stairs, after all.

My favorite class text, by far, was *I Am Malala*. In parts, it read like a Judy Blume novel. Malala was brave to present her story both from the perspectives of herself as a Nobel Laureate and of herself as a child, because she risked being taken less seriously. Her early ambitions to become a politician and speak out for the right to education were inspiring to me, and certainly inspiring to the rest of our class. The activities conducted during discussions about this book reminded me of one done at some point during our first semester for which we were asked to say what we want to be when we grow up. Why did I feel embarrassed when my response was preceded by words like doctor, missionary, and artist living in Korea?

“Cute mom” did not seem like the right answer. Of course I want more than just physical cuteness and children, but my choice to not divulge the extent of my life goals earned me uncomfortable looks of slight disgust from nearly everyone around the circle. As freshly educated, probably angered, feminists, it is easy for us to see traditional roles of women to be automatically oppressive. Even worse, we may feel that putting yourself in those roles voluntarily is anti-feminist. As a class, I feel like we all grew in our understandings of feminism over our eight months together. However, due to nothing more than the focus of this class being limited to global women’s issues and perhaps the time constraint to just two semesters, a large part of my definition of feminism was
never discussed. Feminism, to me, is intersectional beyond just the inclusion of women of color. By no means do I feel left out because we did not cover women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, etcetera, but I do believe that discussion of related issues would have legitimized my goals. Perhaps my colleagues would have then understood that being “cute” as a mom is not easily achievable for me because society doesn’t like to see two women raising children together.

Perhaps my colleagues would have then understood that I have to manipulate science to have the opportunity to have my own children. Instead, we discussed many times that having children should not be a woman’s purpose. Much of our class does not realize that every part of my right to become something as apparently simple as a “cute mom” was won in a fight fought just as hard as the ones that won women the right to vote, African Americans the right to freedom, and girls the right to education. We admire that a persecuted Pakistani girl is on her way to becoming a world-changing politician because there was a time when she couldn’t have been. We admire that a black man was president because there was a time when he couldn’t have been. We admire that a young, female college student is in school to be a pharmacist because there was a time when she couldn’t have been. I want to be a successful, loving, and loved wife and mother. Admire my ambitions. There was a time, extremely recently, when they were impossible to achieve.

Perhaps I could have mentioned these issues in class. Perhaps, because I didn’t, that means that my confidence in myself as a feminist was not strengthened as I’d hoped. However, I can use what I learned in this class to empower women I meet that may need help strengthening their voices. Maybe it’s a good thing that I’m more aware of the dangers surrounding me, and I am thankful for my education and my expansion of knowledge of issues that truly do not discriminate based on location, race, or socioeconomic status.
Maxwell Franklin Brown (born April 18, 1999), is an American musician and composer. He has played in (insert awesome band here) and (insert awesome band here) and collaborated with artists such as (insert awesome artist here) and (insert awesome artist here). Max Brown has also been a very successful solo artist winning a Grammy Award for his second solo album…

Hey look, that’s me… well sort of. It’s who I want to be in the future. My name is Max Brown, I’m 18 years and, as of now, I haven’t done a single great thing in my life. I am an aspiring musician and have loved music for my entire life. I speak its language, I have always had a feel and understanding for music. So i’m great musician right… well not really, not in perspective. I have a long way to go to get to where I want to be and even where I need to be as a musician. I am a trombone player, which is obviously all the rage right now. I like playing all styles of music, but my favorite style to play is jazz. I know music is subjective and all, but if I had to pick a genre that was the best I would definitely choose jazz. Jazz combines the skill of classical music, the showmanship of popular music, and the emotion of music with emotion in it (I guess), and adds its own unique flare to the mix. Jazz is great.

I’ve wanted to be many things throughout my life. My ideal has always been changing. I’ve wanted to be an athlete, I’ve wanted to be an FBI agent, I’ve wanted to be an author. I’ve also wished that I were a different person… several times. This musician is who I want to be right now and what I have been working at for years. This musician might not be as exciting as some of the characters that I have wanted to be, but at least this character shares my actual name and operates in the realm of the real world.

Technically I actually am a professional musician at the moment. The amount of money I’ve actually made from gigs is pretty laughable. I’m pretty sure it’s about 20 bucks in total. I haven’t put myself out there enough. I like performing, but I am not the guy that won’t stop playing his music for you no matter how many times you tell him to stop. Do I have to be that guy in order to succeed?

I guess if there’s one thing that I want it is to be great. I want to be great whether I become a musician, or a music teacher, or a businessman, or a writer, or a Target worker or whatever. I want to be a great husband, father, friend, son, role model, teacher. If I ever do get really successful I will have to be humble and not let it get to my head, because I already promised myself that I would be. I also promised myself that I would never drink alcohol, I don’t know why I did it, but now I’m totally going to be the guy who walks into a bar and asks for a glass of water.

Early music career

Brown’s mother Ruth, who came from a musical family, started her sons on music very early. Brown started music at a very young age, he took his first piano lesson at the age of five and his first guitar lesson at the age of seven. Brown claims that he has always loved performing and his love for music started was started in his two man jam sessions with his brother Ben in their basement. “My brother and I would play rock tunes in our old carpeted basement, just the two of us”. “We would play Beverly Hills by Weezer or Warning by Green Day, and as we got older we would move on to harder stuff like Can’t Stop by the Red Hot Chili Peppers or White Room by Cream (Eric Clapton’s band)”. “Ben was always on the drums, and I was always on the guitar”. “He (Ben) was a great player, but he was too humble, he didn’t have the ego to be a performer for a living”.

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There have been so many days where I felt like I couldn’t make it. Sometimes I feel like I don’t have the drive or motivation, and sometimes I feel like the journey is too hard and I don’t deserve this shit. The last time I felt like this was a couple of days ago. The white walled practice room can feel like my own little jail cell when I am forcing myself through the same boring exercises everyday. Its like solitary confinement with a trombone and a piano. Sometimes I get so hot headed that I don’t even think twice about what I am doing. Slapping my music off the black metal stand across the practice room. Kicking one of the white walls that already has a hole in its cardboard wooden outer layer. Packing my trombone up as fast as possible and slamming its hard plastic case closed.

There is a quote on my trombone professor's door that says “Just start somewhere” this quote is attributed to a drummer named Ed Soph. The quote is accompanied by a black and white image of a disheveled looking Soph sitting in a thoughtful position and smoking a cigar. This quote is a reality in everything that we do. It’s impossible to start something being really great. I guess you could be what some people call “a natural” at an activity, but that just means that you show a lot of immediate potential. Becoming great at something takes a lot of time, and you are never going to be where you want to be when you start. But we all have to start somewhere to achieve our goals.

Brown started playing his main instrument, the trombone, at age 11. He began playing so he could be in the middle school band. Music went from being a hobby to being a career idea for Brown late in his high school career when he found his love for jazz music. Brown cites trombonists such as JJ Johnson, Curtis Fuller, and Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews as his main inspirations as a musician.

I hope one day my kid looks me up on google and realizes that I am a lot more of a big deal than I let on to be. They will realize that their dad isn’t just an annoying guy who made them take music lessons and play old jazz songs with him. Wouldn’t that be the greatest way to impress your kid? They look you up, totally not expecting to find
anything and BAM there it is!

Why do we only hear about the greats working hard and loving what they do? Why do they never talk about the greats doubting themselves or wanting give up? Has every great musician always put in the work and practiced, and never spent their afternoon watching youtube videos in their dorm room? Why can’t they ever talk about that?

College

Brown went to Butler University to pursue a BA in music (trombone performance). Brown claims that college was where he learned what was required to be a professional musician. “Before college I didn’t really know how to practice”. “In my first year of college I learned that success isn’t only achieved by putting in the proper amount of work, it’s also achieved by putting in the correct type of work”.

It’s around 9 at night and I am in the usual practice room. Most of the rooms surrounding me are empty, and I can only hear myself. I feel relaxed, its the day before I go back home from college for spring break. I pull the usual gray etude book out of my black backpack and open it up to the piece I am playing that week. I put the trombone to my lips and just play. I soar through the piece in an uncharacteristic way as I feel the relief of being done with a long and strenuous stretch of school and music. About halfway through the piece of music I actually use my ears and take a whiff of what I am playing. For a rare moment I hear something that I have been working towards for a long time, its myself sounding great.

I want to be the guy that everyone wants to hear. “When is that Max guy gonna play a solo”, “man, I wish that I could play like him”.
Throughout my life, there have been many times where I have felt like I could not reach my goals. So far I haven’t really felt like the person that I want to become. Now I am going to start thinking about it in a different way. I feel like my rise to becoming a great will end up being more impressive because of how unlikely it was. I didn’t have the greatest start, but I will finish very strong. On the road to greatness “ just start somewhere”.
December 23rd, 2016

Before I even went to Dylan’s house, I laid down the law about what we could and could not do – anything but sex was okay. Apparently, he forgot this, because after I got there he asked me again. I originally told him no, then went back to kissing him. He kept asking, I kept saying no, but he was persistent. He told me to “stop being a pussy” and to “stop being a bitch,” so I reluctantly complied. I told him he could but only if he wore a condom (he didn’t want to, but I made him. I’m surprised he didn’t fight me more on that, actually). But I changed my mind right after. I told him to stop. Said I didn’t want to do it anymore or go any further because it hurt. I had changed my mind, but he didn’t care. “Lauren don’t be such a bitch,” he told me. I told him I didn’t care if I was and that I wanted to stop because it hurt. “Just trust me.” I became silent. He tried again, and by this time I was on the verge of tears. I didn’t want to do it anymore. It hurt, and I didn’t want to. I said ow, said to stop, but all I got was “it will hurt for the first three seconds and then it will feel better. Just trust me, don’t you trust me?” I just shut my mouth, held my breath, and waited. It hurt so badly, and I didn’t want it anymore. But I found myself to be trapped in silence.

January 3rd, 2017

I felt so sick. I wasn’t thinking clearly at all. I couldn’t focus on anything, and I was an absolute mess. I locked myself in my room for an hour or two, and everything that happened the rest of that night is pretty hazy. I remember trying to make myself throw up, laying on the diagnosed with PTSD; triggers are unique and specific to each person (NIMH). Although this explanation is the general definition and overview of PTSD, this paper focuses on PTSD from sexual abuse. The symptoms are very similar, if not identical, to the summary provided above. Because of its confusing, convoluted nature, PTSD is a disorder that is not easily understood. It
is a disorder of multiple causes, but other than an imbalance in neurotransmitters, it is not known why PTSD occurs in some people but not others. There are speculations yet no solid, backed studies or experiments to explain the nature of PTSD.

The topics of rape and sexual abuse are often discussed, whether in the news, in day-to-day life, or in classroom discussions. However, the aftermath and complications from said topics are not considered as often in these commonplace settings. To combat this, Carrie Arnold, a writer for Women’s Health Magazine conducted a case study titled “Life After Rape: The Sexual Assault Issue No One’s Talking About.” In this article, Arnold examines a woman named Lucy, a vocalist who one day found herself unable to sing. Devastated and beside herself, Lucy began to conduct her own research and stumbled across a story of “two women who had [literally] lost their voices after being raped”. Lucy recalled how she had been raped at college ten years prior to this incident and realized her mental health was now affecting her physical health, which is a common symptom of PTSD. This is due to the fact that rape is about gaining power over another individual, but sex is about “pleasure and connection” – when someone is raped, their intimacy is violated, causing that person to lose trust in people, relationships, and situations.

Per usual, though, there is a silver lining: many women have said, “speaking out about rape, privately or publicly, lessens PTSD, even years later,” proving there is hope and healing for victims. On the topic of sexual assault and the violation of intimacy, Arnold states, “Violating that intimacy can shatter a victim’s trust in all relationships”. A sexual assault cannot literally shatter trust because trust is an abstract concept, not a physical object. However, the use of the word “shatter” allows the reader to better grasp the sudden, debilitating effects PTSD has on the sufferer and the people around him/her. Furthermore, Arnold says, “About 30 percent of survivors will sink into depression or numb their pain with booze and drugs”. A person can only figuratively “sink into depression or numb their pain with booze and drugs”.

Depression and pain are, again, abstract emotions, not objects that can be seen or touched. The use of the words “sink” and “numb” allows the reader to better grasp why a person with PTSD might be feeling this way, but also discounts the actual severity of these issues. Depression is difficult to overcome, and so are drug and alcohol addictions. When one
“sinks” into depression, he/she might not be able to come back from it. Alcohol and drugs do not actually take the pain of an assault away for good; the effects are temporary and extremely short-lived. Thus, the use of these two metaphors downplays the gravity of these two aspects PTSD sufferers often live with. Further supporting the idea that PTSD can also affect physical health, not just mental health, is the heightened pain perception in PTSD sufferers. Bethany Ashby D., PsyD, and Kaul Paritosh, MD, researched and wrote an entry for the Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology discussing the effects of PTSD from sexual abuse in adolescent girls. They found these adolescent girls to have reproductive health problems, dysmenorrhea (painful periods), pelvic pain and dysfunction, headaches, dyspareunia (pain with sexual intercourse), and increased muscle pain.

Furthermore, “Adolescents with histories of sexual abuse and subsequent PTSD are much more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors,” increasing their risks for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), early pregnancy, and pregnancy complications. A sexual assault victim’s choice to engage in these high-risk behaviors largely deals with the means of using sexuality as a form of control over their own bodies because this control was taken away from them when they were assaulted. A large majority of victims also feel as if they have lost connection with their bodies, so they are more willing to engage in reckless and indiscriminate sexual behavior. At first glance, these sentences and analyses seem to be in-depth, scientific explanations of PTSD and its effects.

However, even the most scientific of sources contains upfront metaphors, even if by accident. The idea that a sexual assault takes control away from the victim is one such metaphor. This is not to say that rape is not about power and control, but rather that the assault itself is not the aspect that took the control away: the rapist did. By calling the criminals and perpetrators out in this way, victims and survivors will feel validated and believed, allowing them to begin or further their healing processes. Another metaphor, this one more obvious, occurs when the authors state how adolescent girls diagnosed with PTSD from sexual abuse feel disconnected from their bodies, causing them to participate in reckless activities (especially those of sexual nature) they wouldn’t normally engage in. The victims aren’t actually not “inside” their bodies after they are raped or sexually abused, but they do feel as though their body does not belong to them anymore. As far as they’re concerned, because their rapist already took the most intimate
piece of them, their body is now the rapist’s. However, these metaphors are not exactly
detrimental to the understanding (or lack thereof) of PTSD. Subtle, explanatory metaphors are
necessary for victims and healthcare providers to understand what exactly is going on inside their
minds and why certain feelings or behaviors may emerge. However, if the general public were
to use scientific, metaphorical accounts like the ones included in this article, the credibility and
usefulness of these metaphors would be diminished. Not only does the general public likely not
know the intricacies and workings of PTSD, but they have also likely not experienced it first-
hand. Someone using metaphors to describe a disorder they know little about can be damaging
and belittling to those who actually suffer from it.

Once, a friend of mine claimed to suddenly have developed PTSD from a harrowing
scene she witnessed. While driving down I-75 in southwest Florida, she noticed a large truck
carrying many slaughtered chickens. It is probably appropriate to mention that she was newly
vegetarian and believed she had to despise every aspect of ranch farming and the slaughtering of
animals for consumption. Once she was able, she texted in our group chat, exclaiming, “OMG
GUYS I HAVE PTSD. I JUST SAW A TRUCK CARRYING DEAD CHICKENS AND I’M
SOBBING. I SWEAR I’M GONNA HAVE PTSD!” Now, although this incident could be quite
traumatic, it does not constitute for the development of PTSD, nor did she ever even display
symptoms of the disorder after this exposure. The constant use of PTSD to refer to mildly
disturbing incidents like these largely diminishes and discounts those who actually suffer from
the disorder due to traumatic, life-threatening events, especially due to sexual abuse. In fact,
although military veterans are the group that is most widely recognized as having PTSD, sexual
abuse victims and survivors suffer from it at greater rates. While 10 to 20 percent of war
veterans develop PTSD, around 70 percent of sexual assault victims will, which is “a larger
percentage than for any other violent crime”. This is not to invalidate war
veterans and their struggles with PTSD, but rather to indicate a need for a shift of focus and an
eradication of using PTSD as a metaphor for a heightened emotional response to a disturbing or
emotional event or scene. In a situation like this, that friend could have said, “wow, that was a
really sad and disturbing sight to see” instead of claiming she now has PTSD. It can almost be
looked at in a “boy who cried wolf” situation: if people are constantly claiming to have PTSD
from miniscule events like this one, those who have experienced sexual trauma will not be taken as seriously nor get the much-needed help they require.

A dear friend of mine, Chessy Prout, wrote a book titled I Have the Right To: A High School Survivor’s Story of Sexual Assault, Justice, and Hope. Working in collaboration with Boston Globe reporter Jenn Abelson, Prout recounted her sexual assault story and the devastating aftermath that followed. During her freshman year of high school at St. Paul’s School (SPS), a boarding school in Concord, NH, Prout was raped by senior Owen Labrie. Sadly, events like this are not at all uncommon at SPS. Prout’s assault was part of an awful, disgusting tradition titled the “Senior Salute.” According to Prout, “The Senior Salute was a well-known ritual at St. Paul’s, where sixth-formers [also known as seniors] tried to [hook up] with as many younger girls as possible before graduation”. When Labrie first invited Prout to accompany him to a secret location on campus, she declined. But, after she learned her friends hadn’t received a message from Labrie, she started to think that maybe it wasn’t actually a Senior Salute invitation. Labrie began to guilt her into accepting his invite. Prout began to feel bad, suggesting that “Maybe [she’d] been too harsh” in her response. Owen’s friend Owen MacIntyre (O. Mac) reached out to Prout, telling her to stop being a bitch and to just go spend time with Owen and see the view he described. In what Labrie described as “a golden change of heart,” Prout retracted her initial decline and accepted his offer. Later that night, Labrie took Prout to the roof of one of the SPS buildings, but then said it was “soggy and gross” and led her back inside. He laid down a flannel blanket, ripped off Prout’s clothes and removed his own, and began to kiss her. Despite her many verbal and non-verbal protests, Labrie stuck his fingers and tongue inside of her. Prout said she “couldn’t feel [her] body anymore, so [she] shut her eyes” and focused on her surroundings; when she opened her eyes, she felt a pressure inside of her, but “realized that Owen’s hands were planted next to her shoulders”. Owen Labrie had just raped her. Although the focus of Prout’s memoir is largely focused on the feelings and events, like court trials, that followed the assault, it is brimming with metaphors, especially when it comes to the topic of PTSD from sexual abuse. Chessy states, “I still dissociated, feeling evicted from my own body. Nausea greeted me each morning. Showering scared me. I hated being alone and having to touch my naked body”. The use of the phrase “feeling evicted from my own body” and the
subsequent explanations of what that entails and feels like makes this metaphor extremely useful. Instead of just leaving the metaphor standing by itself, she explains it and provides supporting details.

Subsequently, Chessy describes what it’s like dealing with the memories and flashbacks of her assault, explaining “Some days it’s angry devils staging a riot on my rib cage, pricking me with their burning pitchforks. Other times, my assault is cold ice running through my veins, numbing me from head to toe so I can’t feel my skin. On better days, […] my assault is a beautiful gust of wind, lifting my heart and my mind to places they’ve never been”. The juxtaposition of the variety of feelings the assault brings helps others to understand it’s not always the same day by day. Chessy creates an appropriate balance between explanation and metaphor, making her use of metaphor effective and beneficial for those around her to understand what she felt and experienced. Because Prout has actually been diagnosed with PTSD, her use of metaphor is acceptable, due to her personal experiences and accounts of what it is like to live with the disorder. However, it becomes a problem when those who have never been diagnosed with PTSD utilize these metaphors. It is acceptable when doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists explain PTSD with metaphor, but it is best to air on the side of caution because the chances that they themselves have suffered from PTSD are slim. It is much better to utilize simile, as opposed to metaphor, in cases like these because, as stated before, there is an immense difference in “it is” and “it is like.”

Drawing from Sontag’s thesis, which states metaphors should not be used to describe diseases of unknown causes nor to explain other circumstances of the world, I have concluded there should be limited use of metaphors to portray PTSD because of the sheer nature of the disorder. If we don’t even know what actually causes PTSD, we cannot be expected to describe it exactly as it occurs, especially in metaphorical form. Sufferers feel discounted when those around them attempt to explain, often incorrectly, the feelings they experience. It is extremely frustrating, and I can attest to this, when someone tries to explain your own disorder to you. These explanations are usually with good intentions, but they have poor execution.

Sufferers of PTSD from sexual abuse have the most knowledge of the disorder, even more so than doctors and researchers who dedicate their lives to studying the disorder, because they live with it day after day. The only people who know what it means to live with PTSD from sexual abuse
can truly use metaphors to relay the workings of the disorder, but it is always best to limit the use of metaphor surrounding a disease, disorder, or illness of unknown or multiple causes. Because, in the words of Susan Sontag, “illness is not a metaphor”, and illnesses, diseases, and disorders should, in no way, be metaphorical in nature.
A blaring, never-ending beep woke me from a short night of sleep. I pried open my weary eyes and glanced at the red glare of the alarm clock on my nightstand. Wednesday morning had finally arrived, and I was ecstatic. I crawled out of my bed covers and leaped out of bed, flipping on all the lights as my room lit up like a Christmas tree. I hurried into my little brother and sister’s room down the hall switching on their lights as they grunted at the sight of the bright morning light. My navy and white striped sweater along with my favorite pair of dark jeans were all laid out on my floor, wrinkle-free and ready to wear. I had to make the best first-impression for my first day of high school, since this was the beginning of the next four years of my life. I scurried down the stairs and out to the front door for our classic first day of school pictures. Primping my perfectly curled hair and sliding on my sandals, I was ready to take on my first day of freshman year. My siblings and I jumped in my mom’s car with sprinkled donuts in hand, along with the excitement and readiness to conquer another year of school.

“How a great first day, sweetie! You’ll be great!” my mom embarrassingly shouted out her car window as I walked across the parking lot and opened the door of awaiting opportunities that lured me inside.

I was fourteen years old and filled with more excitement than ever before. School had never been necessarily exciting for me, until my freshman year began. I began to picture what my new life would look like, who I would hang out with, and all the endless possibilities I would be given. I was a football cheerleader on the JV squad and thought that I ruled the school. As any other freshman thought, this was a new school where I would make all new friends and have brand-new, exciting surroundings.

I knew I had a busy year ahead of me, filled with lots of homework, cheer, and less sleep than I was used to. Cheering for the school team, while also cheering competitively for Indiana Elite, didn’t leave me much free time during the week. While balancing practices with a new and more intense homework load, I knew I was in for more than I had hoped for. As my mom has
always told me, “You never know until you try,” so I decided to give it a shot. Being the vulnerable fourteen-year-old that I was, I thought I could do anything and everything. Unfortunately, this mindset didn’t turn out in my favor as I originally hoped it would.

As I continued on with my busy schedule, I slowly became lethargic and worn out toward the end of my first semester. My family began to notice this when I’d come home from school and fall into a deep sleep until I woke up to the alarming sound of my mom’s voice, “Sweetie, it’s time for dinner!” I let out a grunting sigh and counted down the hours until I could go back to sleep again. Surprisingly enough, I would still be tired enough to sleep for almost nine more hours the same night. My siblings and I gathered around the dinner table while my mom brought out the sizzling chicken tenders and cheesy mashed potatoes, our classy family dinner. We sat around and told the funniest and most embarrassing stories from our day at school, laughing until all of our stomachs clenched, and we couldn’t make out any more words. As much as I enjoyed every crazy moment around my family, I felt as if I wasn’t fully present mentally. I was so tired all the time, and all I could think about was sleep.

I felt as if I was dragging a lifeless body along with me wherever I went, but that wasn’t stopping me yet. I continued cheering and going about my weekly schedule with limited free time with my friends, until my tired body became too heavy to keep pushing along. My concerned parents scheduled me an appointment with our family doctor, for a usual checkup that would give them some reassurance about my energy levels and health status. At least that’s what they were hoping would be the definite answer from my doctor.

One day after school, my mom picked me up early from school and we headed to the doctor’s office. I never liked this place, especially because I clearly remember my mom dragging me here when I was little for a “just a checkup,” but I usually came out with two or three pokes on my arm covered with Scooby-Do Band-Aids. My mom expressed her concerns to our doctor, which she concluded were fairly normal, but decided to prick my finger anyway and test me for mono. The results came back positive, and the doctor ordered me to sit out of cheer along with any physical activity for four to five weeks. I was devastated I couldn’t cheer and was forced to sit out and watch my teammates continue on without me. After a few weeks with lots of rest and hydration, I wasn’t getting any better. I’d still randomly wake up in the middle of the night to my
clothes drenched in sweat, feeling like I just ran 50 miles, along with a fever of over 100 degrees. I was frustrated with myself for getting sick, especially when I was so excited to cheer with all my new friends at the high-school level, which I had dreamt about since I was a little girl.

As I continued to watch my teammates cheer from the sidelines, I became lonely and sicker. My parents were more worried about me than ever before and began scheduling appointments with a variety of specialists. Our family doctor referred us to Riley Children’s Hospital, where I would soon get many CT and PET scans as more doctors attempted to uncover the reason behind my mystery illness. I cannot explain the frustration I was feeling, but I sometimes catch myself remembering what it felt like. I was disappointed in myself for ruining my opportunities that I was so ecstatic for all summer leading up to my freshman year. I knew this journey was going to be a long one, and my body kept assuring me of that. After a weary, dreadful, and perplexing twenty-two appointments of blood draws, scans, and debriefing with many different specialists at Riley, I was finally given my ultimatum.

I recall sitting on the crinkly tissue paper on the exam room table, waiting aimlessly for the doctor to return. My mom was sitting in the chair across from me, and I clearly remember hearing the mumbling from the nurses and doctors outside the closed wooden door. The hematologist was supposed to return with the results of my latest PET scan. I sat up on the table as we heard a knock, my heart rate steadily racing. The doctor sat down next to my mom with a trembling look on her face, crossing her legs while she gathered her thoughts. I had already guessed the outcome, but I knew my mom was still hoping for the best. My vision became blurry and I felt my body turn instantly cold, as my hands were shaking at my side.

My body began to shut down and my selective hearing only allowed me to make out a few words, “large mass behind the breastbone,” “tumor,” and “possibly malignant.” The room was originally filled with desperate hope, which slowly faded away after each word she spoke. My mom burst into an uncontrollable number of tears as the doctor grabbed her a tissue box and reached for a hug, embracing the fear and sadness everyone was attempting to avoid. I was present physically, sitting on the table in silence with a cold, stiff face and a strong gaze at the doctor that hadn’t broke since I watched those words trickle out of her mouth into the bitter, cool air. My mind was racing, and I couldn’t force out any tears, emotions, or words. My legs had
stopped bouncing from anticipation. My hands had stopped sweating and I felt my heart stop beating. My vision still appeared blurry, even though the outcome was now clear. I had been diagnosed with stage 3 Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, an extremely rare type of blood cancer. Rare enough that only ten percent of cases are diagnosed in teenagers and children in the U.S. each year. My spleen was severely enlarged, and I had diseased tumors sitting behind my breast bone and surrounding my spleen. I was about to embark on a journey that no normal teenager should experience, or anyone at all. The next year and a half of my life was going to be a constant battle, but I was ready to fight.

Breaking the news to my family was hard and unbearable, as I watched the disappointment and fear appear in the faces of my brother and sister. I was supposed to be their role model, the oldest sibling that was there to help them with anything they needed, and I felt as if I had let them down, let my team down, and let myself down. I couldn’t bear to think of myself as “the sick cancer kid” when I was always so energetic and hopeful. I wish I could say that I only had positive thoughts throughout this whole experience, but that wasn’t the case. I became frustrated and upset with God and with myself. Why was God letting this happen to me? My life was great, so why now? What did I do to deserve this?

The next few days were a blur, with more hours spent in the hospital and in procedures than hours of sleep I received. The day after my diagnosis, I had my port inserted so I could begin chemotherapy as quickly as possible. School was obviously not the main concern for me or my family at the time; their first priority was making sure I was healthy again. I was given a rigorous schedule of a three-month treatment plan, which included two eight-hour sessions, two four-hour sessions, and one thirty-minute session of chemotherapy each week. I began my first eight-hour chemo the next day, which came with lots of great naps, endless snacks, the most supportive family members, and the best doctors and nurses in the world.

One of the few reasons I was determined to keep fighting and never give up was not purely due to inner strength, but more so from the people that surrounded me. My first treatment was full of lots of fear, tears, and hand-holding. My parents were right there by my side helping me push through the pain and worry, along with my doctors and nurses. After I got through all the sticking and poking, I dozed off to give my puffy eyes some rest. I woke up, to what I
assumed was a few minutes but turned out to be over three hours later, to the sound of an unfamiliar voice. “Lord, I ask that you watch over and provide her with enough strength and courage to keep on fighting through this battle. Amen.” I slowly peeked over my blanket to see who it was. Nevertheless, it was our family pastor from church, Dustin. When my parents broke the news to our community, Dustin was the first to call and check in. He asked if he could come visit and give a quick blessing of healing. My parents and I were overwhelmed by this gesture and all the kind words we received from our family and friends.

As I quickly learned the ropes of life in the hospital as a “sick kid,” I became very close with my nurse, Alisha, who always gave me courage to keep fighting. She became my best friend and was the most trustworthy person throughout the whole process, especially because she was always willing to tell me the cold, hard truth. We talked about everything, from hair loss and learning to eat even when I felt too nauseous to stand, to catching up on all my school work and staying in contact with my friends. Alisha gave me comfort on the hardest days and helped me smile through the unbearable pain. As I lay there on my stiff, cold bed, she sat beside me as we watched my favorite Bravo shows and gossiped about all the characters. She always knew exactly how to cheer me up and helped me through the days when I felt too weak to keep on fighting.

I had the biggest support system and always had someone checking up on me, but everyday still seemed to get tougher and tougher. I felt my face flush from the liquid poison that was dripping into my veins through a tube that stretched from the IV pole up my shirt and became queasy and nauseous. I didn’t want to eat or drink anything, not even my favorite sour patch kids and starbursts my mom always brought with her. As I’d wake up with groggy eyes from a deep, four-hour sleep, my bladder would be so full I was sure I was going to explode. My parents would sit me up and drag me out of bed, as I wheeled my IV pole behind me, down the hall from my isolation room to the bathroom. The walk was about thirty seconds for any normal human being, but for a sick kid like me, it felt more like a three-mile crawl to the finish line.

After many rigorous treatments and more trips to the hospital than one person should have total in their lifetime, the day had finally come. April 14, 2014, was my last day of chemotherapy and I was cancer free. The support my family and I received from our community
along this journey was remarkable and almost unbelievable. My school cheer team hosted a chili
dinner in my name in which they designed and sold t-shirts, collected donations, and told my
story at our school’s pep rally for Riley in preparation for our Riley Dance Marathon. Everyone
was so supportive and caring, which made it all much more bearable knowing I was supported
by the people who mattered most. I was constantly showered with gifts, big and small, from so
many people, some I barely even knew. I decided I wanted to do something with all of the
support I was receiving, so I decided to design my own t-shirts. They were bright pink and had a
quote on the front that read, “Don’t worry about tomorrow, God is already there.” and the back
designed with the hashtag “#pray4kate.” I raised over $1,600 with the help of my classmates,
friends, family, teachers, and coaches who all contributed. I decided to donate all the money
raised back to blood cancer research, in hopes of increasing the chances of finding a cure for
cancer.

Everything happens for a reason. This cliché often comes to mind when thinking about
my journey through adolescence. As I look back on my experiences from freshman year, I
realize that life is too precious to waste. I have become more appreciative of each and every day,
finding the little joys in life. Not only did my journey shape me into the person I am today, but it
has also allowed me to look at the world with a different perspective. I have a more open-mind
and a kinder heart that allows me to push myself outside my comfort zone through new
experiences. Now that I am healthy and fully recovered, I remember the positives during the hard
times that got me through. I remember there’s always a purpose behind everything. Even though
I haven’t fully discovered God’s purpose for my journey yet, I’m determined to find an answer. I
hope this purpose grants me the opportunity to give back and help others through hard times, like
my family and nurses did for me. This journey has made me especially thankful for my health
and has also contributed to my newly inspired motto: “Live each moment like it’s your last.”
You were taken from me. Taken from us. You were ripped away and I did not even know until two days after the fact. Why did they have to take such a beautiful soul?

The news was a shock to my body, like stepping outside barefoot into a blanket of snow. I was in the beautiful Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala. The sun warmed my skin and glistened on my darkening blonde hair. As I glanced to my right, the monstrous but dormant volcano, Agua, towered over the muted colors of the closely packed colonial buildings. To my left, in the distance, smoke from the peak of Fuego puffed into the sky.

It was the first full day we had on the cobblestoned streets of Antigua. I was aimlessly walking around in my new, and clunky, tan and teal hiking boots, when my roommate, Maha, and I peered down our host family’s street. Standing at our door, we found our trip leader, Dr. Vance. He looked at me first with concerned eyes: “There has been a death in your family,” he said plainly. “Your mother wants you to call her as soon as you can.”

Immediately, my thoughts raced to Grandma. I would’ve been devastated but my heart had already prepared itself two years prior. Ever since her stroke, she had been suffering in the nursing home and having visits in and out of the hospital. A broken arm. Physical therapy. Pneumonia. Health problems haven’t been new for her. Not to mention, emotional issues. Along with her physical health, her over-the-top, bubbly, and shining personality was taken from her. She had become merely a pile of skin and bones—she was lifeless. I was ready for her suffering to stop.

Though, this past year, a flicker of hope revived in me. In all of us, actually. The highlight of the year with her was this Christmas. Her liveliness and overly-honest comments about her relationship with you burst out of her mouth as if she was never in the two-year trance. Jackie Stamps was back. The baby-loving, God-praising, emotionally-driven, overly-positive mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had returned.

But, I know how this world works. It drowns your body in darkness just when you start to feel the warmth of the sun.
I thought that she was the one that had to be taken.

I heard the words of my mother vibrate into my ear through my phone but I refused to believe what they whispered. “Grandpa?” I repeated. No, it couldn’t have been you. You weren’t supposed to go first. You were fine. Strong. Your health seemed to be better than Grandma’s. Why did you quit fighting? She needed you. I needed you. We all needed you. I was not ready for it to be you. I had just seen you around Christmas time. You were just next to Grandma kissing, laughing, and holding hands. You and Grandma just celebrated sixty-five years of marriage. Your marriage couldn’t be over yet. You guys were the perfect couple; the couple I admired. The living existence of true love. I knew you had the ultimate relationship because of you and your actions: you visited Grandma every day in the nursing home, even after she would call you at night to rat you out for not calling the night before. Once for Valentine’s Day, you gave her a heart-shaped box of chocolates, her favorite thing in the world, the size of a toddler. To propose, you cracked and shelled Diamond walnuts, placed the ring in one, and re-glued all of them with precision so that she wouldn’t know. Most importantly, even after Grandma and you both lost your youthful looks, I saw you guys both kiss frequently, as if you had never lost your spark. She was your sweetheart. Your everything. I am glad you taught and showed me what it means to love someone. I’ll never forget that.

I listened to the rest of her call and I replied with cracked and constricted sentences. My throat’s lining tensed up, fighting back the arrows my heart flung at my voice. Each second I spent with my mom on the phone was a war against my tears. They pooled in my eyes, ready to show themselves, while my mother worried over the funeral plans. I held the forming droplets back by batting my mascara-covered eyelashes. My mother’s sanity was my only motivation against the brewing storm of my emotions. She couldn’t hear me cry. She didn’t deserve to hear me surrender to the shock when I knew her heart was already beaten black and blue. I hoped the mere strangers near me wouldn’t see me wave my white flag either.

My brick wall crumbled down as soon as I hung up the phone. As I delivered the news to Maha and Dr. Vance, my body released the storm. My eyes, red from exhaustion, welled up with a flood of salty tears, streaking down my cheeks. The smooth marble complexion of my face transformed into a blotchy red and cream. I summarized the news, word by word, after pathetic
gasps of air escaped my throat. The shock of your death had finally pinned me to the cold and unforgiving ground.

The reality of the news never really clung to my thoughts until I was alone. Once the bustle and light of day ceased in my room, familiar rivers of tears stained my pillow. I couldn’t comprehend why it had to be you. A good man like you did not deserve to go so unexpectedly. I knew you were in a good place but that did not fill the void left in my heart. My chest felt lighter—empty. Your death carved out my organs, my feeling of life, from my chest so that the only thing left was just a mere shell of skin and bones. I felt hollow. Nothing felt right.

Your funeral was a whirlwind for me. Your casket was centered in the gloomy room, surrounded by bouquets of flowers. A bird’s eye view of your little farmhouse, full of red, orange, and green, peered down over your colorless face. I remember looking at your body in the casket. They didn’t do it right. Your face was lifeless, cold. They caked too much makeup on your face. The sunspots and familiar wrinkles I had memorized were erased as if they never existed. Your overly large ears and earlobes, drooped with age, rested lightly on the white bed of the wooden casket. Your lips were sealed shut. They reflected a deathly purple and blue hue, the same hue that your rough and structured fingernails now displayed. Your lips appeared fuller than I’d remembered. I always remembered how your lips would slide up into a smile and crinkle at the corners when you laughed or how your top lip curved slightly inward and over the bottom. And, just like your lips, your eyes were shut tight and guarded by the unruled fragments of salt and pepper hairs arranged in a soft line. I will now only have to rely on my memory to revive your dark and hazy brown eyes that contained so many memories and experiences well before my time. I never heard all of them. I wish I had. The morticians damped the whiteness of your hair when they greased it back on your head (you were one of the few who actually had a full set of hair). You never wore your hair like that. You let it fall like a cloud to the left of your head, never restricting it. Those people did not know the pride you had in your hair. I know that I loved it. They did not do your hair right. They didn’t make you look right. It wasn’t you.

You looked sharp and handsome in your suit, though I would have rather seen you dressed in your usual jeans and flannel or khakis and a polo. I always thought your lean and tall figure could rock those outfits with ease. Despite your leanness, I remember you walking with
such confidence and strength as if your feet were attracted to the floor. It wasn’t until the end when you starting using your wooden cane with a snake’s face engraved on the handle. But even then, I was never quite aware of how weak you were getting. Your magnetic feet shuffled slower than before yet they were still strongly secured on the ground. I wish I could’ve seen that you were getting weaker. Maybe that would have made your death less of a shock.

I try to destroy the image of you laying in the coffin from my mind because I know that’s not who you were. You weren’t weak. You weren’t fragile. You were a man. A perfect man. You had goliath hands, roughened from years of stripping tobacco leaves, fingers worn with calluses from the factory line in Alcoa, and nails hardened and rigid like a tortoise’s shell. Those weren’t the hands I saw wrapped so neatly on your lap. Those hands couldn’t have made the grip that previously could have broken my delicate and smooth child hand with ease. We used to compare our hands, and I remember how my pinky was maybe a fourth of the size of your index finger. We also played a game where you would grab my finger and I would try to escape from your finger jail—you’d always let me win after a few minutes of squirming like a worm. Your hands were one of the few ways I saw your strength and I always stared at them in awe. I never really saw you do much else to show your muscles. You weren’t the type to brag.

At the funeral, I still felt your calming presence. In my eighteen years of existence, I never heard you raise your voice out of anger or lash out impulsively. Thanks to you, I know what a real man is or perhaps even a perfect man. He isn’t emotionless, angry, egotistical, or as big as the empire state building. He is exactly what you were: kind, smart, sensitive, physically and mentally tough. An overall good man. I know now that I shouldn’t settle for anything less than that, than what you were. A good man, or perhaps a perfect man, does exist. I hope I am blessed enough to marry a guy like you. Maybe that will help me cope with the loss of such a beautiful soul. I was lucky to call you my grandfather.

What scares me the most is what lies ahead for my family without you. I think about Grandma the most. I fear losing Grandma sooner than I want. You were the other half of her soul.

I peered into the viewing room to find my grandmother’s wheelchair stationed in front of your casket. My mother or uncle knelt alongside her with one of their hands resting on the black
wheelchair handle and the other clutching to the inner rim of a gray geometric Kleenex box. I kept my distance so that I wouldn’t stir up the thick fog of grief that sat in the room. Intimate whispers were exchanged between them. With each comment, Grandma nodded and let her thoughts weigh down her face with sorrow. In other moments, I saw her grasping for her sweetheart’s hands. She held onto your rounded fingers with hers as she spoke softly to her children. With her same arthritis hand, she brushed her rigid knuckles across your smoothed face. She peered at her husband, the father of her children, with sorrowful eyes and weakly pushed against my mother and uncle, trying to stand up. She tried to absorb every detail of your body, of your face, and she tried to engrave the touch of your skin onto hers. Your physical body was the only thing left of you. She wasn’t ready to let go of the last part of her everything.

At the funeral, Grandma was more composed than any of us thought. Her wheelchair was locked at a forty-five-degree angle from your chest as she greeted her friends. Yes, she had her tearful outbursts but when she greeted your visitors, she locked her head upright and extended her mouth to showcase her usual toothy grin. With each new soft-smiling face, my Grandma flowed with life. It was as if God was flowing through her veins. Kind words flew out of her mouth, though they were shortly followed by a slight head nod and sorrowful eyes staring at the gray carpet. I saw her sneak multiple longing stares towards the man in the casket. She missed you already.

Now, she’s the only one left from the dynamic duo of smiles, love, warmth, and comfort. I know she’s sad. She’s lost actually, without you. She calls my mother on the phone, dazed, and asks if you have passed. She usually has trouble remembering what she ate for breakfast or if you came to visit her that day, but your death haunts her thoughts. I bet she wants to die. I don’t blame her for wanting to. I know that she will likely be happier dancing in heaven with you, her siblings, and parents, but I selfishly want her to stay here with me, my sister, my mom, and my uncle. She’s the only reminder of the goodness she and you both possessed.

I fear for my mother. I fear she will never be the same. She is such a strong woman yet she conceals her pain. I know she’s hurting because the nearly perfect man that I called Grandpa was her father. She had many more years to witness the way you composed yourself with grace, the way you restrained yourself when arguing with Grandma, the way your arms felt in a warm
embrace, and the way your eyes twinkled when you were proud of her. I am sure my uncle feels the same way. People say they see a lot of you in him. I am glad another version of you still exists on this planet and I am glad that I can call him my uncle.

And what about all these other people, your friends, and colleagues, that you left behind? I fear for their well-being as well. I saw at your funeral a middle-aged man, your friend Keith, tormented by his own tears. Did you know that you had that big of an impact? I thought I was going to be as distraught as many of the visitors at the funeral were. However, as we made a long journey from Boonville to the snow-covered fields, I felt a concentrated warmth in my chest. As I peered out my window, I was filled with awe. The beauty of the sunset sky over the naked trees and patchy white ground entertained my eye during the ride.

My cousins, uncle, and Dad lifted your casket out of the hearse. Their long dark overcoats flapped in the wind and provided me a sharp contrast to the bold red and blues of the flag over your casket. Although it was cold outside, the warmth of my chest remained.

After your twenty-one gun salute, they carefully folded the American flag that was draped over you and handed it to my Aunt for Grandma. I was especially proud to have called you my Grandpa at that moment and I know that having the American flag being apart of your burial would have made you beam with pride as well. After that, Pastor Bob gave his final words and then one of the soldiers stated lowly that family members could take a rose off of the bouquet if they pleased. I immediately knew I wanted to. I walked up to the soldier, reached for the rose in her hand, and gently grabbed it with my knitted pink mitten. I quickly stepped out of the tent and into the cold air, rose in hand. I danced around slippery spots of ice and into the warm car. As we drove away, I longed back towards the tent where your casket laid. I twirled the rose in my hand, laid it across my covered lap, and rested my bright pink mitten on top of the stem. My hand rested there for the rest of the ride.

During the ride back, I kept glancing at the rose. The petals reflected an earthly dark red and wrapped themselves around each other delicately. The pinkness of my mitten complimented them perfectly whereas the darkness and sorrow of my dress dulled the petals’ brightness. Just like the beauty of the fields and the sky on the way to the burial, the beauty of the rose consumed
my thoughts. I played with the stem with my pale and delicate fingers just to feel the warmth of your presence flow through my arm and back to my chest. I knew that you were with me at that moment.

Although I realize that you are buried in the cold ground, in front of a tombstone, in the middle of a cornfield, I know that I will still feel your presence within me. I like to believe you’ll be watching over me, my mom, my uncle, my sister, and Grandma from above and protecting us from harm. Although my beliefs have not been confirmed, I do know that you will continue to be in my life. I know I will greatly miss seeing your weathered face with a tuft of cloud-white hair at Christmas and Easter, but I also know that you’ll be there for me when I need it most. Despite the date that is engraved onto the cold slab of stone above your head, I know that you, our memories, stories, and special granddaughter-grandfather bond, will never be taken away.
The Perpetual Inferiority of FeMENity

Daniel Mulawa

I’ve always been a momma’s boy. I grew up with a strong mother, who because of her intense work load, had to have me cared for by either my babysitter, sister, or my grandmother. Because of this, I was always immersed with women that were deeply affectionate, caring, and nurturing- maybe less so with my sister at the time. My sister played a significant role in shaping my personality, however. She is six years older than me, so I was always trying to be around her and trying to be just like her, much to her dismay. We played with Barbies, dressed up, watched princess Disney movies, and did so many more things that were considered to be “girls only” activities. When I started going to school, I was quickly and forcefully met by the binaries of our society. I went there with no idea that boys weren’t supposed to be doing all the things that I had grown to love with my sister. I was teased, bullied, and ostracized just because I didn’t see a value on putting labels on what I should and shouldn’t like because I’m a boy. I remember the struggle of finding friends, and that I would cry almost every day when I got dropped off at preschool just because I didn’t want to deal with strangely mean 3-year-old children there. From that early age of 3, I was already being stripped of the things I loved in life because our culture denies the opportunities for self-expression from early ages. It was until a few years later that I learned to key of how to feel comfortable around all the other students- I had to conform.

Through the years of me growing up with the female role models in my life, I grew up with a skewed view of how strong and powerful women are. When I started going to a public middle school, I started to realize how different my mindset was from that of others. I quickly became friends with some girls there, and through them I started to see the injustices and corruption our society places on their shoulders. They constantly felt compelled to look, act, and dress in a certain way. It was depressing to watch them struggle to be unique and do things how they would naturally when all the other people around them pushed ideals for how to be a good woman down their throat. This doesn’t go without mentioning how the boys were treated as well. I had always been in touch with my “effeminate” side, and because of this, I was always more emotional and surrounded by more girlfriends than that of most other boys. In order to be friends
with the other boys, I had to be a different person than who I was truly because most of them didn’t want to be friends with a boy that was essentially a girl. This further set me on a track to hide my true self and create a face that conformed to the desires of society. In hindsight, I wish I had been less influenced by the criticisms of others, but as I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized the importance of expressing your true self. However, the lingering question of “Why is being feminine innately bad?” has been a central question throughout my life. Why are women forced to act femininely, and why is it when a guy identifies with this, he is inadvertently set lower within the social ladder? Through this paper, I intend to explore the facets of our society that have caused us to equate femininity to inferiority.

There is no denying that women have faced oppression over time. Until very recently in history, women have been subjected to the will of the man she is with. A personal example that comes to mind is my grandmother. Her parents moved from Germany to the United States to raise their family and get away from the political unrest that was unfolding there during the time. As she was growing up, her parents were extremely strict on her, and she was forced into being the person that she is today, rather than being guided into that position. When she was just 19 years old, she went on a date with a young man from the marines, and after one thing led to another, my mom became part of the picture that night. At that moment, my grandmother realized how her parents and even society would look at her if she was pregnant without a husband, and with that, she quickly married the marine she had recently met—my grandfather.

Though they are still married to this day, the path up until this point for my grandmother has not been easy by any means. She was in charge of tending to the house, caring for the kids, cooking the meals, and had to get a job in order to keep the money flow somewhat stable. To add upon that, my grandfather is an alcoholic, and was not a loyal husband. My grandmother was never quite sure when to expect him to be home, and I’ve heard many stories of her preparing really nice meals, spending all day making sure they were perfect, just to find out that he was sleeping with a different woman that night and wouldn’t come home. However, even in the face of constant extreme stress, my grandmother persisted. She never quit, and even though society forced her into the position she was in, she pushed through and was successful in the end. When I heard about this, not only did I think that her perseverance was admirable, but I find it
ridiculous that she was put into that in the first place.

The ultimate reason behind a lot of her struggles in life were due to the fact that she became pregnant at a young age. She knew that life would be even more difficult if she hadn’t married a man at that point, so she accepted her fate and did what she had to do to protect herself and the child she was bearing. I believe that part of the reason my mom ended up becoming so work-oriented was because she saw what my grandmother had to put up with. She didn’t want to be put into a situation where she couldn’t make her own decisions and need the help of a man to get her through the various obstacles in life. This one example of many just demonstrates the dynamic changes that are happening in our society. Just 50 years ago, many women were reliant on their husbands to be the provider of their homes. In present times, the situation is starkly different. Women are still fighting for equality, but the fight has shifted from one of control over one’s life to being viewed and treated equally as a man. We can see how women are treated differently in various places, such as the media, the workforce, politics, and possibly one of the most influential and reflective of our time- the film industry. Women in the film industry are faced with many problems to this day, and one particular genre that accentuates this is horror film.

The horror film industry, though most likely unconsciously, implores the facets of society that seek to keep women from being treated equally as men. More often than not, the movie will have hyper sexualized women that, because of their feminine qualities, are unsuitable to survive or at least survive by themselves. However, there is a particularly different reappearing female that transcends across many different horror films. This girl is dubbed the infamous “Final Girl” by Carol Clover. This girl’s attributes of being virginal, “intelligent, watchful, levelheaded,” and an outcast set her apart from the rest of the women in the film (Clover). She doesn’t pertain to the feminine qualities that the other girls have, and as a result receives the spotlight. She has the “opportunity” to fight the monster, and eventually, with the help of either someone else, luck, a transition into masculinity, or some combination of those, is able to walk away with her life, unlike many of those that come across the monster. But why is this archetype so common? Why does such a vast array of horror films actively choose to use a woman with a gender recombination to be the survivor? I believe a good place to begin is with how femininity is without a doubt one of the key elements for either death or monstrosity.
There are three movies that I am going to focus on: The Exorcist, The Babadook, and Halloween H20. These movies all have a female lead, and through that, we can see how the role of the “Final Girl” and femininity play throughout each film as a whole. Halloween H20 is a prime example of how gender and the “Final Girl” interact with one another to create a “hero” that we can root for. In this movie, Laurie Strode is yet again faced with the treacherous task of fighting off her psychotic brother, Michael Myers. However, the situation behind this story is slightly different in the fact that she is now a mother, and she has resorted to alcoholism in order to cope with the trauma of her past. The movie centralizes around how Laurie’s son had just turned 17 years old, and because of this, Michael decides to track him down and kill him. When Laurie figures out that her son is in imminent danger, she instantaneously becomes a fierce protector, much unlike how she acted whenever the same happened to her at that age. In this, “Laurie is faced with and must come to understand her own relationship with the monster who has haunted her life and dreams”.

Laurie intentionally pursues Michael, and with that, embarks on a battle that relies on her wit and perseverance to endure. She isn’t afraid to use phallic weapons and the gaze, and with these tools, she is able to finally put an end to the monster that seems to never perish. The Laurie in this movie is a stark difference from the Laurie we all grew to love in the classic, Halloween, however. In the original, Laurie is the embodiment of the Final Girl, whereas in Halloween H20, she has lost the status. When Michael is attacking her, she relies on her quick wit and resourcefulness to get her through the fight, but ultimately, it’s just a game of survival for her.

Her attacks against Michael only bring him down for brief moments before he gets up and goes after her again. “Laurie has the chance to kill Michael, but she rejects this opportunity, showing that she has not yet mastered the masculine violence necessary to defeat a psychokiller”. It’s not until Dr. Loomis shows up and shoots Michael that the fight is finally over.

So, what makes Laurie capable of defeating the monster in the H20 and not the original? In H20, Laurie has grown to be a woman full of corruption, losing the purity that so encompassed her when she was a young 17-year-old in the original. She has become dependent on alcohol and lost her virginity, thus stripping her of the feminine qualities that we admire in the Final Girl. Though Laurie must take on masculine qualities in order to fight Michael in the original film, the qualities are on a whole different level in H20. Rather than just defending
herself, Laurie becomes willing to attack. She has evolved from the innocence of her young adulthood into a hardened mother, willing to do what is necessary in order to protect those that she loves. This evolution into being a Final Woman, coupled by Laurie’s abandonment of femininity, allow her the strength and drive to take action herself, and not to just sit around surviving until someone else can be the hero for her.

The Babadook has an interesting take on horror film. It is about a young mother, Amelia Vanek, who has lost her husband due to a car accident when driving her to the hospital during her labor. Over time she has become exhausted trying to raise her six-year-old son Samuel on her own. One night, Sam asks his mother to read him the pop up storybook, Mister Babadook. The book is about a monster that tortures those who find out about his existence. After they read the book, Sam became convinced of the monster’s existence, and Amelia is forced to comfort him many nights in order to help him sleep. Then, the strange things started to happen. Bizarre sounds echo through the house, doors seem to have minds of their own, and glass is found shattered on the floor. Amelia blames Sam for these, but he claims that it is because of the Babadook. Eventually after things escalate, Amelia destroys the book, just to find it reassembled on her door step. Soon after, Amelia becomes possessed by the Babadook, and until her son assembles an elaborate plan to subdue her, she terrorizes the house and kills the dog. When Sam has her tied up in the basement, he lovingly holds her face to which the demon is expelled from her body. Amelia confronts the monster and is able to make it resort to refuge in the basement, because “you can’t get rid of the Babadook.”

After all this, Sam and Amelia have found peace in their lives, with the subtle addition of the monster living within the basement. Throughout this story, it is apparent that Amelia’s status of being a Final Girl isn’t very typical. She is a hard-working mother, trying to make ends meet, but when the monster takes over her, she becomes a monster herself through abjection. Abjection in terms of a maternal figure is “where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent” (Creed). This definition encapsulates the essence of this story because the father had died, and the child is struggling to cope with his mother, who after a long struggle, succumbs to the power of the Babadook. This inability to “move beyond trauma” makes Amelia susceptible to being possessed,
and through this monstrous gender recombination, she becomes unable to save herself as a Final Girl (Grafius). This causes a disruption in the Final Girl archetype. Gone is Amelia’s femininity—motherly, nurturing characteristics, which has been replaced by a cold, distant, destructive, masculine female.

On the other hand, her son displays the characteristics we typically associate with Final Girls. He is intelligent, virginal, and an outcast among his peers, so he in a way fills the role when Amelia is forced out of it, thus creating a Final Boy. Because of this, Amelia relies on her son to devise a plan to save her, which ultimately exposes her to the femininity of her son’s love and compassion, dispels the heathen which resides in her, and causes her to be the Final Woman that we also see in Laurie Strode. This does not go without noting that Sam was not able to fight the monster himself. His feminine characteristics made him unsuitable to take action himself. Amelia then uses the masculinity of her motherly ambition to save her child by defeating the monster, and thus in turn, protects the Final Boy.

We’ve addressed the Final Girl, Final Woman, Final Boy, motherly abjection, and how they all interrelate, but what happens when the Final Girl is actually a little girl that becomes possessed? The Exorcist is undoubtedly one of the most iconic horror films of all time. In this movie, a young, innocent girl, Regan MacNeil, is possessed by the demon, Pazuzu, after she uses a Ouija Board. After some time, she slowly displays more and more signs that she needs help beyond what a doctor can provide, so she begins to receive an exorcism. When confined to the room, Pazuzu forces the girl to do various awful and bizarre things, such as masturbating, making her head spin in a complete circle, say vile statements, and so many other things.

Through this torturous event, Regan, the Final Girl of the movie, is subjected to gender modifications that portray her as a monstrous female. This movie “while seemingly invested in the spectacle of the rebellious, possessed female body, actually works to preserve the patriarchal order by purging it of the monstrous-feminine” (Olney). This is shown by how the movie others women “by constructing the feminine as an imaginary other that must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order” (Creed). This process includes a “graphic association of the monstrous with the feminine body,” making possession a “rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh,” which is resolved through a “ritual of purification”
(Creed). Through this, it is apparent that the movie characterizes the possession of the little girl as a catalyst of the underlying desires that females have, and with that, the female is seen as needing to be fixed and purified into the natural feminine course of things. This ultimately demonstrates that the patriarchal status quo dominates our culture, and in effect, causes us to relate a relinquishment from our conception of femininity in a female as a horrid, monstrous act. In the end, Regan relies on the masculine priest to expel the demon that causes the “horrid” changes within her, and when she is returned back to her normal self, she is also reintroduced back to the feminine qualities that she once had, and as a result, is freed from being a monster.

All these stories demonstrate how a Final Girl is the lucky survivor of the film, but also displays the sheer inability for femininity to do anything remarkable. Regan MacNeil shows that when her femininity was tampered with she became a monster, and the only thing that could stop that monster was a masculine character, which in the end, restored her to her feminine state. Laurie Strode and Amelia Vanek both had been originally feminine Final Girls, but once they were exposed to the power of masculine traits that a mother can have when she stops at nothing to save her child, they each became a dynamically different character. Both had a regained sense of strength and determination to actually combat the monster, and as a result get to be the hero that saves the day, all because they embraced the masculinity of a Final Woman.

Though substantial progress has been made in the way for feminism, there is very clearly a long way to go before we can firmly say that women and men are treated equally. Horror films reflect the ideals of our culture and demonstrate that we as a society believe that femininity is innately inferior, and that the only way to combat and solve the problems that we face is to be masculine. Until we resolve this plaguing belief, the perpetuation of sexism towards women will transcend the test of time, and the gender binary will always be weighted to favor masculinity.
My Childhood was a Shattered Mirror

Alexandra Cordill

My childhood was a shattered mirror

In my oldest memory I play with my parents in our Halloween orange kitchen. They chase me as I laugh.

One afternoon in June last year dad said to me, “Be careful of who you date, I know autism can be passed down by parents with ADD or ADHD too. And you would hate to double the chances for your kids.” I say nothing.

I didn’t speak until 21 months. My mom taught me basic sign language instead.

When my fish, Frederica, dies I don’t cry. I bury her in a Tiffany box in our front yard with her favorite pebble.

I cry when we move to a new house and I can’t push my bed flush with the wall, so I can feel the pressure on my chest as I sleep.

I learn to sleep face down.

Every year for my birthday we play Happy Birthday to Me by Cracker

My parents nudge me towards social interaction. I have different friends every year of elementary school.

They all leave me eventually.
My mom’s scent is a permanent slurry of Tiffany perfume and garlic from the hours she spends in the kitchen.

I press my face into her growing belly when she is pregnant with Anna. I talk and sing to the floating fetus for hours on end.

When she is born my mom makes me use Purell every time I want to hold her. My hands are constantly dry and cracked from the alcohol.

In second grade I move to public school. My anxiety is so severe that I scratch myself to the point of hives every morning. Just so I can escape to the nurse’s office for 20 minutes. My parents take me to an allergist. He prescribes me pills that do nothing for my burgeoning anxiety. I continue scratching and walk down to the nurse’s office every morning for my half pill.

When I was twelve I copied down every lyric to Young the Giant’s Cough Syrup at least 15 times in one week.

A year later I announce I am atheist. My catholic aunt tells me she is worried about me.

The two movies I feel connected to are The Perks of Being a Wallflower and Into the Wild.

At freshman homecoming I have my fist kiss. Afterwards he tells me he wants to just be friends.

In fifth grade I read Bullfinch’s Mythology cover to cover. All the kids at school saw me lugging around a 500-page book of Greek myth from 1863. This did not help me find friends.

I relate to Medusa
At age nine I set record for most words read in a school year. 2.4 million. I devoured at least two books a week. This did not help me make friends either.

I went to day camp for kids of State Farm employees for five consecutive years. The only thing I remember from Camp Wanikskaka is winning the costume contest dressed as an ear of corn.

When I was fourteen my best friend was sent to boarding school. I had to find new friends.

My grandfather asks, “If your husband likes long hair, you’ll grow it out right?” I say no and go on some long rant about hair and femininity. He understands none of it.

In 7th grade I wrote an essay titled The Mercator Projection Shifts Childrens’ Paradigm of the World. My teacher tells me I’m too smart for my own good. I don’t understand what he means.

Anna bikes to Culver’s with her friends, I watch 80’s movies with my parents. Ally Sheedy is my spirit animal.

I watch Friends on an infinite loop to compensate for not enjoying the company of my friends.

My therapist tells me I should schedule one social thing per week. I don’t.

I am the only 12-year-old at my gym. I make friends with all the 40 somethings doing Crossfit to fulfill some desperate need for human contact while exercising. I go through my teen years lifting weights instead of killing myself on cardio machines like my peers. This does not help me make friends.

My mom cries while watching soldiers come home to their dogs. I don’t understand why this makes her sad. She says she’s happy crying. That doesn’t make sense either.
I lock myself in my room from breakfast to dinner, so I can start and finish my book without interruption.

My sister gets annoyed because we’ve watched Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat the past five days during winter break. I don’t care because I’m five years older and I should be perpetually in control of the VHS player and also because Finding Nemo is stupid.

My dad asks me to grab his shoes on my way to the kitchen. I say, “You have two feet why don’t you get them yourself?” My parents get mad, I’m just repeating a line from a tv show and the character’s parents laughed. I don’t understand why mine are so angry.

I get my hair cut in my favorite sweatshirt, it has a moose embroidered on the front. The hairdresser doesn’t wash my hair, so it clings to my skin. I throw my sweatshirt away, it is forever itchy.

My mom buys me a pink striped fuzzy sweater. I feel like a Muppet and I love it. I tell her its itchy, she says it won’t be after she washes it. I never wear the sweater.

I am eight I teach myself how to knit and spend hours toiling over perfect, evenly spaced stitches only to get bored. I eventually end up with several impeccable doll sized blankets.

My sister is loud and speaks her mind. I learn to do whatever she wants to, so I can avoid her screams hurting my ears.

My mother forces me to drink water. I hate how the cold spreads down my throat.

I go missing at a wedding reception when I am four. My mom finds me in a back room of the hotel practicing to be the flower girl at my aunt’s upcoming wedding. I refuse to go back to the party for another 20 minutes.
I ruin a 9th birthday party because I refuse to watch any movies that are not comedy. We watch Napoleon Dynamite instead of August Rush.

During recess I am escorted by a lunch monitor to the bathroom, so I can brush my teeth after lunch. After a boy called me stinky breath on the jungle gym the week before. This does not help me make friends.

In third grade I punch Paige H. in the butt because she was encroaching onto my carpet square in the library. My teacher isn’t that mad because I don’t think she likes Paige H. that much anyway.

Paige H. had a baby last month.

In fourth grade I obsessively read Shakespeare and get frustrated when my mom can’t talk to me about the central plot of each play because she’s never read them. She takes me to see A Midsummer Night’s Dream instead.

Two summers later my mom forces me to go with two girls I don’t like to see Romeo & Juliet. I have to explain every detail to them and then listen to them gush about how romantic the play was.

I visit my aunt in New Mexico and go to the hot air balloon festival. I sit on the hood of her car to watch all the balloons take flight, she turns on the windshield wipers and laughs. I don’t understand why this is funny.

In eighth grade I go to Washington D.C. with my middle school. I become friends with our tour guide and don’t understand why people are reluctant to share a hotel room with me.

In preschool my teacher gives us each a bag of construction paper bones and tells us to create a new dinosaur. Forever the realist, I construct a Stegosaurus.
In high school I have a group of friends. I have nothing in common with them but they are friends nonetheless.
War: Religion’s Tool to Destroy Itself

Abby Beckman

Human life is sustained through a cycle. Through the process of photosynthesis, plants take in sunlight and carbon dioxide in order to make oxygen. The oxygen release is then breathed in by humans. After a breathing in oxygen, humans breathe out carbon dioxide. In return, plants use that carbon dioxide, plus the sunlight, to start the cycle again. Similarly, religion and war feed off of each other. The relationship between religion and war can be described as cyclical too in that religion can cause destruction, through war, and in return war sometimes destroys religion or redefines society with religion. However, unlike the photosynthesis cycle, the relationship between religion and war is destructive, not productive. This type of relationship can be seen in history through an analysis of wars like the American Indian War, the Civil War, and World War II.

Violence against the natives of the Americas occurred since the first colonization of the Americas around 1540. Specifically, the American Indian War commenced after the pioneer groups, who were traveling from the east to the west side of North America, encountered the Native Americans and attempted to transform their culture; this included their religion. Around 1840, an interest in the West was sparked after a wave of nationalism, caused by the War of 1812, and the Second Great Awakening. Manifest Destiny, a journey rooted in colonial progress, was almost a pilgrimage in that many of the people traveling felt it was God’s providence for them to make the land their own. The pioneers who went “believed that America had a divine obligation to stretch the boundaries of their noble republic to the Pacific Ocean” (“Manifest Destiny”). During their travels, they attempted to convert the natives. Many of the pioneers were Christians and believed it to be their duty to convert the native people and deliver them to salvation. Cultures clashed as the pioneers began to control how the natives’ society, including their religion, operated, “Missionaries also attempted to control the most intimate aspects of converts’ lives, encouraging heterosexuality, monogamy, and Christian marriage while
reinforcing larger cultural ideas about which sexual practices were natural”. Despite the war starting in one religious group’s attempt to eliminate the culture, including the religion, of another group, the ending did not produce this result as many Native Americans did not assimilate to the culture of the pioneers and continue to practice the religion of their ancestors.

Later, tensions began to grow between the North and the South over slavery. Many remember the war being over the legality over slavery. While this might be true, many of the tensions that eventually led to the Civil War were over the morality of slavery as both sides used different interpretations of Christianity to back their opinion. The Southern interpretation was that slavery was not only moral but a Christian obligation. One explanation of their interpretation included the teaching of how labor led to the salvation of both the slave holders and the slaves. This idea was something George D. Armstrong, one of the Presbyterian preachers of the time, often spread to his followers. He wrote that slaves secured “a Christian life on earth and meekness for his heavenly kingdom” through their labors. Many ideologies held within institutionalized religion begin with people who hold power within the institution. This is an important concept because if people of power in Southern Christianity preached that slavery was not only profitable, but moral, then it would have lead Southerners to believe their actions to be religious and not just economic. If the government declared slavery to be illegal, Southerners would have felt that it contradicted their right to practice what they considered to be religion. Thus Southerners felt they should fight the proposition.

On the contrary, Northerners believed slavery was the opposite of what Christianity taught. Thomas Starr King, a Unitarian minister who wanted to claim California for the Union, said the Northern success to be wrong on all fronts, “a geographical wrong, an economical wrong, a moral wrong, a religious wrong, a war against the American Constitution, against the law of the globe, against the New Testament, against God”. The Northern interpretation was rooted in the preaching that all people deserved equality. This view point was expressed in a war song written by Julia Ward Howe which was titled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”. Northern soldiers would sing Howe’s lyrics as they marched into a battle, “As He
died to make men holy, let us die to make men free” (“Civil War Music: The Battle Hymn of the Republic”). He was a reference to Jesus. As Christians, they believed Jesus to be their freer from sin, savior from hell, and deliverer to salvation. Northerners were, somewhat, comparing themselves to Jesus as they thought of themselves as saving the slaves from the hell they were in. This is important as it would have shown their religious reasoning for taking part in the war. In order to end a war based on religious interpretation, one interpretation of this religion had to prevail over the other within the United States Government. This finally came to fruition when the Northern interpretation redefined the United States laws by making slavery illegal.

Most people know how the second World War and religion are related on the surface, but do not know the aftermath of the war and how it affected the religion of the survivors. Elie Wiesel was one of the prisoners in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. In Night, he documented his time during the war. The book depicts his transformation from a devout Jewish boy to a victim of war who doubts God’s existence. It was the awful conditions within the camp and inhumane treatment of his fellow prisoners by the Nazis that led to the break down the faith of Wiesel. The hanging of a young boy is a specific instance of inhumanity that Wiesel detailed in his book. This instance was so outrageous that it caused an immediate denying of faith within Wiesel, “Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is- He is hanging here on this gallows…’”. Wiesel was not the only prisoner who began to doubt his faith. He recalled another prisoner struggling and deserting his faith, “He would recite whole pages of the Talmund from memory, argue with himself, ask himself questions and answer himself. And one day he said to me: ‘It’s the end. God is no longer with us’”. Although Wiesel could only give his audience insight into the prisoners at Auschwitz, the quotes give an idea of how the war affected the religion of the Jewish survivors. It can be inferred that the war environment, as created by the Nazis, destroyed the faith of many Jewish people, including Elie Wiesel, who were detained in the concentration camps.

While people were suffering in concentration camps in Europe because of their religion, Japanese Americans were facing discrimination in America. During World War II, Japanese Americans were put in internment camps out of fear that they were conspiring against the United States with Japan. George Takei, a Japanese American actor who was affected by the internment
camps, recounted how his family’s humanity was taken away from them as they were relocated to an internment camp, “When we arrived at Rohwer, in the swamps of Arkansas, there were these barb wire fences and sentry towers”. Although Japanese Americans were released from the camps, many were still being discriminated against. Takei described the his life after the war, “They would deny us housing. Jobs were very, very difficult. My father’s first job was as a dishwasher in a Chinatown restaurant. Only other Asians would hire us”. Under pressure to be accepted, many choose to desert Buddhism and to redefine themselves as Christians, “…some Buddhists converted to Christianity, while others burned Japanese-language books and other personal cultural artifacts in an attempt to destroy, literally and symbolically, their Japaneseness while simultaneously demonstrating their Americaness”. Japanese Americans, of the time, rid their lives of all elements of their religion, in order to feel excepted by the society in which they lived. Although the war did not force them to become Christians, the destruction and rebirth felt like a necessity for a whole group of people to fit in due to left over fear from the war; therefore, it can be viewed as a byproduct of the war.

People may argue that religion was not the main element of these wars. An argument could be made that the American Indian War was a war of economics. The American Indian War was fought over the land, which the pioneers wanted for the fur trade and railroad construction. While this is true, it is important to remember the original reason the pioneers were there. They were there because of Manifest Destiny, a religious movement. Also, many may view the Civil War as a war of politics instead of a war of religion. Slave-owner and abolitionists had different opinions on slavery and politics. Abolitionists felt the act should be illegal while slave-owners thought the government should not interfere with what they believed to be a right of the state. Political passion for the topic stemmed directly from religious passion. Additionally, World War II may be thought of as a revenge to the damage caused by World War I. The Treaty of Paris sent Germany into economic downfall by demanding them to pay a lot of money to the Allied powers. Hitler’s rise of power occurred when he began offering the Jewish people as a scape goat for the problem. World War I led to racial and religious discrimination which led to World War II.

Despite the dissimilarities of the various wars, each example had religion as a critical
element. In the American Indian War, Christianity was used by pioneers an attempt to obliterate the culture, including the religion, of the natives and reassemble them as the people they wanted them to be. This did not happen as Native Americans continue to practice their ancient religious practices under laws like the American Indian Religious Act. Although they are allowed to practice their religious beliefs, their way of life remains misunderstood and stereotyped. Similarly, interpretations of Christianity, were used, in the Civil War, as explanations for the North’s and the South’s stance on religion. The Northern interpretation overcame that of the South by winning the war and outlawing slavery. In World War II, two religious groups, Buddhist Japanese Americans and Jewish Europeans, were affected. After the internment camps in the United States, many Japanese Americans deserted their long-held religion for Christianity. The horrors in the concentration camps led many Jewish Europeans to desert religion altogether. Through an analysis of three wars, the American Indian War, the Civil War, and the second World War, it can be shown that religion can influence war and, inversely, war can influence religion.
Eric Hoffer presents a colorful array of information in his book The True Believer, none of which is more potent than the idea of a man of words. The grounds for mass movements must first be tilled by the words of an eloquent individual before real change can begin to occur. The man of words can strengthen or tear down a regime. Although Hoffer describes this man as an eloquent speaker or writer, he (or she) can be found in many different roles today. No longer must the man of words be found hunched over his desk, scrawling letters by candlelight and begging for change in pubs.

Today, he can be found with a spray paint can in hand, splattering the words “Sale Ends Today” in an alleyway. He questions authority and encourages others to do the same. Alternatively, men of words can be found strengthening authority through propaganda.

While the word “propaganda” often calls to mind depictions of Uncle Sam sternly calling young men to war or violent, racist drawings, it can also be a political candidate carefully choosing his words to persuade listeners to agree with him. Whether the man of words chooses to encourage questioning of authority or support a regime, he cannot diminish his importance in being the catalyst of a mass movement.

The primary role of a man of words is to discredit the prevailing order, allowing a mass movement to take hold after citizens are no longer allegiant to their primary authoritative figure. Hoffer says the man of words has a duty “to familiarize the masses with the idea of change, and of creating a receptivity to a new faith”. He alone is capable of imperceptibly inspiring change among the masses. Historically, this man of words has been someone like Karl Marx, whose words still course through society. His Communist Manifesto has been the guidebook to reform and the basis for multiple schools of thought for many. As Hoffer said, “the man of words formulates a philosophy and a program”, which is exactly what Marx dedicated his life to creating. While men of words like Karl Marx still exist today, a new group is being formed with the same ability to change
the masses’ minds: graffiti artists. These artists are individuals who feel so strongly about sharing their ideas they are willing to perform illegal activities to get their message into the world.

One of these individuals is British artist Banksy, described in the Smithsonian magazine as a “graffiti master, painter, activist, filmmaker, and all-purpose provocateur” (“Story”). A notoriously secretive artist, Banksy’s work exemplifies the notion of a man of words. He stencils his artwork onto dilapidated buildings and sneaks his paintings into prominent museum galleries (including the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) (“Story”). Banksy’s artwork can often be identified by its characteristic stenciling. The artist once told friend and author Tristan Manco: “As soon I cut my first stencil I could feel the power there. I also like the political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They’ve been used to start revolutions and stop wars” (“Story”). And Banksy’s work is revolutionary. The primary goal of his work is to encourage the masses to see the world more clearly. For example, Banksy once erected a rock in Gallery 49 of the British Museum. The caption read: “The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across the South East of England under the moniker Banksymus Maximus, but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognize the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls”.

With this humorous, slightly accusatory caption, Banksy questions the actions of authorities and invites others to do the same. He attempts to lead by example, and encourages change through the act of erecting a work of art without the museum’s approval. Often, Banksy’s actions (sneaking into museums, painting illegal works of art on buildings, etc.) tells more about the philosophy he intends to spread than his physical paintings. Banksy’s work encourages individuals to take a closer look at the world around them and to question their idea of normalcy. It is not only Banksy’s work that makes him a successful man of words, but also his form of producing work. He realizes that much of his audience (the general public) does not spend their time in art museums, so Banksy chooses to showcase his artwork in places where more people can see and affected by it. He is a successful man of words because his work is not restricted to a specific location. As a man who operates outside the law, Banksy tosses his message anywhere and everywhere people can see it; by this method, the common man has greater access to fresh, new
ideas. Additionally, Banksy posts his artwork online, allowing people to share and purchase it at any time. Chief reporter and New York correspondent for the Sunday Times Will Ellsworth-Jones says this action “gives [Banksy’s] art a lifespan that graffiti artists never had before… everyone has a chance to feel they share some part of Banksy,” which increases the willingness of individuals to embrace the message he shares (and, conversely, the willingness of individuals to share that message with others). This feeling of familiarity is imperative to Banksy’s success and the success of the message he spreads. Banksy’s message is often one of pacifism or one that questions the consumerist society, but the message is not important to understand how he—and other graffiti artists—work as men of words. It matters only that they feel strongly enough to spread their ideas and warm individuals to the idea of change.

Where graffiti encourages change, propaganda reinforces existing beliefs. Hoffer writes: “The gifted propagandist brings to a boil ideas and passions already simmering in the minds of his hearers. He echoes their innermost feelings”. It is important to know that propaganda exists for the purpose of justification, not for the purpose of inspiring new ideas. This does not mean that propagandists are not men of words. It is their words which decide whether citizens will stand with or go against their country. Propagandists can decide the future of their countries with a simple picture or phrase. Often, propaganda is used to ignite nationalism during war efforts. The iconic image of Uncle Sam, for example, was created when President Woodrow Wilson formed the Committee for Public Information, which “employed modern publicity techniques to sell the American people on the necessity and wisdom of jumping into the Great War”. Although the poster was created for the purpose of calling young men to enlist in the army, it also encouraged a strong sense of nationalism, calling the entire United States to prepare for “self-sacrifice in answer to a higher calling” (Palermo 36). The simple poster solidified the public’s trust in their country, gathering every citizen together to pursue a common goal: winning the Great War. With the strong and noble face of Uncle Sam to look to for guidance, Americans were called to believe in their country; they placed unwavering trust in their leaders. After World War I, propaganda became a common word—and a more prevalent tool—in English-speaking countries, probably because it was so effective in soliciting support for the war (Bernays 9).
In an introduction to Propaganda by Edward Bernays, Mark Crispin Miller, professor of media studies at New York University, writes: “it was not until 1915 that governments first systematically developed the entire range of modern media to rouse their populations to fanatical assent… now ‘public opinion’ stood out as a force that must be managed” (Bernays 11-12). Public opinion must be managed because regimes understand that nothing substantial can be accomplished without the support of its citizens. Propaganda is the tool used to ensure citizens are unified in their thoughts, which strengthens the regime.

Propaganda is not only seen in the form of nationalist posters created during wartime, though. It is any propagation of a strict, black-and-white mindset the public can accept. For example, during World War II, propaganda said that all Germans and Japanese were bad and led by the worst people alive, Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo. People subscribed to this idea because it was believable and comforting. Having a specific enemy on which individuals can pin all their problems is consoling in times of extreme fear.

It is for this reason that Steve Denning, author on radical management and contributor to Forbs magazine, believes President Donald Trump is a practitioner of authoritarian propaganda, a form of communication in which one weaves a fictional narrative explaining why problems stem from a simple source, then offers a simple solution to fix the problem (Denning). This propaganda is not dependent upon catchy slogans or colorful posters, but rather the simple repetition of stories until the public accepts them as fact (Denning). Trump’s position of power does not negate his role as a man of words. He set the stage for change, then stepped into a position that allowed him to activate this change. Hoffer references similar situations: “Men like Gandhi and Trotsky start out as apparently ineffectual men of words and later display exceptional talents as administrators or generals… A fanatic like Lenin is a master of the spoken word and unequaled as a man of action” (131). Both historic and modern propaganda are perpetuated to secure the role of the government (or an authoritative figure) in citizens’ lives. In Trump’s case, he is the authoritative figure whose role is secured with words of power. In any situation, these ideas must be spread by men of words who understand that, for ideas to be embraced by the people, they must echo what thoughts already exist in the public, simply magnifying (and thus, strengthening) their ideas.
Eric Hoffer covers a wide range of ideas in The True Believer, but only the man of words can spark a mass movement to life. Today, this man of words can be someone like Banksy, who stencils his art illegally so the public has access to radical ideas. By placing his art in large cities or sneaking it into illustrious museums, he forces people to take a closer look at the workings of society. His art asks individuals to question the world around them, which warms them to the idea of eventual change. A man of words can also be a propagandist, someone like James Montgomery Flagg—the artist who first painted Uncle Sam calling young men to enlist in the army—or President Donald Trump—the man who personifies the idea of authoritarian propaganda. Flagg acted as a man of words warming citizens to the idea of nationalism. President Trump warms citizens to the idea of change in traditional explanations for problems, and has since begun enacting his ideas for solutions. Hoffer’s ideas—specifically those referencing men of words—are still prevalent in society today. It is still the men and women of eloquence and creativity who instigate change, either by encouraging the public to question and change who is in power, or by providing more support to the ruling body.
Hearts of Ash

*Hope Blackburn*

Esther drew the attention of the other migrant workers like a bright light near winged bugs. For she had arrived cold and alone to the struggling town of paper tents, save for the baby she surely carried in her swollen stomach. Esther was too young for her predicament, they soon observed. Her inexperienced face, though intelligent, revealed nothing but the stubborn expression of youth. To add it all, the young woman rarely opened her mouth to speak; and instead, words poured out like flood waters from her expressive dark eyes. Even the single pocket that bulged from her ragged red dress became the topic of excessive interest, as it was promptly found to hold two pencils and a little mud stained book. The other migrant mothers were ravenous with mockery and wasted no time in concocting the idea that Esther dreamt of becoming an elementary school teacher. This fresh spreading rumor was cause for multiple bursts of screeching laughter that reverberated throughout the camp. “She’s in for a big surprise if she thinks she’ll even set foot in a school house near this place,” sneered one gossiper without even bothering to talk to the young woman. Many did, however, inquire constantly about the whereabouts of the baby’s mysterious father. “He is gone,” Esther would simply state with flattened and emotionless words, code that in truth, too many feelings for him were bottled up in her arguably broken heart. It was grief that would most definitely come pouring out if she spoke much else. The other migrants didn’t read code though, and they merely scorned her abrupt speech.
One day, as the fiery California sun slid lazily down the wall of the horizon, throwing a warm orange glow upon the typically grey-clothed Hooversville, Esther felt sharp movement from the child inside of her. Its limbs were pushing, pinching, and squirming to come out of the dark womb, and to emerge into the yellow sun-spattered world. Esther wished to tell her baby to be still, to whisper that this new place, a land that looked to hold such wonder, was only waiting to unveil its true form as a starving, empty, and frightening expanse, a sanctuary with no resemblance to the warm home she kept now. But the baby persisted; and as evening kept watch at the opening of her tent, Esther’s skin wept with glistening sweat, and she couldn’t suppress the inevitable ugly cries that seemed to explode from her throat. All the women that could came to help her, covering her shuddering body from the prowling eyes of the men.

Not surprisingly, Esther called the baby girl Luna. This was the name that she and Jack had chosen together in the early weeks of the summer, when their little paradise had teased to stay forever. The very thought of Jack brought stale tears to her cheeks, ones that she had been holding in for quite some time. Esther cradled her newborn baby with the very first tinglings of a mother’s pride promising to show in her eyes. She was caught up in these moments, these raw breathless seconds, and she began to unlatch the stiff and tired barricade from around her heart. This was one she had held shut since the awful day that she had crouched, sobbing, at the top of a giant cargo train headed somewhere west. The memories from her wandering summer came back tonight while she struggled to properly hold the small baby girl in her thin arms. Most of all, she felt the weight of her tragic decision drop from the gallows of her heart and swing throughout her limbs with soft trembling. Why had she let Jack go? Why hadn’t she run after him, gone back with him to the place she had come from, back to dusty Arkansas where her stubborn family toiled still, forever waiting for the unmerciful King of Time to miraculously turn their luck around? The loud argument, once painted so tumultuously in her mind, now seemed completely dissolved, as Esther couldn’t quite
remember what she had been so angry at him about. She was ashamed at the motives surrounding her mad decision. Though she would have denied it to anyone, Esther knew deep down that she had been buried underneath a great mound of stubbornness, one heavy, heaping fortress of pride that was finally beginning to sink into ruins. She remembered the night of those horrible tick-tocking seconds, the cargo train launched into a plummeting free fall away from her love, her heart realizing bluntly that she had chosen out of absolute vanity. Her dreams of prosperity came nowhere close to making up for this awful loss.

As the first days of motherhood shuffled by, Esther watched her baby grow tough like a warrior. Luna’s malnourished cheeks and starving eyes stuck like magnets to Esther’s tired face. It was as if the child knew already the dire need of her circumstances, and it pained the young woman to see her so cold and hungry. A baby shouldn’t live like this, she thought to herself. With each passing foodless day, Esther began to wonder more fervently how she would ever find work. She realized that Luna could not be left alone, as this determined her task of gathering enough penny-producing crop nearly impossible. Each night, Esther spared herself a single tear, letting it slip carelessly down her cheek as the other migrants straggled back from their days’ work. She let those tears go for the loss of her dreams, for the broken promise of wealth in this evidently cursed land. Most of all, she cried for the child in her arms doomed to starve forever. Here, prosperity was nowhere to be found, even scarcer than that famous California gold once romanticized in her Grandfather’s relishing stories of the olden days. Ether would shiver when she felt the sun next to her, all hot and ablaze with light, carving a deep grey shadow into the things behind her.

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Soon though, Esther’s shadow turned darker and darker until it was black like the jet night sky. Only this was what the other migrants assumed, that the shape so closely stooped behind the woman was merely her own shadow. The manly figure, in truth, was strangely alive. He wore a
heavy cloak of darkness to conceal his face, a countenance that was surprisingly human and handsome. This presumed shadow had haunted these Hoovervilles for many months now, and he adored their decaying stench, for it meant that they were as plentiful to him as buried treasure chests. These days, he stayed closer still to this particular town of cardboard because the mere sight of one young woman endlessly intrigued him. There was something different about her aura, something he could not quite understand. Her time was coming to an end, that was for sure, and he knew that her little babe’s hour was even more imminent. Yet for an indescribable reason, he chose always to return to the side of this curious young woman rather than spend his after-hours exploring the spoils of other copious places. He remembered stumbling upon her once while she was singing to the baby, and her raspy voice had filled the air so softly as if it were a sleeping dragon’s breath. The song had left him unable to move from her presence. It was as if she had frozen him into the tapestry of time and space. Now the figure watched her during the daytime hours while she struggled calmly to herself in the field of hopeless cotton harvesters. He loved to witness her daily battle with the gnarly plants, her hands fumbling with their course skulls as she scraped the white material from their stiff brown insides. He would smile as her muscles shook with the weight of the heavy stuffed bag, and chuckle when the baby wailed so loud as to make the other workers avoid her like the plague.

In all his years of work, the creature that lived as Esther’s shadow had never encountered another human being so captivating. Now he longed for the day when he would plunge his hands into Esther’s cold and lifeless body, searching through every curve and crevice with his fingers until he found and extracted her newly expired soul, only to carry it like a child in his arms back to the great Scale to be presented and weighed in front of the wise Maker. He planned to remember just how heavy her heart turned out to be. Then, with jealous hands, he would turn her passionate soul
over to the Maker for the final judgement, and witness him let her loose into the colorless abyss, either to go up to paradise or down into oblivious inferno.

Death shook with the thought of watching Esther’s soul go flying.

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Only two weeks passed before Luna took a turn for the worst. Esther could sense it in her child’s eyes, for Luna’s almost menacing look of desire had vanished completely. Her fingers didn’t grasp at Esther’s cheeks and ears, and she no longer took to her typical bouncing laughter and giddy dancing. Any ounce of time Esther had been saving for herself she now spent with raw commitment beside her dying child. She was wrought with grief over Luna, still haunted by the man she had so foolishly let go. “If Jack were here,” she whispered to the sleeping baby, “None of this would hurt so much.” That was the truth, of course, and Esther knew all too well that Jack’s departure had taught her misery in its truest form.

She tried to weigh the strength of her heart. If Luna were to die, Esther doubted that it would make out simply laced with cracks as it had for Jack. No. This time, Esther figured that her heart would crumble into unidentifiable dust, becoming as weightless as ash. She wondered if her own death would follow quickly in suite, or if it would rush over her gradually like the slow yet steady descent into a deep sleep. In the meantime, Esther did everything she could to ignore the looming presence of something alive, something all too ghostly that seemed of late to be always so near, always waiting for the right moment to advance upon her. Yet the worse her daughter became, the more intensely Esther became aware that it was Death himself who had taken a terrifying interest in her precious Luna.

Then one day, when the sun seemed dipped in blood as it sank into the heart of Salinas Valley, Esther sensed the first tender strings of life being pulled stealthily from Luna’s body. She stiffened, heart pounding with screeching fear. She could nearly see him, standing still and graceful.
before her, tugging on the strings with perfect precision. Esther could bear it no more. “Stop!” she cried, “Stop you evil wretch!” Only then did she break into uncontained sobs, her heart melting with the shock of Death’s scorching closeness.

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When Esther screamed, Death almost dropped the delicate bundle that he was clutching so carefully inside of Luna’s chest. Had she known of him all along? Death wanted to step back, for he felt the anger of Esther’s dark eyes piercing inside of him. He knew what she would ask even before she opened her mouth to speak.

“Can’t you take mine instead?” she begged, pressing her salty wet lips against Luna’s forehead. Death thought for an endless moment, ideas and fantasies swirling in his mind like drops of paint in a jar of clear water. If he agreed, he would undoubtedly be breaking the rules of the universe, dangerously ignoring the formalities set in stone by the Maker himself. For human souls were each prescribed with delicately chosen times, and Luna’s was flooding upon him this very instant. Yet despite his responsibility, Death could not resist his boiling urge to take up Esther’s drastic offer. For if he gave her what she wanted, she would become his, his until the day he had drained every last bit of life from her body. How could he let this wonderfulness slip through his fingers?

“Do you truly wish to sell yourself to me?” Death asked, hardly suppressing his excitement. He believed she had no option but to agree. “Take me.” Esther whispered, tightly shutting her eyes to refuse him the satisfaction of seeing her tears. And take her he did. After gently letting Luna’s tiny heart slip back into its perfect place, Death stepped closer than ever towards Esther’s hopeless and quivering form. When he could feel her shaking breath against his chest, he lay one hand over her pulsing heart, and finalized the deed by twisting with all his might. A silent scream burst from the young woman’s mouth, and Death blinked with satisfaction as liquid the color of life seeped out
towards his palm, quickly turning dark the second it touched his fingertips. Esther’s soul was officially his.

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Living as Death’s slave was everything it should have amounted to. It was also unlike anything Esther had ever known. She grew to believe that she had lost a single sense completely. Gone from her grasp were the tendrils of movement and life spilling up from every living thing. Vanished was the peaceful light from the grey-blue moon; and the tingling heat from the sun when it was highest in the sky was a mere memory. Esther was hit with indescribable heartache. How could she move on after losing sight of the sunsets made of her mother’s rosy cheeks, since she could not hear the conversations between the river and the rocks? Her heartbeat had surely disappeared, yet she could still feel half-frozen blood moving slowly through her veins. What frightened Esther the most was a new and uncomfortable presence, a raw power derived from that gaping hole in her chest. This unwanted feeling triumphed over her as if it were a stranger dead set upon destroying her sanity. But surely Luna was safe and sound, and Esther breathed a promise to her daughter that she would find a way to be all-right. She would force herself to at least pretend to be alive if Luna was to last any longer in this cold-hearted world.

When the cotton fields were finally scraped to the bone, emptied, down to every last flake of fluffy whiteness, the migrants embarked upon yet another search for work and wages. Esther considered herself fortunate when she found a meager job picking oranges in the orchards. The work became her distraction, a dream world in which all that mattered was how many oranges she spotted under the golden California sun. Luna strapped tightly to her back, her shredded red dress tied just above her knees, Esther would spend her days tromping through the secret place which was her work. She liked to pretend that it was paradise, to imagine that she could still hear the birds and the bugs laughing with each other, that she could even smell the citrus sprinkled throughout the air.
In the evenings, weary with empty exhaustion, Esther would take the five cents she had dutifully earned that day back to the general store to buy bread and milk. Then, clutching her crying child, she would listen to her weak uneven footsteps as she hiked up the quiet highway and back to her tent. She always ate the food with uncontained hunger, saving for her daughter all of the lukewarm milk provided by the small disposable carton.

There was something else about Death’s enslavement that bothered Esther more than she would have anticipated. Her captor was leaving a trail of changes upon her physical body; for her appearance was fading like the wilting leaves of a flower. First, she saw that her hands had become so thin they looked about to break, and soon found that the striking dark color had been squeezed entirely from her eyes. Then, Esther was struck by the discovery that her own touch set off in living things an early descent into death, for even the slightest brush of a finger shriveled up innocent things and crumbled them into indistinguishable particles. Equipped with what was certainly the worst of powers, Esther fell into the shadows of her work, disappearing like a lonely ghost in the midst of the other orchard workers. In a struggling attempt to save her oranges, she used pieces of food wrapping as binding around her catastrophic hands. Esther could not hide her predicament from the other Hooverville families though, and she was shunned as a witch by her own neighbors. “We knew something was wrong with that woman all along!” they began to murmur, each day inching farther away from her innocent tent like a pack of nervous animals. Esther could only cradle her child for comfort, for Luna had never been afraid of her.

On one occasion, while Luna lay in peaceful slumber, Esther found herself being forced to listen to things she wished with all her might to unhear. Sounds of utter anarchy and discord seeped into her waking dreams. For a moment she felt like she was falling, a sense that she was plummeting down, down into an endless pit that only grew darker as the depth increased. This is true oblivion, she thought, this is the infinite and uncaring vehicle of time itself.
As Esther lay captive to this freakish nightmare, only half asleep in the company of her slumbering child, a pair of foolish jokers lit the air around her with their reckless games. It was Chaos and Time who accompanied Death for this friendly visit. They were grinning wide, their excitement bubbling on the brink of uncontrollable laughter. Immediately after spotting the grief-stricken human being, Chaos had launched into taunting Esther with his slithering insults. Then, as if not to miss out on the fun of it, Time had taken up his drum to sing her a tune of his own, a spell of lovely sadness. Now Death watched as his comrades joked and played with the young woman like little children. For some reason, he found he could not take part in the foolish and immature antics he normally would have embraced.

The trio’s makeshift party came to an abrupt end when a shimmering green figure the color of rotting fruit appeared at Death’s side. Chaos and Time turned around hastily and stared glaringly up at the hooded man. This figure was Deceit, a dreadful soul whose awful actions had doomed him into exile at the beginning of time. Now he had proven himself a master at the art of crafting portals, using his devious powers to regularly sneak in and out of the kinks and crannies of the world. As he advanced upon the others, Deceit kept the fire of lust in his eyes directed acutely at Esther. The four glanced around with tense unease, each secretly readying himself for whatever was about to happen. Then, in the next split second, Deceit’s shimmering image seemed to turn itself inside out, and the hooded man was suddenly replaced by a sun-tanned farm boy, damp with sweat as if he had been out working the fields. “Are you mad?” Time asked the exiled troublemaker, looking up at the changed figure with a mixture of fear and admiration. “The Maker will surely find out about any human you dabble with.” Deceit turned slowly towards his former comrade, and simply replied, “She does not belong to the Maker anymore. She belongs to Death.”
Deceit never once took his intense eyes off Esther’s restless form, and his presence pushed past the others like a giant. When he stepped closer to her, she immediately tensed and opened her eyes, which were stained red with permanent tears. Then she gasped for air as if breathing had betrayed her, and touched her cheeks and mouth as if she were testing reality. “Jack?” she finally whispered, letting sobs of laughter escape her lungs, her eyes full and open with joy. “Oh Esther,” Deceit said to her, already advancing close enough to wrap his arms around her neck. Then the man crouched down beside her, reaching out to touch her dress.

Death could bear this no longer. Something was burning in his chest, a distant feeling he faintly recalled noticing in ages past. He could not ignore the clear jealousy in his mind directed at Deceit. Yet strangely, it was not pure envy that prodded him to yank the vile creature up from the ground the second he put his fingers into Esther’s dress, to strike him with three of his brutalist blows, and to let something along the lines of rage overcome him. Then, it expended from him an uncommon amount of restraint to contain his clenched fists, to watch his thwarted opponent limp slowly through his pitiful portal and down into void and soundless banishment. Death was immediately overcome with thought. He had tried too hard for some time to stifle out this roaring flame inside of him, and it was high time he let it burn. Is this love? he wondered with disgust. Deep down, the burning sensation sputtered and spat, expanding fully with air and movement. Then, slowly but surely, it took up a staggering beat, like a drum that stomped a tune in his chest. Death shook all over with fear, for who in their right mind would believe that he of all beings could be infested with a heart?

Death watched as Esther clung to Luna with wide, protective eyes, looking up at him with angry exhaustion. He couldn’t imagine what she thought of him, not now when he had wrenched her long-lost lover away from her grasping fingertips. “He wasn’t real!” he wanted to scream to her, “You don’t know what he would have done with you!” Yet even as he thought this, Death squirmed
inside with sickening guilt. It was he who had hurt her first, he who had torn away her beautiful blooming life, and now it was he who owned her as prisoner.

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Angry men came one night with shouts of terror and rage, they were shaking their fists at God and all of his ironic creativity. “What’s wrong?” asked husbands and wives as they emerged from their makeshift shelters. “There’s a fire on its way, and a damn big one too,” replied a man who was calm enough to explain. Then the mob of ruined men moved onwards, on in the direction of the next poverty-stricken camp. Esther watched as the circle of tents erupted in movement. Women gathered their children close, lining them tightly up like frantic mother ducks. The men let their tents collapse into a mess on the ground as they rushed to pack up their miserable family belongings. Esther could only reach out to where Luna lay crying beside her with upset sobs. She picked the baby up, cradled her in her arms, and staggered to her feet in an attempt to run away. All she could do was walk slowly up the hill, unable to muster another ounce of speed. Soon she listened to shuffling shoes as the other migrants caught up to her, then watched as they sped, uncaring as ants, past her and her child.

The runners could smell the fire by now, it’s scorching heat being flung in waves through their ranks. Esther was at the back of the thundering herd, the fire casting a mystical red hue on her face. It roared like a rabid lion behind her. Suddenly, she looked down at Luna with pure terror written in her eyes, for her dilemma had become all too obvious. Esther’s own life was worthless, this was apparent. But Luna, her beautiful, strong-willed child, oh how she must live! Esther reached inside of her weak body and gathered every ounce of her remaining energy to expel into the air in a loud, determined cry. At first her shouts were lost in the crescendo of flames. Only then she started to scream, numbly, grasping at the arms of the few stragglers closest to her. “Take my child! Someone please save her!” Esther held Luna with outstretched arms, her eyes tightly shut to ward
off the precipitating fire. Then, to her greatest relief, she felt Luna being snatched resolutely from
her grasp. She opened her eyes for a split second to see the bouncing head of her child atop the
shoulder of a fleeing middle-aged woman. Then her knees buckled, and she sank like a stone into
hot soil.

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The racing migrants shrank in horror when they spotted a tall figure clad in darkness
plummeting through their ranks. Death was actually clothed in fear. His newfound heart was
strumming a frantic tune in his veins, his eyes were searching desperately for the fallen young
woman. Where was she? Death had seen her drop, and had felt his soul sink along with her into the
earth. Just then, when his feet almost tripped over a heap of crumpled red fabric, his heart promised
to tear apart with both love and sadness. Death scooped the precious bundle that was Esther up into
his arms and took long easy strides away from the hungry fire, letting the tiny weight of her skeletal
body sink deep into his shoulders. He heard her shriek in her half unconscious state as he wrapped
her underneath his cloak of darkness. He felt her scarce breath against his bones as he carried her up
and away. Yet Esther’s body was ever still, lifeless like the expired souls he brought out during his
regular rounds. Her time was seconds away. This he knew because he felt the tingling urge in his
fingertips to uncover her heart from somewhere underneath her breast, to extract it from its fragile
chamber and carry it away. It was a duty he was so accustomed to. Yet, something was drastically
different. For Death understood now that no will of his own could force him to follow through with
such a task upon Esther’s soul. Hers was too beautiful.

The fire finished surrounding the straggling ranks of retreating migrants, and Death sensed
Time’s ceaseless clock ticking in his ears, counting down the seconds as if to say, This is it. He could
no longer feel Esther’s scarce breath, for she was suffocating gradually in the heat of the toxic
smoke. Death stopped running then, and knelt on the hot coals that were smothering the grass.
Next, as gently as he could, he held firmly onto the dying woman with his hands in place to compress her ribs. It was with a strong, spilling desperation that he placed his mouth to her lips and breathed. Death breathed until his air ran out, he breathed until his chest seared with pain. Then he inhaled the coarse, burning air and did it again, and again, and again. She only sank deeper into his shaking arms.

Death had never before kissed a single soul in all his time, and the thought of this presumed shortcoming had never crossed his mind. But when his lips pressed madly upon Esther’s tender mouth, he felt more strikingly human than should have been possible. And while this brief instance was not even a true kiss, Death was immediately shy, overcome with rare embarrassment. For buried underneath his wistful desperation, Death had always known that he could never be a true giver life. He had only pretended that sending Esther oxygen held a chance at reviving her. Yet still he had breathed into her, maybe merely for the sake of trying, maybe only to feel her lips just once against his.

Again, the ever-present thought of his own role in Esther’s demise struck him with pounding potency. Oh, how he gagged on the memory of his own disgusting robbery of her vibrant soul. Death looked down intensely at the woman he had so recklessly enslaved. No more than weeks ago, she had sold her soul on behalf of her newborn daughter, and smuggled ripe oranges for a beggar child. Yet today, at this awful moment, no one was present to restore her sacrificial deed. She was no one’s greatest treasure and care, not even the child’s she had willingly given her life for. Death felt so much sadness that his own heart was hurting, the sting of it pressing upon his chest. Then the pain was reaching everywhere, unraveling in strands throughout his bones, all the while begging for some timely action. Death knew what he was to do. He understood without a doubt the idea that had suddenly sprung upon him along with scarce, unbridled hope. Trembling, he placed his burning fingers against his own chest.
If extracting the hearts of dying people had been a painful task for his hands, ripping his soul out from its blooming infrastructure was excruciating for his entire person. Death opened up his mouth as if to roar in pain, but no sound came out. His hand seized in fear as it betrayed the rest of his pulsing body while it screamed for him to stop. Madness seeped in through the giant hole he had made in his chest and tempted him to end this hopeless fling. Yet an invisible force had taken his side, and it was pushing his hand forward and in through Esther’s skin, towards the place where her blackened and deflated heart hung empty in its chamber. Death dropped the priceless, ever-beating bundle of life into her chest, and exhaled in exhausted wonder. She lay ablaze with light in his crumbling arms.

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Esther awoke to the charged humming of the burnt morning air. She could feel injured life beneath her sweating limbs, its movement spreading through her stiff skin. She allowed herself to rise and fall along with the tired breathing of the hills as they inhaled the quiet blue sky. When she finally opened her eyes, Esther saw that ash the color of snow covered everything she could see. It enveloped all but a small pile of jet blackness. For a time, she couldn’t remember who she was, or what in the world she was doing here. Then, all of a sudden, memories rushed back to her like faltering sentences. There had been a fire that roared like a beast, shouts so angry they could have killed. Then fear the color of red hot flames had stunned her heart. Next, she remembered arms, great long arms that had taken her baby away. She had also sensed darkness, such an endless shadow that could have engulfed all eternity, and someone’s face so close that she had tasted his skin.

Perhaps she felt his presence now, his hands still gently plucking at the strings of her heart. She shivered at that strange thought, and carefully picked herself up to stand. Esther would walk for miles and miles until the glistening whiteness bloomed back into color.

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Three days later, two obscure figures stood knee deep in a pile of ashes, their arms madly
digging through the debris. “How could this happen?” they cried in echoing whispers, “What must
we tell them?” Finally, once their colorful hoods were fully doused in the white residue from the fire,
Chaos and Time felt with exhausted fingers the fading form of their ghostly friend. The two
retreated upwards with frozen fear, only to dive immediately back in again, down into the frosty sea
of ash to pull this blackened shadow out of the dust. They looked at each other, speechless, when all
that came up in their hands was one thick fireproof cloak, filled completely with emptiness.