

Reflections 2016-2017

Reflections is a literary magazine published by the English Department of Holmes Community College. It contains poems, short stories, essays, and drama written by Holmes Community College students. The students whose works are featured here are winners from the 2016-2017 literary competitions held on the individual campuses. The entries of the top two students in each category are then submitted to the Mississippi Community College Creative Writing Association (MCCCWA) annual literary competition.

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Poetry

The Language of Numbers

by

Joelle Young

First Place Poetry, Grenada

Second Place Poetry, 2017 MCCCWA Competition

Humming, they sound
Thin,
Circling around
The compass rim.

Fractions unfurl
Their organic dresses,
Dancing and turning
In the sunflower's center.

Infinity skips
With the thousands and threes
As the varied rain
Slips through the trees.

...

One name
I hold in my chest:
A singular flame—

While zero echoes
At the horizon's edge.

Dove

by

Joelle Young

Second Place Poetry, Grenada

What does a dove mean?
Not what it tries to tell in the wordless songs it sings.
But what does it mean—with its plump body,
Ruffled feathers, and gentle eye?

The universe is a book. Blind,
I run my fingers across its pages, trying to feel its bumps.
The dove is a word: a weighty word, a palpable word.
But I cannot read it.

The dove is a word in God's own language.
He spoke it into being, its plump body, vowel—
Ruffled feathers, consonants—
Gentle eye, the living sound.

What does a dove mean?
It means Himself, the shape of comfort,
The inaudible note of innocence,
The very voice of love.

Like the Sea Kisses the Shore

by

Ashley Regan

First Place Poetry, Ridgeland

Third Place Poetry, 2017 MCCCWA Competition

The chill of mint on his breath enticed me.
Taste of saccharine sweet honey on
Soft lips like mine as they met like the sea
And the shore. Like the sky and horizon.
Felt like oceans inside me were moving;
Reverberating like sound waves and beats
Of my fluttering heart. I was losing.
My complexion burned with a scarlet heat.
One hand entangled itself in my hair
While the other gently caressed my cheek
My knees shook and my head was light as air
His eyes like green orbs spoke in ancient Greek.
The perfect duet, the two of us. We
Fit like puzzle pieces, sand and the sea.

Reflection

by

Derek McGraw

Second Place Poetry, Ridgeland

I go out to the waters once more.
Staring into the deep abyss, a fish or two swim by.
The ripples cease, and I notice a face staring back at me.
I study it for a while. The round, dark eyes.
The sharp jaw line. The dark, windswept hair.
I grin, and then look solemnly at my reflection.

As I stand there peering down at the murky waters,
another fish swims by and the water ripples, distorting my reflection.
I bend down and let the water flow over my hands
as I let my memory trickle over simple moments like a river
trickling over the stones that are embedded in the earth.

A memory surfaces up to me and trickles over my mind.
I smile and let the memory take me under its current.
Father played his guitar while Mama sang her tune.
The dogs bayed as Mama sang,
and the crickets made up their own chorus.
As the fire blazed, I couldn't help but gaze
at the moon rising up in the sky.
The children played as Grandpa laid
another log on the crackling fire.

Times have changed since then.
I look at my reflection once more, and I realize that I have changed too.
I try to hold on to that memory a little while longer
because I miss the simple times, but the memory slips away
just like the water passing through my hands.

The Anchoring Feather of Hope

by

Elizabeth Howell

First Place Poetry, Goodman

The stalwart feather of hope stands strong,
An anchor in its own right.
It's dark and it's heavy, as hard as a stone,
And a beacon to get through the night.
It lands soft and heavy
Atop the cloaked Lizzard,
Who had long since been wand'ring alone.
To my uncle, I was always Lizzard.
"Good evenin'," it bellows
In a voice soft as silk.
"You's been here by yourself for long?"
"Of course!" cries the Lizzard,
"For what else should I be?
There's no other creature gives ought of my woes!"
"That's fine, for quite truly, though it may not appear so,
Each person is just as alone as a flock!
Feathers hate birds – and that's 'zactly why!
We get sick of all these animals that can fly!
That's why I'm here, Liz – we love those of your ilk.
So I'm going to teach you to glide and to soar."
So the Lizzard grows wings thanks to the feather's call
And flies far up into the night.
The smells and the tastes of the skies up above –
Convey the hope of the feather all too clear.
Then suddenly - *zhànliè xiāoshì* – no!
The feather flies away over China's Great Wall.
That's when the Lizzard realizes her horrible fault –
When you take Hope for granted, it may leave with a roar!
So she will learn to control her inner desires,
Or she'll soon lose her wings, and joy will come to a halt.
For an anchor of feathers is just what she needs,
Otherwise she'll soon lose control of the voices she heeds.

Life is Going to Be Different

by

Abigail Perez-Cabral

Second Place Poetry, Goodman

i lie in bed confused
with no clue as to what is going on
stick after stick in one arm, then the other
because there never is enough blood
machines connected to me left and right
my mother in the corner crying
and my father in the other
talking to the man i call doctor
i want to scream but i can't
i literally can't
the tube in my mouth and down my throat won't let me
the only thing i can do is move my eyes
i don't have the strength to move a muscle
the doc walks to me and explains what's happening
he says my life is going to be different
i'm not normal anymore
my body is too weak
i'll need new lungs
the right side of my heart is too big
it needs to be smaller
they don't know how i got sick,
but they know there is no cure
when i'm older i can't have kids my body is too weak
i'll kill myself and the baby inside
i'll have to take pills for the rest of my life
i'll have to
STOP!
i want to yell stop, but the tube in my mouth won't let me
with tears on my face i look to my father
but i'm only 11 i'm confused make him stop daddy Please
Make him Stop

Essays



A New Edition

by

Taylor Vance

First Place Essay, Grenada

Third Place Essay, 2017 MCCCWA Competition

“I’ll never forget that phone call when the social worker told me they had found us a child. My husband Barry was not at home that night. He was at an Upward Basketball game, coaching other people’s children, teaching to love sports and to play with integrity, when I got the call. The social worker said she had sent an e-mail with a picture, but I didn’t need to read the email or see the picture. I knew I wanted her, whoever she was, and didn’t think twice about saying yes. That sounds odd to some people, but let’s face it, no mother gets to see her child before she decides whether she wants her. When God gives you a child, you want her, no matter what.”

Michelle Burney, vice president of Holmes Community College Grenada campus, recounts the arduous, yet rewarding process of adopting a child from a third-world country and the remarkable timing of how everything came together.

“Since I was young, I knew that wanted to adopt a child. I can still point to the spot in my yearbook where I wrote down that in however many years, I would adopt a child.”

Twenty years later, after unsuccessful attempts at having a child, Michelle and Barry were drawn immediately to Bethany Christian Services, the adoption agency her sister and her husband had used to adopt their daughter from China. Bethany Christian Services has offices in twenty countries around the world, including Guatemala—one of the easiest countries to adopt children from at the time.

“We didn’t want to adopt domestically, not because the children here in the United States are not in need of parents, but because we were told that the adoption process would be easier if we adopted a child from Guatemala and I loved the Hispanic culture and people. No one knew, however, that just as we started the process, UNICEF would begin to start tightening restrictions on adoptions from Guatemala.”

Along with the increase in the number of adoptions from Guatemala, profit for attorneys and agencies had grown into the millions, which had invited exploitation and unethical behavior by some private entities. The new restrictions were intended to protect Guatemalan children and families, but, at the same time, they made it harder for well-meaning families to adopt children who were often living in poverty. Everything became a time crunch for the Burney family to secure a child. What was supposed to take three months in a seamlessly easy process, ended up taking over a year as Michelle and Barry waited to hold their soon-to-be daughter.

“Every country has its own adoption laws. For the most part, you pick an adoption agency first, and then, with their help, you choose a country from which to adopt. Next, you complete a dossier or list of

preferences for your adopted child. This may seem easy, but hundreds of forms that must be translated into the other country's language, Spanish in our case, come with each step; and, because the birth mother couldn't afford to keep her daughter, we had to pay all the expenses. Barry and I jumped through crazy hoops and more crazy hoops in the jungle of bureaucracies."

While the Burney family was going through a mountain of paperwork, the birth mother also had to complete task after task, traversing through the various Guatemalan agencies, taking pictures with the child at the beginning and end of the adoption process and taking a DNA test at the beginning and end of the process.

"The requirements imposed on the birth mother make it particularly hard to adopt a child because the mother has to relive and think about her choices not only at the beginning of the process, but also at the end. This is the point where most people end up losing their potential adopted child."

Much to the Burney's joy, however, they were able to come home with Demi, their healthy baby girl. Michelle and Barry are grateful every day for their precious daughter, and they recognize the unselfish love of her birth mother to give up her child, trusting that her child would have a better life in the United States than she could in her native Guatemala, where 50% of all families live in poverty, half of all children have stunted growth, and the childhood mortality rate is five times higher than that of the United States. Michelle and Barry are keenly aware that having Demi as their child is miracle of God. Just one month after Demi's adoption was finalized, adoptions were officially shut down in Guatemala and continue to be shut down today.

"All I can say is that it's such a God thing that we are able to have our Demi, who looks different on the outside; but likes to dance, eat sweets, and claim boys have cooties—just like every other Southern girl." Demi never forgets to pray for her native land and its people and hope that they will find relief to poverty one day. She also hopes to meet her birth mother and wants to learn more about the Guatemalan people.

"Through this whole process, I've learned to be patient with myself and life in general, and I've developed a greater passion for people, particularly for minorities of different countries. I see their struggles, and I know that my child will experience some of the same struggles. I see their achievements, and I celebrate the opportunities that Demi has in this country."



When Michelle went through the adoption process, she was an academic counselor on the Holmes Grenada campus, so the Holmes family has been a part of Demi's story from the beginning of her life in the United States. Michelle and Barry appreciate the support they felt from their Holmes family throughout the challenging and, sometimes discouraging, adoption process and hope that their family's story is an encouragement to others not to give up on their dreams in spite of obstacles they may encounter along the way.

Demi with the Holmes Community College Ambassadors

That's What Faith Can Do

by

Abby Ray Vance

Second Place Essay, Grenada

“Abby, you’re so skinny! I wish I looked like you.”

“I wish I could eat like you and stay as fit as you do.”

“Girl, teach me your ways.”

These comments, among many others, were ones that I frequently received and longed to hear two years ago. These comments are what continued to push me when all of my energy was gone. These comments are what steered me down the darkest path I’ve ever traveled. These comments once made my thin, emaciated face light up with happiness, but not anymore.

Many people cannot even begin to imagine the self-imposed prison that confined me within its walls for four long years. So many times, I wanted to break free, but I could not. I had become a slave to my disorder. It controlled everything I did and did not do. I felt compelled by the relentless fear that I was a weak, worthless failure if I gave up and walked away from its tight grip. But, by the grace of God, I did escape—through surrender.

It seems contradictory to say that only through surrender could I be free, but I learned that I had to surrender the control *I thought I had* and allow Christ to take His rightful place in my heart, mind, and life. I learned that Jesus does not come in and try to control me. He allows me freedom to choose each day whom I will serve. When I choose Him, He will help me, guide me, and protect me so that I can have absolute freedom, peace, and joy in trusting that His plans are better than my plans for my life.

The hardest step in my healing process was surrender, but as soon as I surrendered my sense of control, I learned that God’s love casts out all fear. Choosing Him and experiencing freedom from bondage is the best decision I have ever made—next to becoming a follower of Christ. I learned that control was far more suffocating than I had imagined. I had been trapped by a lie. I had believed that planning every meal and then spending hours a day working out so that I could burn enough calories to “enjoy” my food, all while trying to fool my family and friends about the number of hours I spent exercising and obsessing over everything about my life—every second, every incident, every plan, every meal, every workout, and every idea my mind entertained—would bring me happiness.

And for a while, it did. But every time “my” plans didn’t turn out or I missed a workout, I became livid. Why would I get so uptight about things I couldn’t change? Why couldn’t I “go with the flow” as other people did?

The answer to these questions was easy to identify, but difficult to accept. I was sick. I was malnourished. I was frail, weak, tired, and exhausted. I was physically hungry; but most of all, I was spiritually starving and even more in need of Christ now than I had been on that day I had invited Jesus to come into my heart when I was a happy, joyful, third-grade girl.

I wanted nothing more than to end the battle once and for all, but I couldn’t. I was scared. The thought of letting go of the control I had worked so hard to achieve terrified me. Whenever I would think of asking for help, the enemy would tell me I was worthless.

“Oh, so you’re going to quit now?! HA! I knew you weren’t that strong. You’ll never look like ‘those girls’ if you just give up now.”

And so I didn’t give up. I continued trying to look like those girls people see on social media with the infamous thigh gaps and sculpted arms. However, even after I started looking like them, I was not satisfied. I was finding my identity in everything except in the One who created me. I was starving myself, barely eating 1,000 calories a day; not nearly enough to sustain my 5’9” frame. My intake consisted of anything I

considered “clean” and healthy: egg whites, rice cakes, apples, bananas, protein bars, protein shakes, smoothies, oatmeal, and peanut butter.

Every. Single. Day.

It was almost as if I lived each day the same as the day before, but each day my life slowly faded away.

No longer could I go out to eat with my friends and laugh and eat whatever I pleased. I would force myself to work out for up to four hours a day just so I could eat chips and dip at a Mexican restaurant. When I was with my friends, I felt like a foreigner trying to understand what, or who, they were talking about. Since I was always at the gym, I never knew what the new “G-town Gossip” was. My friends were slowly becoming distant strangers—all because my one “true” friend was controlling and time-consuming. I called him, “Gym.”

I was in a toxic relationship. The prison walls closed in on me more and more every day—until I could not seem to bear my life anymore.

There’s a saying, “You don’t know you’ve hit Rock Bottom until you’ve hit Rock Bottom.” Let me be the first person to tell you this: Rock Bottom isn’t fun. At all. I remember that day vividly. My parents took me on vacation to the beach, but, unlike most people surrounding me, I could not relax. Instead, the beach was filled with consuming thoughts of how to burn enough calories to even “attempt” to enjoy a yummy, greasy seafood dinner. I would try to work out on the beach while my mom wasn’t looking, doing endless amounts of crunches so I wouldn’t lose any “progress.” Looking back, what I considered progress was more of a deterioration. On our previous family vacations, we had always had the best of times, but now my obsession with exercising had become the topic of every discussion.

“Y’all, I’m fine. Look at how much I’m eating.” (I always used food as a way out because food helps with everything, right?)

Well, not at this meal. Not this time. My dad, my greatest “pal,” was so worried about me that he was constantly stressed. He told me that he wanted to take me to the doctor to find out for himself, once and for all whether I was healthy.

That is when everything changed.

While we were vacationing, my parents had secretly called to make a doctor’s appointment for me. I was livid. *Why would they do this to me? My own parents who are supposed to love me have betrayed me!*

On the day of the appointment, I was scared. Scared of the truth. Scared of finding out that I did have a problem. When I stepped on the scale, reality hit.

My mother heard how much—or how little, rather—I weighed, and she began to cry.

That’s when I hit Rock Bottom. That’s when I realized I wasn’t only killing my body, but I was killing my mother—the woman who tried for seven long years to bring me into this world. The tears I fought back that day seemed as if they had been lifting weights just to be strong enough to lift my eyelids. Everything was beginning to surface. All the truths I had fought to conceal were finally revealed. The next six words my doctor told me changed my life forever: “Abby, you have an eating disorder.”

When my doctor said those words, I felt the walls closing in. I couldn’t focus. My stomach immediately fell to the floor. Even though I never wanted to hear that I had an eating disorder, those six words set me free. That day, my doctor referred me to a woman named Hope, my God-sent angel. Before I met Ms. Hope, I thought people who went to counseling were depressed, dark, and strange; however, I quickly realized we are all in need of help. We all need forgiveness. We all need hope. Thankfully, the Lord gave me a physical representation of hope. Because of Ms. Hope, I now have a clear vision of how I am supposed to live—in freedom. She helped me realize that I had been fighting a battle I could not win. But when “I cried out to The Lord in my time of need, He heard me and healed me” (Psalm 18:6).

Now, I let the Lord fight my battles, and I have seen victories that can be done only by His strength and power. I still have my bad days, but don’t we all? The difference is that I have learned to take my bad days and my struggles to the cross.

On days when I feel guilty, unloved, and unworthy, I simply look at the cross; and the cross is enough. It is a symbol of God's love. I could write so much about how wonderful it has been to eat foods I had denied myself since I was a kid or about the joy of re-gaining friendships, energy, and much-needed weight; but most importantly, I have re-gained my life with Christ. God has restored the joy of my salvation. Through my experience, I have learned that recovery is worth all of the fears, tears, struggles, and hardships. Through Christ, there is hope and there is freedom from the dark, suffocating, and depressing pit of captivity. Jesus came to set the captives free (Luke 4:18). He set me free, and He will do the same for anyone who believes in Him and surrenders to Him. I took that leap of faith, and it has made all the difference in my life.

Remembering the Battle

by

James Snead

First Place Essay, Ridgeland

Everybody encounters events in life that are unforgettable. Each event in my life has had some kind of significance, but some hold more importance than others. Few people remember the time they dropped a gummy bear in the parking lot of a Dollar General when they were four years old. Most, however, remember their first car purchase. Major events can make a lasting memory for decades to come. Some of those events can be strong enough to resonate with a person in such a way to change their entire course of life. These are the events that create stories that can be extremely heartwarming, terrifying, insightful, or awe inspiring. I personally have few of these events that I am willing to discuss. Most of my life as an adult was spent in the Army, and most of my time in the Army was spent overseas, in remote areas. There I gained numerous memories that I'll carry with me until the end of time, but most will never leave my mind. One of the biggest benefits of each of these memories is they have taught me many lessons and has given me lasting relationships. One specific event led me down a dark path that ended with numerous disabilities and less friends, while creating a gateway to a new life.

On July 6, 2010, I was on a mission in Afghanistan. It was a late summer afternoon in the scorching 100° country that I called home. I was riding in the back of a tan armored truck with six of my friends on the way to look for an insurgent we knew was making bombs. This truck wasn't an ordinary truck. It stood twelve feet high and eight feet wide on top of four massive tires that were three feet tall. It was wrapped with multiple plates of half-inch thick steel to stop bullets and metal fragments. My best friend Mac was sitting across from me and we were jokingly making fun of the guy next to me. The guy sitting to my left was a temporary support soldier named John Shaw. He greatly outranked us all but he had a great sense of humor, so picking on him about his job was fair game. Mac made a joke about Shaw's bushy "pedophile" style mustache and everybody erupted in laughter. Less than a second later, all I saw was a bright white light followed by complete darkness and what felt like endless silence. The silence was ended by the devastating sound of thirty-two thousands pounds of steel crashing down to the ground. Our truck had been hit by the largest bomb in the history of Afghanistan. We were sent fourteen feet into the air and returned back to the ground in an unrecognizable pile of wreckage. Nothing was visible through the thick plume of sand and dirt that filled the truck. Before I could see anything, I yelled out "Mac are you okay?" He laughed through the pain and said "Of course you'd ask about me. You love me!" Mac was always one to joke even in the most serious situations. I looked to my left to find Shaw, motionless, pouring blood all over the back of the truck from a gaping head wound. Everybody quickly scrambled to exit the truck through the top gunner's hatch,

because the truck had rolled over in the explosion. While they exited the truck, I stayed and made a quick improvised bandage for Shaw. By the time Mac exited the truck, I was done with Shaw and began to drag him out. The second I was out of the truck it was like entering a whole new world. In the truck we were isolated in an intense darkness and all of the outside noise was muffled to the point of near nonexistence. Outside the truck, it was a blindingly bright midsummer day with bullets flying, explosions going off nearby, and the controlled chaos of people running around trying to get a handle on the situation. My Platoon Sergeant grabbed Shaw and took him to the medical truck so I could get back to my job.

At this point we had to forget about what just happened and focus on finding an end to the conflict. I kicked in the door to the house next to the truck and went to the roof for a better vantage point. Twelve men and I stayed on the roof of that building, surrounded by gun fire, for over fourteen hours before the first person was ever evacuated for their injuries. Most of the injured chose to stay behind due to the amount of enemy forces in the area. Throughout the night, it took multiple medical evacuation trips to get the injured out. Once the most severely injured were taken to safety, we left the little protection the house provided and went straight for the enemy stronghold. We knew we only had about twenty-four hours until we had another major mission, but it was decided by the upper leadership that it was necessary to push on and eliminate this threat no matter how long it took. I was the third person in the formation as we walked through a dried up creek bed trying to find a way to get to our target location. We only had about eight hundred meters to cover but due to the large number of enemy that were attacking us, it took us over twelve hours to travel that short distance. After we reached our objective, a decision had to be made about the follow on mission that was supposed to be conducted in less than twelve hours. The mission only required a few soldiers, but those soldiers had been in combat for over a day straight and have not slept in almost two days. Since the follow on mission was looking for the same insurgent that our current mission was searching for, it was determined that we needed to complete it. I was on the list to go. Helicopters were rerouted to our location and picked up six of us, while the remainder of my group went back home in the trucks.

It was around midnight on the morning of July 8, 2010. We were flown to a small place called Combat Out-Post Monti that was home to about a hundred soldiers. I went to a friend's wooden shack, threw my gear down, made fun of his stupid haircut, and passed out almost instantaneously. I was awoken moments later when a rocket was shot into the building next to me. That building was immediately engulfed in flames and trapped my friend Anthony Simmons inside. After fighting through the inferno into the building and working my way closer to where he was, it slowly became unavoidably apparent that it was not possible to get to him. We had to leave the flaming shack. Most had to be forcefully dragged out, refusing to leave him alone. I had a sinking feeling in my gut. I wanted nothing more than to die next to him instead of having to listen to him yell and scream to death all by himself. I looked around at my friends' faces and could see that I wasn't the only one who was thinking the same thing as we all were forced to stand there and listen to the sound of agony and death. What made this worse was that Anthony's brother was Nick Simmons, who was one of my friends and my roommate while I was deployed. The amount of damage caused by this attack caused my mission to be cancelled and helicopters were called to send me back home. I knew when I got home I had to deliver the worst news imaginable to an amazing friend. I had to tell Nick that his brother was killed. Nothing had prepared me to wake somebody up at 3AM and tell them something like that. Later that day, I had to fly in another helicopter with Nick and Anthony's charred remains so we could get him out of Afghanistan. That is one sight and smell that has always stuck with me. I no longer have a sense of smell, but I will never forget the searing nose burn created by the stench of burnt bone.

That event spanned two long and trying days. It has made a deep and lasting impression on my life. I have had many dark and lonely periods because of this but it has all been worthwhile. The bomb that initiated everything left me with most of the injuries that I still have today. I have overcome most of the physical limitation that it placed on me and I cope with the remaining ones. Dealing with disabilities at a young age is not an easy task at times. I've gone through extraordinary efforts to hide every disability that I can, and that has made my journey harder than it has needed to be. I do not like the sympathy that tends to come with

people knowing about my injuries and impairments. I want to be viewed as nothing but normal. However, I am now a completely different person than I was and I'm a better person because of the things that I have endured. I've overcome so many obstacles that normal everyday life does not faze me. I find it hard to understand how I could have ever struggled with life before the military, because of how much my perspective has changed. I have lost so much being in the military, but I've gained far more. I have had eighteen close friends killed in combat and I've watched most of them die. I have learned and developed so much from their deaths that it makes it worth it. I'm now friends with some of their fathers and I've participated in charity work for wounded soldiers because of their deaths. My unit has been in three movies and featured in two TV shows in order to help other people deal with what they've experienced. I have endured some rough times but I have loved them. I wouldn't trade my life for anything in the world. I've been asked if I wished I'd never joined the military because of the sheer number of friends I've lost. I may have seen and done some horrible things in my life but those things have shaped me into the person I am today. Those times are by far the best times of my life. I love the time I spent overseas and I would go back again if I could.

In summary, not every traumatic event has to have a negative connotation for the rest of our lives. I've learned to use these events and create a positive out of each and every one of them. At the end of each dark path there is eventually a light. Chaplin Roberts once told me, "When you are surrounded by nothing but darkness your only real option is to search for the light. Lean forward and push through everything in front of you until you find it. Once you find the light, grab it, and spin it in every direction as fast as possible so anybody else that is in the dark might see it." I try to find as many lights that I can around me so I can have the happiest and brightest life possible. I might have gone through hell, but I've loved the vast majority of it.

Unbridled Fear

by

Leslie Ann Fleming

Second Place Essay, Ridgeland

I awoke to the sound of the front door slamming and was immediately bombarded by my mother's gut-wrenching sobs. It was Saturday morning, usually my favorite time of the week. Through the window, I could see the dew glistening on the rooftop of the barn. Although the day looked perfect, I knew it would be different from my usual carefree Saturday. I could still hear the echoes in my head of all the bloodcurdling screaming and cursing from the previous night. I heard my father crank his truck and watched as he drove away. I got up, threw on my favorite pair of denim jeans and red checkered shirt and hurried quickly into the bathroom to brush my teeth. There in the laboratory was a bloody wash cloth. I knew my father in his drunken rage had hit my mother once again.

My mother's condescending voice rang out from the kitchen. "You need to feed your horses!" she exclaimed in anger. "Your worthless father didn't feed them this morning. He is nothing but a drunk. Don't think I don't know that you were deceitful and helped him hide his liquor late last night! You are just like your father, and you will never amount to anything," my mother yelled convincingly.

"I didn't!" I shouted as I bolted to the barn as fast as I could with salty tears flowing down my face. Smokey Joe, my barrel racing pony, curiously greeted me with a soft nicker. He offered his love and comfort in the form of a soft nudge. I fed all five impatient horses and I watered and hayed them. The smell of fresh cut hay and sweet feed lingering in the cool morning air made me love the barn. There was contentment

mixed in with my overwhelming feelings of hopelessness. I would come back later to turn the horses out to graze.

I grabbed my bicycle and fled from my mother's wrath to Renee's house to play and hopefully to eat lunch. As we laughed and played like normal children, time flew by. Then I remembered that I had not turned out the horses.

I swiftly peddled towards home with my heart racing and pounding in my chest. I feared being in trouble because I had forgotten about the horses. In the distance, I could see my mother in the barn standing on the tractor tire. Maybe she had turned the horses out and it wouldn't be a big deal, but what was she doing? Why was she standing on my father's tractor tire?

I wasn't prepared for what I saw next. The tractor was on fire! She had lit a match and had thrown it into the diesel tank. Orange and blue flames were shooting towards the ceiling of the barn as I raced on! My lungs were burning from running and from all the smoke. I didn't say a word to my mother. In a panic, I bolted to the back of the barn and opened the stall doors and the back gate. The frightened horses ran out one by one to the safety of the pasture.

I ran inside the house and frantically dialed 911. I felt like it took forever for the fire department to arrive! A myriad of people began to stop and gawk from the roadway. I then saw my father's blue truck as it roared into the driveway. Instantly flooded with relief at the sight of my dad, I cried out, "Dad!"

"What happened?" my panic-stricken father asked.

"Mom got mad at you and set the tractor on fire. You left it parked in the barn." I replied between sobs. "I forgot to turn the horses out, but they are all ok. I got them out safely during the fire. Please, don't start a fight, Dad. I can't take anymore!" I wept uncontrollably.

I followed my mother into the kitchen as she retreated to the seclusion of the house. Even though I gravely feared her, I began to scream at her. "The horses were in the barn; you could have killed them all!" I exclaimed in disgust.

"I didn't know that you hadn't turned them out," my mother sobbed remorsefully. "I just wanted to get back at your father for punching me in the face last night. I am so sorry. I can't and won't live like this anymore. Your father has to quit drinking; his drinking is tearing our family apart," my mother spoke softly. Her anger had been replaced with shame.

I looked up to see my dad standing in the kitchen doorway and fear began to engulf me. He had heard everything she had said! He turned and walked into the living room. He sat down, placed his face in his hands and began to sob. The anticipated explosive fight, never occurred that day. Instead, they both changed for the better.

Dad rebuilt the barn and remodeled his tractor. I learned several lessons as a twelve-year-old that year. One was that nothing good comes from alcohol. Another was that my mother's pain was real. My father had made her miserable throughout the years that they had been married. I felt compassion and understanding for both my father and my mother; compassion for my father in the mist of his addiction and understanding for my mother's feelings. Until this incident, I had viewed my mother as hateful, mean and angry all the time. The truth was that she had been pushed to her breaking point. I had always thought that I was the problem. That particular day, I was actually a major part of the solution. I took the initiative and stood up to both my mother and my father that day. Lessons in life may not always be easy, but this one was well worth it.

Fourth Street and Jackson Avenue

by

Chris Kalil

First Place Essay, Goodman

I spent my sophomore year in a gray daze. My cozy little private high school had never felt more like a prison. Every morning I fed myself to the wolves. All the laughter was pointed at me, and every face jeered at me as I passed by. I constantly fought back a crushing wave of sadness as I walked down those crowded halls. All around me students were laughing and gossiping and fretting about the chemistry test that they “totally just bombed!” Nothing that my classmates enjoyed seemed to interest me anymore. And then one Monday in October, I realized something as I stood in the hall. I was deeply, severely depressed.

I tossed and turned in my bed that night. I had named the thing that was bothering me, and now I had to figure out what to do with it. So in other words, I had named the thing that was bothering me, and now it was angry. Depression bared its fangs. No longer did it have to hide in the gray fog of my brain. It went for the meat. I was a worthless, friendless, loser, and it would be better for anyone I cared about if I wasn't around. I would never succeed in life. I would never have a family. How could I ever possibly trick someone into loving me for long enough to marry them and start a family. Anyone who spent any amount of time with me would see me for what I truly am; a hollow, unlovable monster. Those dark claims were not anything new. But now I could see the tiger in the corner, and I let it swallow me anyways. I prayed a desperate prayer, not for mercy because I knew there was no mercy for me, but for sleep.

I woke up angry at God. All I wanted was to sleep. “Why can't you just let me sleep?” Slowly with eyes closed, I made my way out from beneath my covers. Slowly with eyes closed, I sat up and put my feet to the cold floor. It felt like I was made of molten glass. I was raw and angry and fragile. Gravity tugged at my form; always pulling downward. Mom beat on my locked door. It was supposed to be six but it was seven. I should have been leaving for school. She beat on the door again. Mom had already cut off the lights by the time I left my room. She stood behind the kitchen counter. She asked me something. Light forced itself in from the windows. Dust rushed and stagnated in lazy beams of light. The walls seemed to close around me as I moved towards my mom. She was impatient and wanted an answer. Mom asked me again why I wasn't ready for school. I told her I didn't know. I could see her face turn red as I gathered my scattered thoughts. Breathing in a heavy breath, I spoke, “I'm scared mom.”

“Why?” Mom asked.

I paused, trying to make her understand what was going on in my head. “Because I can't feel anything and I'm sad and angry all at the same time. And I don't think that this will ever get better. I need help, or I'm not going to make it.”

Mom stood very still. Her face softened and then tightened again. She began to cry. I tried to cry with her, but all I felt was a dull ache. We both got in the car. Mom called the school. I stared out the window. Mom called dad. I was not paying that much attention.

My dad was an associate pastor at our church at the time. He said that there was a very good therapist, Mr. Steve, on staff at the church that could take me in later that same day. So Mom and I went back home and waited until it was time for the appointment.

On the way to the therapy session, Mom asked me if I was scared. I told her that I was. She held my limp hand.

“I love you, Christopher Mason.”

“I know, Momma.”

I don't remember much about that first session. What I do remember, now, was how wonderful Mr. Steve was. He was kind and understanding in a way that I needed greatly. I could always talk to him about

anything, even outside of our sessions. He was and is a dear friend of mine. At the time though, I was pretty wary of him. I didn't feel like he was really helping me. I came out of that session raw and anxious.

After the session, I was supposed to go to my dad's office. As I stood at his closed door, I looked through the little pane of safety glass. He was working away with his head down. I reached for the metal door knob, but then I hesitated. What would he say? Would he understand? Would he be angry with me? I took a deep breath and opened the door. Dad smiled a bit as I came in through the door. "How did it go?" he asked. I said it went fine. Dad sighed deeply, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. I tried to summon something similar to what he was feeling. Again, all I felt was a dull ache. "Let's go for a walk," Dad said.

The church owned more than half a block of downtown Yazoo City. So that is where Dad and I walked. Dad did most of the talking. I just listened. We stopped at the corner of 4th Street and Jackson Avenue. He told me the thing that I really needed to hear. Dad's voice began to break.

"Son, I love you. I love you so much. You will get through this. Because you are strong and good. You will beat this; I know you will."

"Ok," I said.

I cried. Sniffing at first, but then great heaving sobs. I bawled into my father's chest on the corner of 4th and Jackson.

"Ok?" Dad asked.

"Yeah...ok."

Life got better after that Tuesday in October. It was a slow, painful change. There were many nights when I asked God to take me. Many nights when that tiger climbed on top of my chest and whispered lies. But it got better. Until one morning, I woke up, and my room wasn't quite as dark as the day before. And all the sudden, I could smile as I walked down the halls of my school.

I know that I will always struggle with this darkness. I know that here is pain and darkness in this world. But for every lie that is told and every dark thought that holds someone captive, there is hope and truth and light. So I keep going. Because maybe one day, I will stand in front of someone who really needs to hear something good.

Mom

by

Tristen Hamilton

Second Place Essay, Goodman

“I’m sorry, Tristen. She can’t make it, but she wants you to know she loves you and she’s sorry.”

These are words that I heard repeatedly throughout my childhood and on into my teenage years. My mother had many problems, but her main one was drugs. I had learned at an early age not to depend on her for much. I will never forget the last time I talked to her and the week of her funeral. It was in those moments of grief and confusion that led me to ultimate clarity. My life’s end will not leave the ones I love in total chaos and heartbreak.

It was December, with my first exam in thirty minutes. As I walked across campus to get to my classroom, I heard the far-off cry of a teacher.

“Tristen! Grab your stuff and go to your dorm. You aren’t going to the rest of your classes.”

A suffocating realization clouded my mind. I always knew this day would come. My mom hadn’t been doing so well. She had made straight A’s at Holmes Community College but was being secretive again. She would stay in her room for hours. The only reason to leave her room was to sleep in another. I walked slowly, knowing what I would hear but just wanting to live in blissful ignorance. My dorm parent called me into an office full of grave faces. Its cold, off white walls and fluorescent lighting seemed to not only reveal people’s flaws, but also their emotions.

“We’re so sorry, Tristen. Your mother died early this morning They tried everything they could. She had just done so much damage to herself. She really did love you.”

I stared blankly, and coldness crept into my heart. The words all drifted away. I had already played the scenarios a million times in my head before. Condolences, sympathetic looks and whispers as I walked by all came at once. Hearing the cliché phrases wasn’t even the hardest part. The hardest part was waking my little sister up and having to tell her that mom died. Hearing my brother cry through the phone, choking on despair racked my brain even further. Suddenly, I was the mom figure to my brothers and sister. I had no idea where to start picking up the pieces. Our mom left us in a confused mess.

We were mad at her. Mad at her selfishness, for leaving us, and never giving us the chance to know her. The day of the funeral finally arrived. The walk down the hall of the funeral home is one I will never forget. I don’t really know what I was expecting to see in the visitation room. The human shell I saw before me wasn’t my mom. At that moment, I knew that this wasn’t what I wanted for my life. Having a sobbing daughter at my grave was not how I wanted everything to end. The lesson I took away from this experience is one that many others must face. We can’t control what happens in this life, but we can control how we react. I couldn’t let my mom’s decisions affect how my life was going to unfold. The end of my life will be painful for some, but they will never wonder about my love for them.

Short Stories

Out of the Dark

by

Abby Ray Vance

First Place Short Story, Grenada

Victoria slammed her hand on her screaming alarm clock and pulled her covers over her head. She wanted so badly to go back to sleep so she wouldn't have to wake up to all of her responsibilities. After a good ten minutes of fighting with herself, Victoria slung the sheets back, rolled out of bed, and trudged down the dimly lit hallway. She walked into her younger brother's and sister's rooms to wake them for school. This had been her responsibility for years now, ever since their dad left them five years ago and their mom was forced to work two jobs.

"Come on, Lily. Time to get up! You too, Charlie! We've got to get ready for school."

Moans from the youngsters' rooms were heard, but Victoria was used to that. They'd get up eventually, but she was going to take full advantage of the only bathroom while they fought the urge of going back to sleep.

As she stood before the mirror and pulled down at the bags under her deep blue eyes, Victoria saw only imperfection. She didn't notice the beautiful, flawless skin or the long, ash-blond hair everyone else adored. She struggled to pull the hairbrush, covered with stickers Lily had pressed on, through her beautiful, thick curly hair. She managed to brush the fly-aways out of her face and pull part of her hair back in a clip right before she heard a huge clash. Victoria dropped the hairbrush and rushed to the sound of the accident.

"See, Charlie! You always mess things up!"

"You're the one who bumped into me!"

"I don't care who did what, but I told you two to get up and get ready for school—*not* come into the kitchen and spill Kool-Aid all over the floor and break one of Mom's favorite glasses," Victoria said in frustration.

Now, Victoria had no time to get herself ready for school. She grabbed a damp rag to clean up the red stain on the floor and a broom to sweep up pieces of her mother's glass.

"Can you two do *anything* right? I ask you to do one thing, and you can't even do that without arguing or breaking something. Now Mom is going to be mad at me—not you two. So would you please go and get your clothes on? We're already running late, and I'm missing my Honor Society meeting."

Victoria flew all the way to Toys-and-Tots Daycare to drop Charlie off and then to Redwood Elementary to Lily's school.

7:42, Victoria thought to herself. She still had eight minutes until the first bell rang for her homeroom class.

The morning definitely had *not* started as Victoria planned.

As she pulled into the parking lot of her school and parked her 1998 distressed black car, she realized she had four minutes until the bell would ring.

Four more minutes of freedom, she thought. *Four minutes I have to myself.*

Victoria rarely had time that all her own, so she was sure to take advantage. She dug into the console of her car and pulled out a tube of mascara, hoping she could make herself look somewhat presentable. When she got out of her car, she noticed her friend Brittany walking in the school.

"Hey, Britt! Wait up!"

"Hey, Vic! Running a little late today? You're usually the first one here!"

"Yeah, WW III almost broke out at the house this morning."

"Oh gosh! Now what?"

“Lily and Charlie were arguing and spilled *red* Kool-Aid all over the floor. You know, just how every person dreams of starting her Monday morning.”

“Yikes. Did your mom see it?”

“She wasn’t there. She never is, remember? I’m the one who wakes them up, gets them dressed, fixes their lunches, picks them up, makes sure homework is done, and gets them to bed at a reasonable hour.”

“Yeah! You’re like a Super-Mom.”

“I guess. Or just the daughter who never gets any credit. I’m about tired of it.”

“Want to go to the park and walk around while Lily and Charlie play? Might get your mind off everything.”

“I would so love that. I’ll meet you there at 4:00.”

“Okay! See you then! Have a good day!”

Victoria walked into her homeroom class and sat down at her desk seated in the front of the room, beside the teacher’s desk, and opened up her notebook to a blank sheet of paper.

Homeroom was English, her favorite subject of the day. Mrs. Langston, her teacher, instructed the class to write about their best day ever. Victoria immediately knew what she would write about. She loved writing because it was one of the only times she could express her true emotions. She picked up her favorite pen and let her thoughts flow onto the paper.

“Unlike most people, my best day ever hasn’t come yet. I dream of a day when I wake up to the sound of my children laughing, not my brother and sister crying and arguing. A day where the only responsibilities I have are actually mine, not my mothers.”

Mrs. Langston gave the class only a very short amount of time to write their prompt, but Victoria noticed most people were already finished.

“All right class, who wants to go first?”

Many hands shot up, but not Victoria’s. Mrs. Langston called on a few of her students, to which most of their stories were quite predictable.

“My best day ever was on June 6, 2009. My family went on a cruise, and I got to swim with dolphins!” said Rosie, one of Victoria’s friends.

Another student said, “On December 2, 2002, my little sister was born. That was my best day ever.”

And you call that the best day ever? Geez. Sometimes I wish mine were never born, Victoria thought to herself.

Mrs. Langston called on one more student, Christi Brighton. Victoria didn’t really know her very well, but Christi seemed happy. She was always grinning from ear-to-ear, and she could make anyone smile.

“When I was a little girl, I was never happy. My parents never understood why, but I was always angry. But on May 19, when I was 9 years old, I became a Christian. From that day forward, The Lord put His joy in my heart. That’s why I’m always smiling now. I want people to know that true joy and happiness can only come from Him, not our material possessions or our circumstances. That’s been my best day ever, and it always will be.”

Victoria was mesmerized by Christi’s story. She didn’t know who this “The Lord” was; in fact, she had never heard of Him. Was He some magical person who cast down spells to make people happy? Where was this man? And, most importantly, when could she get him to make her happy, too?

After the bell rang for class to be dismissed, Victoria quickly assembled all of her belongings into her backpack and caught up with Christi before she walked out.

“Hey, so that story you shared today...that was really powerful.”

With a huge grin, Christi said, “Aww, thanks so much! Whenever I share my story, I hope and pray that at least one person truly hears my message.”

“Well, I actually have a few questions to ask you,” Victoria confessed nervously.

“Oh, I’d love to talk to you! How about we meet tonight at Philip’s Diner? Here’s my number.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

Without thinking, Victoria completely forgot about her plans with Brittany. Victoria battled with herself for a little while because she really wanted to hang out with Brittany, however; she also felt this tug in her heart to go with Christi.

Surely Britt will understand, Victoria thought.

At lunch, Victoria saw Brittany on the other side of the cafeteria. Victoria hated she had to cancel plans with Brittany and dreaded telling her.

I'll just come right out and tell her. That's always the best thing to do.

"Hey, Britt! Look, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Okay. What is it?"

"Well, in homeroom, everybody wrote about his/ her best day ever, and Mrs. Langston called on a few of us to share. Christi Brighton, the girl who is always smiling, shared about the day she became a Christian. It sounded really neat, so I met up with her after class to ask her about it. She invited me to dinner tonight to talk about it, and I forgot that we had made plans."

"Oh wow, Vic. It sounds like you're really interested. Of course, I'm not mad! Please go with her. We can always hang out. Let me know how tonight goes!"

"I will! Thanks so much for understanding."

"That's what friends are for, Vic."

Once Victoria got out of school at 12:30, she went to work at Charlie's daycare until Lily's school let out at 2:45. After she got both Lily and Charlie in the vehicle, she told them she was meeting with a friend.

"Who is gonna stay with us?" Lily asked.

Crap, another thing I've got to do, Victoria thought.

"I'll take care of it."

She had no idea how she would, but she always took care of it—whatever "it" was.

Surely, Britt will watch them.

Victoria dialed Brittany's cellphone, and Brittany answered and said, "Hey, Vic!"

"Hey, Britt! Look, I know I've asked a lot of you today, but can you please watch Charlie and Lily while I meet with Christi? It shouldn't take too long. Just make sure Lily does her homework and Charlie doesn't break anything. We've got some frozen pizzas and chicken tenders in the freezer you can cook for dinner."

"Of course. Take your time."

"You're the best. I owe you big time. Christi asked me to meet her at 5:30, so can you be at the house at 5?"

"Absolutely. I'll see you then," Brittany said and hung up the phone.

Well, this is the smoothest my day has gone in a while, Victoria thought. *This is kinda strange how everything is working out in my favor for once, but I like it.*

On Victoria's way to Philip's, she had a strange feeling. Her stomach was in knots and her palms were sweating—two things that meant she was extremely nervous. She had never felt this nervous before, and she didn't know why.

As she walked in the diner, she noticed Christi, beaming with excitement. She motioned Victoria over to the table, and they both started talking immediately.

"Thanks so much for meeting with me, Christi. I have no idea why, but I have the strangest feeling right now. I can't explain it in any other way than knots in my stomach."

"I'm so glad I could meet with you. And it's OK to be nervous. I think The Lord is working in your heart."

"Okay this 'The Lord' man—who is He? And why are you always saying how He makes you so happy and why is He working in my heart?"

"This is the part I love telling people about! This man you keep asking about is Jesus Christ. He came to this earth a *long* time ago to be an example of a perfect life. He knew we were imperfect humans, and

the only way for us to escape the death we deserved was for Him to be brutally beaten and hung on a cross. And not only did He die a brutal death, but He also rose from the dead in a powerful victory. ”

“Wait, what? This sounds really crazy! How could He do that? *Why* would He do that?”

“I know, Victoria. You see, we are all sinners. Sin is what separates us from God, and it is anything we think, say, or do that displeases Him. When we talk back to our parents, lie to our best friends, think about a guy in a sexual way, or steal from someone, we are sinning. We do this thing called sin every single day because it is our human-nature to sin. I could go back to the very beginning of time and talk to you about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but I’ll save that for another day. The main point is this: Jesus loves you so much that He died for you. He thinks you are beautiful and perfect the way you are, and He notices every single thing you do. He wants you to have a relationship with Him so He can fill you with the joy and happiness we all try to fill with worldly things. He didn’t deserve to die the way He did, but He did it to show His love for you and for me.”

“Wow. That is amazing. I’ve never known anyone to love me like that.”

“That’s right, Victoria. He loves you *that* much. It’s more than we could ever imagine.”

“I can tell. So, I want to know more about Him. I want Him to fill me with joy. Can He?”

“Absolutely!!! This is the greatest part. It’s so easy for Him to fill you with all of His goodness. All you have to do is realize that you sin, believe that Jesus is God’s Son, and confess your faith! The best part is that you will live with Him forever in Heaven one day.”

“Okay. I want to do this. I want Jesus to be in my heart. I want to spend my eternity with Him. I know that I’ve said things about my little brother and sister, my mom, and my friends that aren’t very pleasing to Him. I’ve done things that I’m not proud of. But now that I’ve talked to you, I believe that Jesus will forgive me of those things.”

“Yes! He absolutely will, Victoria! May I pray with you?”

“Sure!”

“Okay, let’s bow our heads.”

Christi grabbed Victoria’s hands and led her in a Sinner’s Prayer.

“Lord, I thank You for this time I’ve gotten to spend with Victoria. Thank You for working in her life, and I pray that You will forgive her of her sins. She knows she has done things that have hurt Your heart, and she is confessing them to You, Lord. She no longer wants to live in darkness, insecurity, and guilt. Come into her heart, save her, and wipe her slate clean. Help her realize that she matters and that she doesn’t have to feel like she carries the weight of this world. You will carry her through all of her struggles. Thank You, Jesus, for saving her and making her new. We love You. I ask this in Your Holy Name, Amen.”

“Amen,” Victoria said, as she was wiping away her tears.

All of a sudden, Victoria felt an overwhelming sense of peace. She knew that this was The Lord’s presence in her life, and she couldn’t be happier.

“Christi, you’ll never know how much this night has meant to me.”

“Victoria, I promise you, I will remember this night for the rest of my life.”

“Now I can say that November 22, 2014 has been the best day ever. Thank you for helping me realize what I’ve been missing out on.”

“The pleasure has been mine, Victoria. Now that you’ve made a commitment to The Lord, I need to ask you a question. Would you be willing to go to my church this Sunday and at the end of the service, walk down the aisle and talk to our Pastor?”

“Wow. I’ve never been to a church as big as yours, much less walked in front of that many people.”

“Victoria, I promise you, those 15 steps down the aisle will be the easiest you’ll ever take. The steps you take outside of the church are the hardest. But once you walk down that aisle and profess your faith to Jesus, He will arm you with His strength and power to handle anything that comes your way.”

“Well, I guess that’s the least I can do. After all, He did die for me. I can at least walk 15 steps for Him and live my days for Him.”

“I’m so happy to hear this! Sunday school starts at 9:15 and the worship service is directly after. I’ll pick you up if you want, since it’s your first time.”

“I would love that. Maybe my mom will notice and want to get my brother and sister going, too.”

“That would be great! I’ll be praying for them.”

“Thanks, Christi. I am so glad to have a friend like you.”

“Me, too! We can hold each other accountable. It’s hard to be a Christian in today’s world, but I promise you it’s the best decision I’ve ever made.”

“I think it’s mine, too.”

The two exchanged good-bye hugs, and Victoria was on her way home. As soon as she got in her car, she felt relieved. She was so glad she took a step out of her comfort zone and talked to Christi. When she went to bed that night, she prayed to The Lord.

“Lord, thank You for saving me. Thank You for Your presence in my life. Please continue to work in me and fill me with your joy so that I don’t get angry over the smallest things. Help me enjoy life and everything it brings. May I stay on Your path and walk in the light You’ve given me. I don’t ever want to take my brother and sister for granted or ever miss an opportunity to tell them how much I love them. Let me be the example my family needs to see. Amen.”

As Victoria’s alarm went off the next morning, she didn’t have to fight with the snooze button. She eagerly jumped out of bed and turned the hallway light on bright. Walking into her brother’s and sister’s rooms, Victoria thanked The Lord for these two blessings and the privilege of being their sister.

When Two Strands Fall Apart

by

Joelle Young

Second Place Short Story, Grenada

I stand in front of my open closet door, paralyzed by indecision—not because I have too many dresses to choose from, but because I rarely deviate from my usual outfit of jeans and a T-shirt. But tonight I need to look good. Dad’s coworkers are coming over at six for a dinner, and we have half an hour to finish preparing everything.

“Lexie, can you come over for a sec?” Mom calls from the kitchen.

I glance at my dresses, and then step over the chemistry textbook lying on my bedroom floor. Butterflies light in my stomach as I glance at the paper lying on top of the book. “Final Review: Oxidation-Reduction.”

I meet Mom in the kitchen. The counter is cluttered with dishes of various colors and sizes. She’s holding a bowl of soup that smells delicious.

“Help me take some of this food over to the table, honey.”

I pick up two plates full of casserole.

“Know what you’re going to wear yet?” Mom is dressed tastefully, as always.

“Nope. You look nice.”

“Thanks.” She smiles. “Well, hurry up and get dressed! The guests are coming.”

Back in front of my closet, I shuffle through my dresses. My finger lands on a dark blue one: seems good. Now, if only I can find the right shoes.

The shoeboxes are piled somewhat haphazardly in my closet. Most of these shoes are for special occasions; I keep my sneakers where I can get to them easily. I gather a load of shoeboxes and begin to look for something that matches. White flip-flops with butterflies: not quite right. Pink glitter heels I must have bought in sixth grade. Where did I get all these shoes?

I open another shoebox, hoping for better luck. But I don’t see shoes. There are all kinds of things in here. Dolls with matching outfits. Snippets of photographs. Notes passed in class. Pages and pages of artwork.

Something is written under the lid of the shoebox. My heart swells with a bittersweet pang as I read, “Lexie, I hope you keep this box and treasure it forever. ~ Grace Summerfield.” Under a little heart, she has written, “BFF’s forever!”

Forever.

I close the box and find my shoes just in time.

The doorbell rings. It’s Walter Reagan, Dad’s boss. I say hi. He says hi. We talk about how school is going. He asks me about the Nursing program at Mississippi College. I tell him it’s tough, but I’m enjoying it.

“How’s Grace? I know you two were like Siamese twins.”

“She’s doing well.”

“Where is she going to college? Was it in Georgia?”

“Yeah, it’s on the east coast of Georgia. Savannah College of Art and Design.”

“How’s she liking it there?”

“She loves it. It’s been her dream to study art ever since I knew her.”

“I bet you miss her.”

“I do.”

The guests start trickling in at a steady rate. We sit down and have dinner, but my mind keeps zooming back to the shoebox.

After the dinner ends, I head back to my room, pull out the shoebox, sit on my bed, and reopen it. I begin to leaf through the artwork, some of it mine, most of it Grace's. It's beautiful—I don't know where she gets her ideas. And she's still painting, whereas for the past year, I've barely touched a paintbrush. *I used to paint nearly every day when Grace was here*, I think.

Grace and I have known each other for a long time. We went to the same elementary school and became friends in middle school. But I remember the one day we became really close. We were talking about what it was like to be adopted.

I was given up for adoption just two miles from where I live now. I never knew my birth parents; I've always known Jessica Ann Burnett as Mom and Kyle Rodrick Burnett as Dad. I can easily pass for their child. My shoulder-length blond hair and brown eyes look just like Mom's. I have high cheekbones like her. I share Dad's love of sports and the outdoors. Being adopted does not cross my mind on a day-to-day basis.

Not so with Grace Summerfield. "People always ask me if I'm adopted, and then they ask, 'So where are you from?' And I say, 'Clinton, Mississippi.' 'So, like, where were you born?' 'I was born in New York City.' 'But, like...where are you *really* from?' 'Uh, I don't know, the breath of God?'" Grace was always annoyed by the questions she got. People couldn't understand why she looked Asian, was born in New York City, and lived in Clinton, Mississippi.

Grace's story was a lot rockier than mine. She went through a lot of foster care before she found the loving family that's now hers. Her first foster family was a disaster. She was sexually abused by her foster father's brother not long before her foster parents were charged with neglect. After that, she went through three different families in three years before she found a stable home. Throughout those years, every time we did Father's Day and Mother's Day crafts at school, she felt left out.

Yet she always managed to carry her pain with a smile. She had an encouraging, bubbly personality that was like a light everywhere she went. Her generosity and sense of humor never failed to lift my spirits.

I wonder now as I have many times before: *Why did that have to change?*

Disco lights flashed above us at the Japanese restaurant where Alyssa Kiersey invited everyone for an after-graduation party.

Grace and I exited the bathroom at the same time. We hadn't talked for quite a while, I realized. "Hey, Grace. How's the painting coming along?"

"I haven't had much time to work on it. I've been getting my portfolio together for SCAD."

"You're still wanting to do the Hope Project, right?"

"Yeah, definitely, if I have time."

"What do you mean *if you have time?*?"

"Lexie, I'm gonna be really busy this summer."

"Grace, I thought this was important to you. The moment our church started a program to raise money for orphans, we knew we wanted to sell our art to help. We both felt like it was our life's purpose."

"This *is* important to me, but other things are important too. I have an internship, and Dylan and I are working on a big project."

"So your project with Dylan is more important than ours?"

"Why are you so jealous of me and Dylan?"

"I'm not! It's just that we've been doing this for such a long time, and this project means so much to our friendship, Grace. We are helping others. You know important you are in this. You're so talented. I really want to keep this going, but I can't do it without you."

"I'm sorry, Lexie. I know I haven't been doing a lot for our project, and I'll really try to finish the painting, but you have to understand that I have a lot to do."

She walked away and joined the crowd.

Grace never finished the painting.

The memories flood back. *Who is she? I wonder. Do I even know her anymore? And who am I? Why don't I feel like a complete person without her?*

I pick up a photograph. Grace and I are eleven years old at the zoo, standing in front of two giraffes. "Grace, how could you do this to me?" I cry. "How could you leave behind everything that ever meant anything to us?"

Suddenly, something breaks inside of me. I crush the photograph into a tiny ball. The pressure in my heart releases as I squeeze my fist.

Why did I just do that? I cry into my pillow.

"You all right?" Dad calls into my room.

"Yeah," I sniffle.

"Having a bad day?"

"Yeah."

"Do I need to beat anyone up?"

"No." I manage to fake a laugh.

"You know if you ever need to talk, I'm here."

"I know. Thanks, Dad."

The door swings back shut.

"Grace, please come back..." I whisper, my face buried in my pillow. Minutes pass by. It's getting late. I should probably get changed and take a shower.

Then I notice my phone has a new text. It's Frances Collier. "Are you gonna meet Grace? She's coming back to Clinton!"

Wait, what? What happened? Did she break up with Dylan? Did she quit art school? She didn't even tell me. I jump up from my bed and text Frances back. "She didn't tell me. Is she in Clinton now?"

"Yeah. She's staying at her family's house for a week."

My heart sinks. She's only visiting family for a week. I feel empty. I don't know what to do. I stare numbly at the contents of the shoebox.

"Give hope to orphans." Grace's beautiful cursive handwriting catches my eye. We did a collage. Faces of children from all over the world in need of parents. They are all smiling. *What am I going to do without you, Grace?* I think.

But I can't walk away from them the same way she walked away from me.

I reach beside my bed and open the drawer, clutching my paintbrushes, foreign yet familiar. I don't know how I'm going to do this. I'm going to be alone. I'm nowhere near the painter that Grace is. My life with Grace was perfect: a perfect story of best friends working together on a project to touch lives. It isn't perfect anymore. Everything has fallen apart. I don't even have an idea of what I'm going to paint.

But I can't walk away from them the same way she walked away from me.

I take a long, warm shower and crawl into bed. As I fall asleep, a thought barely enters my mind. Maybe I do know what I'll paint tomorrow. I'll paint hope.

The Joy You Reclaim

by

Connor Foley

First Place Short Story, Ridgeland

Monday

Where could that shirt be? The poor light in the closet makes this task even more difficult. I rummage until I find the green shirt jammed between a flannel and a Sunday blouse. My head is still throbbing, but rushing my routine is making it worse. I look at the bed I rolled out of and am too angry to make it up.

"Jeanine! Come on! You need to go out for the bus now," bellows Mom.

"I'm almost down." Struggling to put on slip-on shoes, I pull my binders off my bed covers. I feel strange walking to the door. I look around to make sure I didn't forget anything. Shoot, my music. No way am I leaving that at home where I might misplace it. The one thing I miss about morning is Dad's goofy greeting. The chipped tooth in his smile had always been the first thing I noticed coming downstairs.

The kitchen smells like meat and cheese because Mom has already eaten her Hot Pocket. She looks at me disapprovingly. "What? No breakfast?" She says.

"There's a vending machine at the school," I respond, having the image of a Nature Valley bar in mind. There is no second glance as Mom meddles with her bag until she heads to the garage.

The hunger begins to sink in as I follow her. She grabs an umbrella from the rack by the back door and presses it against my chest. She clarifies, "It's pouring out there, so you might need this."

"Oh. Thank you... I better get going." At least I could make better conversation with Dad. It was here that I notice the drips of the storm outside. The sound flows steadily like a river through the open door. Echoes move across the garage. Focused, I listen to the chiming to find a pattern I can follow. Raw in tone, the rain has an enticing softness that syncs with a deep humming.

...Wait a minute. Humming? As in an engine!? It sounds pretty close as I slip past my mother in the garage. The rain is a foggy thickness drowning away most of the color of the world. Although blurry, the humming chases a grayish-yellow mass zooming past my driveway.

"Oh, crap!" Those were my last words before leaving Mom to go to work. I'm not sure if she even says goodbye. It is too late to open my umbrella. Instead, I wave it over my head to flag the bus down. The raindrops are cold and heavy. This had better not be sleet! The bus keeps going so I call out to it. The windows' dark shapes notice me now. Some move as though they are looking to the front. Finally, the bright lights cause me to squint my eyes away from the vehicle. My feet glide over grass and concrete in order to stay on level ground. Lights continue to shine in my sight, and the creaking of the brakes sounds in my ears.

"Just by the skin of your teeth this time," says Mrs. Charleston, the bus driver. I want to say that she could have waited a little longer on her part, but decide not to. She has enough on her plate dealing with this noise pollution. So many voices are talking at once, and some are probably talking about me.

Any empty seat in the middle is my turf. I park it down and immediately check my backpack. My shoes are muddy and gross; also, my cold clothes are sticking to me like leeches. However, that is not important right now. What matters is if my work is still dry. More important than that is that my music folder isn't soggy and turning to mush.

It's the first good fortune I've had this morning. For the day so far: my teeth feel slimy, the headache will not go away, I'm starving, and the weather whipped me badly. I lay my head against the cool glass to listen to the rain. I hear the rhythm from the garage again, and my fingers play on my knees trying to assign notes. There are sorrow and peace in the notes that come to my mind. On a new music sheet, I jot down those notes so I won't forget them. It's the start of a new creation. Although it is sad, it is also what I feel.

Tuesday

First bell is just another headache to wait out. Yesterday's storm came and went without as much as a warning. This morning was better, but I cannot help but feel something is going to happen. James sits in front of me. "Rough morning yesterday, huh?"

"Mom had a rougher afternoon. Late shift again." Getting the money Dad used to earn to pay bills means extra hours. "How is Music treating you?" I want to change the subject to something new. No more about old misfortunes. If James is allowed to be in the one class I can't attend, he can at least keep me updated.

"All is fine. Mr. Saul has us working on some old twentieth-century jazz. You should at least swing by to show off." James is one of the better clarinet players in the band. Our school is well known for its concert band. While I really wanted to be in the band, my mother says the first two years of high school is the time to focus on academics. The fun classes can come in my junior and senior years according to Mom. Well, as a sophomore, I still have another year to finish until I can have "fun." Until then, someone else has dominion over the piano in concert band.

Mrs. Gateman walks into class. Today, we are talking about things like homeostasis and environmental agents that affect our health. It feels wrong to have Biology so early in the morning. Gateman is at least the kind of teacher who doesn't call on you when you don't want to participate. She gives us a movie to watch about how chemicals in acid rain can affect nature. All I notice is how the trees are dying, and the animals grow sick.

Movies usually have many distinguishing features. Aside from how depressing it is, there is just one thing that catches my ears: the bass in the background. Every image seems to flow as the music moves in such tension. Once again, my fingers dance to identify the notes. This goes on for the remainder of the program. Narrator guy reaches the conclusion, and I reach my own finale writing this music.

I'm uncertain why these scales mean so much to me. Maybe it's because they express the emotions of those poor sick creatures. Maybe it is because I feel for them, or maybe I just feel I can relate to being down. That is the only thing I understand from the video.

Mrs. Gateman's voice snaps me back to the conscious world, "Here's a worksheet on the material from the video. I hope you were paying attention because this will count as a grade. Turn them in when you are done."

I don't know for sure, but I believe she was saying that to me specifically. I admit I can only blame my own inattention for this predicament. Damn it.

Wednesday

Loneliness begins to sink in while walking in the lunch line. It sucks that James has a different lunch period. What also sucks is that Shelby, the self-proclaimed school queen, is here. She and her wannabees always sit nearby just so their talking prevents me from thinking. Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

"Hey there, Jeanine," says Ms. Lucifer.

"Hi. Are you going to try any other half-ass attempts to mess with me? The note passing is a good idea, but you need to get your facts straight." I don't mean to sound like I was mocking her. She's just one of those girls who need someone to poke fun at.

That obviously hits some kind of nerve. She pulls out my music folder to look at my encrypted secrets. She says, "I don't see why you even bother. No one is going to want to hear it." That was one fact she got right. It doesn't make me any less pissed off.

I stand up to take my folder back. There is a bit of a struggle. I swear if this girl rips anything, I'll rip her a new breathing hole. Some boys and girls begin asking us to either stop or keep going. Finally, it is back in my possession.

"You should not mess with other people's things," I say.

"You don't even take Music, so why bring that pointless trash?"

Someone in the audience would believe that the pause is for dramatic effect. This is just a pause to get my words right.

I declare, "I do it for me and me only. I don't need approval from anyone to make music, especially you. Now back off!"

Shelby knows how to take a hint. Everyone watches as she walks away. One teacher, Mrs. Stean, comes over to talk to her. The fact she didn't come over to me means Shelby made the right choice to leave it alone.

The moment I squat down to sit, my foot slides out. My elbow hits the table to catch myself, and my entire tray slides off the table. Disaster has struck again. It was all in a span of a few seconds, but I hear everything that happened. The used ketchup packages land first with a light tap. Then, the cup of green beans produces a low-toned splash. Next, the tray's end emits a high clang. Finally, the milk carton was low and vibrant spilling itself onto the floor. Chaotic is the best way to describe it, but there was something usable hidden there.

Eating is out of the question, so I examine my sheet music for awhile. I tap out the rhythm on the table. The new song needs a little more to it. I hum different notes but become distracted by what Shelby had said. It is true that the only person interested in my music besides James was Dad. He always told me that I don't have to make music for anyone else. Just me. However, I never had a problem making it for him; the same way he did it for me.

Without thinking, I match my mood with the humming. My music is now a little longer. For the first time ever, I want to thank Shelby for ruining my lunchtime.

Thursday

Third period progresses without any problems. That, however, makes me worry. This whole week has been a load of crap. Today has been too peaceful. Even Shelby didn't bother me. James was rather concerned this morning. He said things like, "Don't worry. It will get better. How about you come to the music room tomorrow? Prove that Shelby doesn't know what she is talking about." I wanted to hit him for reminding me.

Our English teacher, Mr. Gibbons, went on about stuff I had already reviewed. The week has taught me a lesson to be more prepared. Mia, my new semester friend, leans over in the desk behind me.

She whispers, "Shelby didn't say anything too bad, did she?" I appreciate her worry and concern.

"No. Trust me. It was nothing," I respond.

"Why *do* you never play for anyone? It would--"

"Just leave it alone. I'm not ready for that, okay?"

"Okay... Sorry that I asked. Do you have any plans for the weekend?"

"I'm just going to visit Dad. Then study. Not much."

"Does your mom go with you yet?"

"No. I don't think she's ready to see him again. Still working on operating without him around. I'm kind of working that out myself."

I know that my friends mean well, but now is not the time for that. One mishap after another has been occurring all week. There is a chance that another accident could happen. I just wish that whatever is coming would come on.

I raise my hand, "Mr. Gibbons. May I go to the restroom?"

No more questions. No more waiting. I need a break. My footsteps travel down the hall ahead of me. The water fountain is what I really needed. It just better not explode on me.

Heading back to class when I hear jazz, the kind that Dad taught me the first few years of piano lessons. It's Mr. Saul in the music hall playing his saxophone. There are no afternoon classes today, so he must be practicing by himself. James enjoys having a teacher who plays the classic stuff.

Listening to the music is what I needed to calm my nerves. However, anxiety catches back up to me. I listen closer hoping he would not notice me. The song should be carrying me away. Why do I still feel like

this? Something in my mind is weighing me down. This music has always been able to get me pumped. Why not now?

Third period is the only place I can go to now. I can't stay and listen to Mr. Saul because that is the bad thing I anticipated. I'm too stressed out to enjoy the music; however, I held onto every note.

Friday

This miserable week is finally coming to an end. Today is going to be different since I know what bad thing is coming my way. I have a dentist's appointment, and I have to wait after school for Mom to pick me up. Most of the people getting picked up have already left. Mom will not be able to come until much later.

My friends are not outside with the other pick-ups. They must have already gone home. There is no one to talk to now. No distractions bother me. This could be as good a chance as any.

I walk down to the music hall. "Hello," I call out, "Mr. Saul. Are you around?" There was no answer. The room has a chilling draft as I walk in. It is hard to remember the last time I was here. The place that became my cornerstone holds the only piano in this school.

Mr. Saul has taken good care of it. The tuning is great, and the wood stays polished. I take out from my folder the week-long project. A little bit of upbeat was what I decided to give it that finishing touch.

Why did I make this music? This may have been inspired by what I felt, but it is from all the down times of this week. Will anyone want to listen? Will Dad like it?

Maybe... it doesn't matter. I made it the way it was, so I'll play it the way it is meant to be. I take a deep breath.

It starts with the flow of rain. Raindrops were hitting those notes that first day. I continue to breathe. Next, the bass follows with it carrying the video's sad messages. Sorrows are met with the rain's calmness as a new harmony forms. Memories of these start to grow inside me the farther I go. Now, the spill from the lunch room clashes with the ground; now, a song that stirs and rises as it goes higher. Finally, a little of Mr. Saul's jazz comes in to bring it all together. These sorrows carry something I did not notice before. Sadness is all it holds, yet there is beauty in it.

I continue on with the song knowing that I made it right. I feel much lighter now. The song was all my sadness, yet playing it now made that fade. It is not a song for joy; it is merely a song meant to reclaim it.

I take one last breath as I reach the end. My week is finally over. Now, I can make use of a new one. This thought makes me smile until I hear clapping behind me.

Oh, man. Mr. Saul gave his all in cheering. James just grins while he holds a camera phone. He says, "I'm glad that you came to show off. Think you could use a clarinet?"

For some reason, I was not feeling mad or negative. "Sorry, I think I'll stay a solo act for now."

Mr. Saul, as if trying to find his words, finally speaks, "James told me you had a real talent, but I wouldn't have needed him to tell me if I had heard you sooner. Where did you learn?"

Some of the sadness returns, but I don't feel held down anymore. "I have been practicing for years with my dad. He taught me everything. In fact, he was a real jazz man himself."

Saul lights up at this. "Oh, really! Did he help you write this piece? I know it's definitely original."

"In a way, yes. Without him, I wouldn't be able to make it. It's kind of like he's my inspiration. Making something out of life was his specialty."

I noticed that Mr. Saul's mood changes to grief. He understands now. James tries to be assuring, "I'm sure he would want everyone to hear it." He waved the phone in the air like a trophy. I smile because maybe James is right. I make my music for myself. However, if it can do for others what it did for me, then it needs to get out there.

At this point, the door opens. "There you are. I knew you would be in here." Mom seems to be in a bitter mood. "Well, come on. We have a get going."

Mr. Saul comes and introduces himself; he then says, "I wish I had known how talented your daughter is. You must be proud."

Mom seems shocked by this. She looks to me; she seems to be at a loss for words. I say, “I made a song during this crummy week... Is it okay if I play it now, or would you like to watch the recording after the dentist?” James is obviously happy that I’m not going to destroy his phone and/or him. Off to YouTube, it goes.

My mom spent no time for thinking, “I’d love to hear it. What’s it about?”

I sit back down at the piano, “Oh, you know. Crappy week. Bitter-sweet memories. Dad... Will you come with me to visit him tomorrow?” This takes her by surprise. Her face cringes as she fights the urge to cry.

She still smiles, “...Okay. We’ll go in the morning.”

“Thank you, Mom,” I begin with a few deep breaths. The past week---no, the past months without Dad has been like weights on me the entire time. He was the only one I could share this with. He told me I didn’t have to make music for anyone, but I see that it doesn’t mean I shouldn’t share it. The truth is... I want to share it, my feeling, with Mom, James, Saul. I want this music to lighten their sorrows like it does mine. That is what it is for.

I’m going to do it, Dad. I want you to hear what you inspired me to make. This is your song as much as it is mine, and I want even Heaven to be able to hear. I found it again... I found my joy in music.

“This is for you, Dad. Hope you’re listening up there.” I begin.

Saturday

The grass was moist with morning dew. Mom followed behind me carrying the daisies. At least she didn’t make the mistake to wear heels again. It felt good coming here. Probably just the humidity in the air. I wave out, “Hey Dad! It’s been awhile.”

The place was pretty sunny despite the early time. Dad did always have a preference for the bright places. His ugly glass vase had a green gleam that just seems to complement its surrounding. I dump out the dead flowers, “Thank you for your service.”

I pour in the new water from the travel mug. Mom smiles as she sticks in the daisies, “You should tell him the good news.”

I roll my eyes and just look at that marble stone, “So I have some good news... Mom and I were talking and... I’m going to take Music next semester. Cool, right?”

My mom immediately jumps into the conversation, “But only if she keeps up with her other classes. I doubt that is going to be a problem.”

There was a quiet moment after that. Then Mom just spent some the next few minutes catching Dad up on current events. She’s trying to hard to make it sound easy. “Well, Honey, our girl needs to get back to Algebra. We’ll see you next week when Jeanine hits a hundred thousand likes online.” I change my mind. I’m gonna kill James.

I get up and take one last look at the grave, “Don’t worry, Dad? My next work will be even better. Just sit tight... I love you, Dad.”

We start heading back to the car rather light in our steps. Everything was... It was not perfect. ‘Nice’ wasn’t the right word either. I could not put my finger on it.

I just walk on feeling the fresh air in my lungs and warm sun on my skin. For the first time this week, I was ready to start a new day.

Visions

by

J.T. Evans

Second Place Short Story, Ridgeland

I swing the blade of a hoe into the malleable dirt. My garden should flourish in this summer daylight. Each stroke of the hoe allows fluffy dirt to accumulate on the ground, where I fold it over itself again and again. I swing the hoe in the cool air and follow gravity to slam into the ground. Before the hoe touches the earth, reality subsides.

I stand in a swamp. Scraggy trees covered in moss stretch from black mud. All plant life is gray. Nothing stirs in the still, sultry air. I have never been in this swamp before, yet it feels familiar.

I am experiencing something, maybe from a previous experience. I furrow my brow contemplating. Suddenly, I recognize an aspect of my feelings in the swamp.

This vision parallels dreams: a reality that never ended and an illusion without a start. Though a dream has a literal beginning and end, --you are awake, asleep, dreaming, and awoken-- you have no recollection of reality ever stopping or the dream ever starting. While in a dream, you are not in reality, and yet you act and believe you are, thus creating a mixture in your conscious of reality and illusion. The swamp is made of that mixture.

The swamp is only a mirage. Movement catches my eye. The moss ridden trees open a path, thinly leading above water. I follow the never-ending path with my eyes into darkness. Aloof from discernment, I enter the swamp's maw and seemingly float down the passage. Darkness spreads the further I traverse. The sky is no longer visible. I see a glimmer of soft, white light peaking at the end of the trail. Something is coming into focus.

There, where the trail ends and the bank of cool waters opens in the swamp. The sky is visible, and a moon peeks through the tree's fingers. In the middle of the bank sits a dark figure.

Perching on a craggy stone, a great egret (similar in shape of a stork) sits covered in darkness, with the contours of its body illuminated by the moonlight. It descends a long beak down the rock and hovers above the still water. Left and right the head thrashes, never touching the waters and alien to resting feathered body. The egret's bright eyes, two moons of their own in the orbit of shadow, stare at me and follow the erratic movements of its head. I can feel the egret pulling me. My feet leave the trail, and I float across the water toward the egret. Floating closer, my chest constricts as I see the egret's head and neck convulse like a worm. The thin beak of the egret opens and slowly utters a sound deep in its throat. Floating directly in front of the egret, it belches the voice of a man--I slam the hoe into the ground, shooting flurries of dirt in the sky.

Drenched in sweat, I stand above my garden, no longer in the swamp nor in the presence of the egret. My hands slip from the hoe's handle. Just as sensibleness and memories return to you after a dream, I slowly collect myself after my vision. Memories of similar experiences, of previous visions I could not recollect during my vision of the swamp, flood my brain. I lift my head to the bright sky with eyes closed. Hot pain spreads in my chest. Holding back tears, I decide to meet with Mr. Archibald. He is the only one I can talk to about my visions.

Leaving the garden behind, I hop into my red Chevy truck and ignite the engine. The engine hums as I leave the dirt driveway onto the road. I follow the twisting path to Mr. Archibald's gas station.

Crunching gravel under the car's wheels, I pull up to the station. The memory of the swamp swims in my mind as I walk inside. Bells ring above my head. Mr. Archibald sits behind a dirty counter stocked with rows of candy in sun-bleached packaging. Atop the counter sits a display of allusively named contraceptives and a stack of crinkled magazines Mr. Archibald is perusing. Mr. Archibald looks up at me and grins.

"Howdy," said Mr. Archibald.

I open my mouth to greet Mr. Archibald, yet I cannot speak. I stand anxiously in front of the counter, with the image of the egret haunting my thoughts. Mr. Archibald studies the distress on my face and exits the counter. Standing in front of me, he looks down with concern and authority and asks what is wrong. Tears stream down my face as I shake my head.

“C’mon Leroy,” said Mr. Archibald. “Tell me what’s wrong. Stop you’re crying.”

“I had another one,” I choked.

“Another what? Tell me, Leroy,” said Mr. Archibald

“I was working on my garden and I had another one of those things I see that other people don’t,” I said with my throat tightening. “A vision.”

Mr. Archibald stares at me angrily. I cast my eyes to the floor in shame.

“Now you know what I’ve said about this,” Mr. Archibald starts. “You know you shouldn’t talk about what you see. And after all the commotion you made of your last vision. About what? Some tiger in an abandoned church? It scared me and, I know, your momma half to death.”

I feel Mr. Archibald’s eyes pierce into me. He tells me to look at him and I look.

“Leroy,” said Mr. Archibald with a sigh. “I know these visions distraught you, but you cannot talk about them. Remember what we talked about last time? You know, about what the congregation at the church says about these visions?”

Mr. Archibald stops to ponder what he is saying. He pats me on the shoulder.

“Why don’t you get yourself a drink and head back to your garden. Alright?” said Mr. Archibald.

I nod and grab an orange pop bottle from a dusty refrigerator. Mr. Archibald says the drink is on the house and tells me to take care of myself. I pop the cap off the bottle with a wall mounted bottle opener. Bells ring above my head as I leave the building. Sipping the orange pop, I enter my truck and pull out of the gas station.

Driving down the winding road, a green flash dances in my peripheral. A grasshopper straddles the right side of the hood, teetering on thin legs as it follows the edge of the windshield. I grin at the struggling grasshopper. Arriving at the center of the hood, the grasshopper stops and traverses to the edge of the hood. It stops at the edge and points towards the road. I laugh at the sight; the grasshopper looks like my truck’s hood ornament.

Following a bend, I slow down as I approach a fork in the road. My mind scatters as I look ahead. How did I get here? I travel this road every day and I have never crossed a fork. My hands tighten around the wheel.

I look at the grasshopper at the edge of the hood. It points to the left path of the fork. Though I know a grasshopper is not capable of such conscious decisions, such as choosing directions, I sense the grasshopper is guiding me. I should turn around, maybe I took the wrong turn as I was watching the grasshopper. I arrive at the fork, anxiety gripping at my chest, and turn to the left path in the fork

My eyes watch the grasshopper. Daylight diminishes in the canopy of trees accumulating down the road. The grasshopper turns itself on the hood, pointing forward. I lift my eyes. I see moss in the passing trees.

Speech Less

by

Darnell Campbell

First Place Short Story, Goodman

Sarah slowly steps her casual flats down the wet, rubber, tiled, steps of the bus while firmly gripping the hand rail. As she makes her way off the bus, she high steps through the snow; her feet eagerly searching for security while white knuckled fists stretch a blazer beyond its limits, in an attempt to shield her from the frigid cold. Her hair has become something only nature could create. No longer its former coiffure, and her pant legs were a deeper shade around the bottom hem than the upper portion. Her mania drives her swiftly past the four houses to get to her own. She safely makes it to the porch, her head and shoulders are dusted with snow. She is wet and cold, but she feels nothing except contempt.

Numb fingers hastily fumble through Sarah's purse, around make-up and lipstick, over gum and candy, and pass whatever else had been forgotten, trying to recognize the keys to unlock the door. What took two seconds to find, seems to be taking *forever* for Sarah, and in this manic state, she stabs the lock with her key and thrusts her body through the doorway. She is unaware of the running shoes, waiting for her, on the other side. Her foot dances over the first abandoned shoe and clumsily skates over the surface of the other, sending her toppling back. Her arms instinctively respond with greedy hands reaching for control. They find rescue from the door trim, aborting a sure fall.

"You can't be serious!" Sarah exclaims. "I finally make it home after a rotten, and I mean rotten day, only to trip over whosever shoes these are! I have told you kids about leaving your shoes near the front door! Jenna, Mary whose shoes are these? You all sit here and say absolutely nothing! Well fine! I've had it up to here, and now I have something to say! First of all, my day started off horrible. I had to rush to get dressed, so I threw on something easy," Sarah expels as she tugs the lapels of her blazer. "Then I had to rush to get to work because I was running late, because YOUR father didn't set the alarm, because he has an *internal* alarm clock; and HE doesn't need an alarm! I mean, god forbid if he would do something for me for a change! God forbid! And I got a frickin' speeding ticket too, because the stupid police couldn't just give me a warning, and who's going to pay for that ticket!"

Sarah lifts her right foot to cross her left thigh, while her right hand cautiously remains firmly planted, ensuring her balance. Her free hand finds its way to her dangling foot and without thought, flings the snowy flat off her foot to a random spot on the floor. Without changing pose, Sarah lowers her right leg and the lifts the left to near her now wet bottom, wet from the snow drifting from her blazer and melting at the curves of her rear, again flinging a second shoe to a second random spot on the floor. All the while continuing her uninterrupted tirade.

"As if that wasn't enough, my idiot boss couldn't find it in his ice cold heart to understand that I was having a bad day, and it wasn't my fault I was late! If anybody else had said, 'Oh Mr. Sledgeslinger, I'm having a bad day;' I'm sure he would have suggested a paid vacation day! But no, not me! 'Sarah this is you third warning! Sarah you're on probation ...' blah, blah, blah! Well I'm sick of it! I'm this close to quitting!"

Sarah violently shakes the residual flakes from her hair and clothes which collect on the floor around her and convert to their liquid form, and her exposed stockings magnetically attract a trickle of water. The cold of the water fuels the flame, and she continues spouting a rant with blatant disregard. Both Jenna and Mary are speechless with astonishment and dismay and are unable to respond to the spectacle named Mom. Beyond that, Sarah leaves no room to listen to anything they could say.

The twelve-year-old, Jenna, has seen her mother act out many times and is growing immune to them, as is Mary, the fourteen-year-old. However, Mary is also developing a voice of her own, and she is examining

her mother's actions and words. Sarah's feet are becoming islands, but she seems unwavering, and is animated from the shoulders up, dramatically accentuating all the reasons her day is going wrong.

“And then, when it's finally time to get the hell out of there, I rush out to the car and it was gone! Apparently, the city had up snow removal signs and I parked on a removal route! Can you believe that? How do they expect me to see them, they're so high up! They could have warned me or something! I don't know! Something! Anything! Instead, they just tow my car! They got my information from my license plate, and they could have called! UGH!! I was so pissed! I couldn't reach your father! And where was he? Working overtime! Never there when I need him! So, I end up taking the bus home! I have to walk! In the snow, mind you! And I am inappropriately dressed to be out in this mess! I mean for goodness sakes!” Sarah gives her hair one more aggressive shake. “Now, finally I get in the darn house and I'm about to kill myself over these darn shoes! Whose shoes are these?!” Sarah pauses and stares dumbfounded at the girls. Her pregnant pause elicits a response.

Mary responds as a matter-of-factly, “They're your shoes, Mom.” Sarah heard the words, and her gaze went searching for conformation. Immediately, she recognized the familiar Nike pink and grey running shoe as her own. Simultaneously, her mind realized that all the shoes in the doorway are hers, and she is standing in a puddle of water. Sarah is speechless.

Literary Essays

**Women Behind Bars: “The Yellow Wallpaper”
and the Constricting Effects of the Victorian Science of Womanhood**

by

Joelle Young

First Place Literary Essay, Grenada

First Place Literary Essay, 2017 MCCCWA Competition

A literary realist writes true to everyday life, dealing with “common-place everyday events and people” and “with the socio-political climate” of his or her time (American Realism). Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one such writer, an activist deeply concerned with the social shortcomings of her day, especially those regarding the treatment of women. In her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” she writes from the point of view of a woman suffering from postpartum depression. The narrator, under the supervision of her physician husband, undergoes a “rest cure”—confinement to a house for several weeks—a common prescription in the nineteenth century for women with similar troubles. Because of her confinement, she descends into madness. The narrator’s analytical interaction with the wallpaper in her room is a lens through which we see the effects of placing rigid theoretical restrictions on people—specifically women in the nineteenth century. The wallpaper, resistant to the strain of logical confinement, eventually becomes a woman in the narrator’s mind, evoking the real human beings trapped behind society’s artificial theories of womanhood.

In Victorian culture, males governed the activities of women, dominating areas like fashion, medicine, psychiatry, and education (Murton). Strong ideas about the female nature led to strict requirements of behavior for women. Because it was important to exaggerate the feminine shape and suggest reproductivity, women were expected to wear corsets, even though they caused heavy damage to internal organs (Murton). This was not the only way in which women were seen as “female” more than as individual people. Women were supposedly physically and intellectually weak, unable to be artists, and prone to insanity, all attributed to the female reproductive system (Murton). So strong was the notion of the “female” that Gilman wrote in criticism, “That women are persons as well as females,—an unheard of proposition!” (Murton)

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” these criticisms recur. John, both physician and husband to the narrator, controls her with the combined influence of the male institutional and domestic spheres. John treats the narrator the way that society treats women: in a scientific and restrictive manner. “[P]ractical in the extreme,” John wishes for everything to be “felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman). He gives her “a schedule prescription for each hour in the day” and “hardly lets [her] stir without special direction” (Gilman). She is not allowed to write or socialize. Twice in the story, he laughs at her condescendingly, and he speaks as if she is a child: “What is it, little girl?” (Gilman) and “[B]less her little heart!” (Gilman) Even her bedroom is a nursery in which the “windows are barred for little children” (Gilman).

This is not the only place in Gilman’s writing that discusses barred windows. Speaking of the intellectual confinement of women, she wrote in *Women and Economics*, “The freedom of expression has been...restricted in women.... Something of the world she lived in she has seen from her barred windows” (Murton). It is no surprise, then, that Gilman’s narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” begins to see a woman behind bars emerging from the patterns in the wallpaper (Gilman).

Perhaps it is more surprising that the narrator does not look at the wallpaper with the intention of imagining anything. Rather, she attempts to study it, in a similar manner to how John studies her condition. Throughout the story, she details the wallpaper in an unusually scientific way. She talks of trying to “analyze” (Gilman) its odor, “keep count of” (Gilman) the shoots on the fungus patterns, and “distinguish the order” (Gilman) of the pattern’s direction. Her suspicion that the paper is affecting the behavior of both John and

Jennie is -- in her words -- a “scientific hypothesis” (Gilman). Although she notes the wallpaper’s erratic nature, “a lack of sequence, a defiance of law,” (Gilman) she stubbornly persists in analyzing it. She “WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (Gilman).

This is an exact analogy of John’s treatment of her: as an object of scientific analysis, expected to follow and benefit from his pattern of medical prescription, despite all evidence to the contrary. Her condition is far from what John imagines. She is nervous, distrusts people, and cries often. Instead of sleeping at night, she watches the wallpaper, descending slowly into insanity. However, her own concerns about her well-being are not taken seriously. When she tells him that she isn’t improving and wishes to leave, he replies with statements like, “[Y]ou really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor...” (Gilman) John has made up his mind to follow her condition to his own conclusion.

In actuality, she is too complex, too human, to be restricted in this way. In the same way, all Victorian women are trapped in society’s constraints. The complexity of the wallpaper and its resistance to an attempt to organize it reflects this truth. The narrator cannot reduce the wallpaper to a science. Instead of logical patterns, women begin to materialize from the paper, sometimes one, sometimes many, creeping behind it, longing to be free. These are the women, Gilman suggests, that society has trapped under its theories of womanhood, theories whose folly one only has to look at the story’s ending to recognize. As he sees their results, the husband collapses. His wife has gone insane, creeping inside her room, believing that she is the woman who has escaped from the wallpaper, which she has torn down from the wall. At the end, it is he who is hysterical, crying for an axe, and she who uses her “gentlest voice,” (Gilman) following his prescription of calmness to the very end.

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Walt Whitman: The Great American Sympathizer

by

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Second Place Literary Essay, Grenada

In Section 46 of Walt Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*, the poet tells of his great lifelong journey and seeks to inspire his readers to embark on their individual journeys. Modern readers could interpret the poem as one meant to inspire teenagers who are about to enter the real world; however, contextual reading may reveal a much deeper meaning with the children of plantation owners in the heart of slavery as the poet's intended audience.

Whitman was born on Long Island in 1819 and grew up during the pre-Civil War era. During his formative years, he was surrounded by Quakers who adamantly opposed slavery. Later as a young adult, Whitman received the opportunity to travel to New Orleans, Louisiana, for a few months to work as a writer. While there, he discovered a love for the Southern culture, scenery, and people; however, he was horrified by slavery and opposed the way African Americans were treated in the South ("Walt Whitman" 646). Whitman was forever changed by his time in New Orleans. Discouragement from his time in the South drove him to shift the focus of his poems to American life and democracy (Burt).

Although Whitman adamantly opposed the way slave owners treated their slaves, he could not make himself hate the slave owners, because he understood that they were only doing what they had been taught to do. He did not judge or condemn other people, but accepted that they were human beings just like he; instead, he had a capability of relating to all people and he offered advice for improvement. In "Song of Myself: The Paradox of the Project," Jeffrey Gordon, professor of philosophy and National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor at Texas State University, discusses Whitman's unnatural ability to identify with everybody in the world: "His capacity for inhabiting sympathetically the presence of others and of natural objects makes it highly problematic for him to mark out a sphere of separateness where he as a self can stand."

In 1855, with society focusing on problems such as slavery, Whitman envisioned a future of equality that inspired an untitled poem in his poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass*. One year later when *Leaves of Grass* was republished, he titled the poem *A Poem of Walt Whitman, An American*, before eventually titling the poem *Song of Myself* in 1860. His original failure to put a title on the poem before associating it with his identity as an American and finally his identity with himself may have coincided with a country that was growing in a self-awareness that would lead to civil war and a break from long held cultural traditions.

By studying his biography and looking at his character, readers can dissect Section 46 of *Song of Myself* and find a message that sympathizes with both slaves and the children of slave owners through suggesting all people are responsible for forming their own beliefs and are allowed to believe what they want to believe—as long as they form their beliefs themselves.

Beginning with a light and gentle tone, Whitman looks to kindly attract an audience, preferably slave owners' families, and offer to point them in the right direction; later, after shifting into a sense of urgency, he invites them to join him on his journey that will change their views on slavery. Whitman begins Section 46 of *Song of Myself* by gently inviting everybody, especially children of plantation owners, to listen, while establishing his credibility, and introducing himself as a kind man with no authority who refuses to force his views on others, saying: I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)/ My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,/ . . . / I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,/ I lead no man to a dinner table, library, exchange. (Whitman 652)

The perpetual journey with many signs reflects Whitman's experiences from living in many places including the North and the South. Whitman gains the trust of readers by assuring them he has no intentions

of forcing any religious or moral views on them or forcing them to learn from others or go to war. This is a great hook for slave owners who have no intentions of hearing a Yankee tell them what to do. Whitman goes on to offer a solution to the issue of slavery by saying to the slave owners' children:

But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.
Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself. (652)

In these lines, which are the most important lines of the poem, Whitman shows his willingness to tell the plantation children about the different kinds of people in the world. He encourages them to travel to different places, interact with different cultures, and form their beliefs based on their own experiences rather than those of their parents. He is not forcing the children to leave the familiar and go into the world, but he is inspiring them to be courageous enough to go and explore the world in order to see if they believe slavery is the right choice.

Whitman then invites the children to join him on a journey saying, "Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth / Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go" (652). Whitman transitions from a light and gentle tone to a sense of urgency by using the word *hasten*. He wants the children to quickly pick up their burdens and join him on a journey to see many different cultures with hopes that they soon change their beliefs and share them with their neighbors and family in order to prevent war.

In conclusion, Section 46 of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* is a great poem with a deep meaning. In a time where racial tensions were at an all-time high, Whitman used brilliant poetry as an instrument to speak to slave owners in the South. Although the poem was written many years ago, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* continues to inspire new generations to explore the world before allowing society to shape their values and beliefs.

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Gothic Elements in “The Birthmark”

by

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First Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

For centuries, the gothic has weaved itself through cultures. It has influenced sects of nearly everything, from architecture to films. It’s influence on literature is perhaps the most notable, as authors from all parts of the world have pulled inspiration from this notorious aesthetic. Andrew Smith, in his essay on Gothic Literature, writes, “The Gothic...mutates across historical, national, and generic boundaries as it reworks images drawn from different ages and places.” Despite this variance of gothic style, Smith notes that there are very identifiable features which make up the distinctive style. These features are expansive. Some of the familiar ones are ruins, castles, monstrosity, and the supernatural (Smith).

Sigmund Freud was the first to present a paradigm for the human psyche; but long before his famous essays and works, readers of Gothic literature read and interpreted the abnormalities presented in this style of work. With the psychological research to back it, readers now have a greater understanding of the eeriness in this genre’s works. However, these thoughts are definitely not new (Snodgrass).

When thinking of gothic literature, the average reader might not immediately think of Nathaniel Hawthorne. However, many of his works can be considered gothic. In particular, his short story “The Birthmark” contains many gothic elements. Some of these are presented in an unorthodox way. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” can be considered a piece of American Gothic literature because of its inclusion of gothic elements, such as magic, a disturbed psychological state, and a unique perspective of gender.

According to the Brooklyn College of New York, one element of gothic literature is magic, the supernatural, or suggestion of the supernatural (“The Gothic”). While “The Birthmark” does not have blatant magic, it is in fact present. In her review of “The Birthmark,” Katherine Snipes writes, “Science is obviously closer to alchemy and magic at this time than to modern chemistry” (Snipes).

The Funk and Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia defines alchemy as “an ancient art practiced especially in the middle ages, devoted chiefly to discovering a substance that would transmute the more common metals into gold or silver and to find a means of indefinitely prolonging human life.” While the techniques used in this art were by no means scientific, it is often considered to be the predecessor to chemistry (“Alchemy”).

Nathaniel Hawthorne considered Aylmer to be a man of science, but a look at the time period should encourage the reader to consider this character to be more of an alchemist than anything else (Hawthorne).

In the Aristotelian doctrine of alchemy, the primary concept stems from the idea that all things tend to reach perfection. Gold and silver were considered to be the perfect metals, while other metals were considered to be less perfect. Artisans who practiced alchemy believed that skill and diligence could recreate perfection in the same way the earth produces perfection in gold (“Alchemy”).

This concept is uncannily parallel to the plot of “The Birthmark.” While Georgiana is close to perfection, Aylmer is determined to remove her birthmark to reach true perfection in his eyes. He uses his sciences to achieve this purpose. This element of the story aligns with the supernatural characteristic of gothic literature.

Edgar Allen Poe is often the first author to come to mind when thinking of American gothic literature. The eerie feeling provoked by reading one of his short stories perfectly encompasses all that gothic literature has to offer. In a book on Gothic Literature, Andrew Smith writes “Poe’s contribution to the development of American Gothic tradition cannot be underestimated” (Smith). Many elements that Poe

incorporates into his stories are emulated in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." The element in particular that both of these authors emphasize in their works is a disturbed psychological state.

Poe's writing shows his fascination with irrationality as well as emotionally disturbed states (Smith). Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* is very comparable to this. In "The Birthmark," Hawthorne writes of an obsession. Alymer's focus on his wife's birthmark grows and grows until it seems almost like a compulsive behavior. It becomes all he can think about when he sees his wife. Particular when Alymer has a disturbing dream about cutting out the birthmark, the reader can sense a very demented psychological state.

According to Smith, "Arguably one of the most telling characteristics of the Gothic from the 1790s to the 1890s concerns the progressive internalization of evil" (Smith). This progression is outlined clearly in *The Birthmark*, as Alymer marries a beautiful woman but gradually grows obsessed with ridding her of an imperfection. This desire could be interpreted as an evil within him as it puts a barrier in between him and his wife until she is nothing but a science project to him.

In gothic literature, women are often presented as fragile and vulnerable. This is absolutely the case in "The Birthmark"; however, Hawthorne takes more of a feminist approach. In a book review, John Dolis notes that Hawthorne is a feminist based on his critical treatment of males and allegiance with victimized women (Dolis 156). He writes that "the power of Hawthorne's feminism lies in his effort to critique normative masculinity" (157).

The fact that Georgiana plays a meek and submissive wife is no accident. Her husband's obsession with perfecting her is what ultimately kills her. Hawthorne uses Alymer's objectification of his wife to critique the dominance of the traditional male role.

In this, Alymer ends up playing the villain, though he does not seem to be purely evil. C.R. Resetarits discusses this element in his essay on Hawthorne. "The protagonist or males of Hawthorne's science fiction differ from their gothic counterparts by being less malevolent by design and more by unintended consequence; they are not inherently evil men, but morally compromised and ambiguous" (Resetarits). Alymer is not an inherently cruel male villain, but Hawthorne does use his character to critique traditional masculinity in gothic literature.

"The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne encompasses gothic elements in a unique and unorthodox way. Through Hawthorne's inclusion of magic, a disturbed psychological state, and a unique perspective on gender, "The Birthmark" is a staple piece in the American gothic tradition.

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Analysis of Death in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

by

Richard Murray

Second Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

Edgar Allan Poe’s life and works are deeply rooted in the theme of melancholia and death; the perfect example being his short story “The Fall of the House Usher.” How Poe treats the subject of death in this story is unique since, particularly the story’s main protagonist’s encounters with the idea of immortality and mortality (Andermatt). The reader witnesses the actions of the story’s main character Roderick Usher’s struggle as he confronts the idea of not only his imminent death but also death of his family. The introduction describes the state of deterioration, starting with Usher mansion, continuing with Roderick’s sanity, and finishing with the eventual collapse of the Usher mansion. Throughout this story, Roderick’s mortality is confronted tested (Andermatt).

The initial details provided by Usher’s friend express a sense of misery. For example, the description of the “dull, dark, and soundless day in autumn” environment within the first line of the story provides foretelling of death (Poe 654). The feeling of dread experienced by the friend is being shared with the audience as he approaches the house. The state of the Usher mansion and its inevitable demise has a parallel relation with both the family name and the last family members. The friend expresses his observation of the house as “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” and finds himself being surrounded by a “mansion of gloom” (Andermatt, Poe 654). These observations provide the reader not only an image of both the house and the Usher family (Andermatt).

The majority of the story’s details of the Usher family’s history is concentrated on the Usher mansion; the relation between the Usher mansion and Roderick’s sanity is hard to miss. The friend observes this connection, stating that “the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain” (Poe 655). For the audience that missed the intended imagery, this description should have formed an image of the entire family in their graves (Andermatt).

Likewise, the house is key to understand the state of Roderick’s illness. The connection between both is cleverly written. The condition of the outside of the house represents the physical illness being observed by the friend, while the inside of the house is parallel with the sanity of Roderick. The friend observes the room which he meets Roderick as an “atmosphere of sorrow” and continues by describing the inside of the house is described as neglected and scattered, which may also describe his mental state (Andermatt, Quote). A tangible observation seen of inner collapse is when the reader is introduced to the doctor who is caring for Madeline. The introduction of the doctor’s physical characteristics is expressed as “low cunning and perplexity” (Poe 656). Madeline represents the reliable double to Roderick. As the Madeline’s Character dwindles and she dies, Roderick’s sanity rapidly deteriorates (Andermatt).

The eventual death of Madeline, too, represents the fall of the Usher family and the death of Roderick’s state of mind. The concept of immortality is being expressed with the reappearance of Madeline. The concept is that the memories of the individual are forever. This notion has the most impact on me. Within this story, these memoirs are painful and represent what must cease to exist. Roderick’s sanity crumbles as he concludes that both he and his family will die. Roderick states, “I shall perish” and “I must perish” (Poe 657). As the story comes to a close with the sudden epiphany and break of his mind, a storm is conjured. The ground that supports his house breaks. This runs both symbolically and literally with Roderick. The house falls to the ground and “dies” with Roderick (Andermatt).

In short, Poe writes of death with extreme melancholy. With the exaggeration of this topic he provides a view of death that most writers do not consider. Poe’s writing was ahead of his time. He forces his readers to think of death, how the human mind interacts with death, and how the mind accepts one’s own death. The

situations written are extreme, but the base for these stations are true. Most people are in some sense afraid of experiencing death, and even though this fact is true, they have this unique urge to witness of how others deal with death, not as a form of obsession but curiosity. This curiosity is why Poe chose to expose readers to death and to experience fear, the fear of the unknown.

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