

Reflections 2017-2018

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.

English Department 2017-2018

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Poetry

Forgiveness

by

Madison Brewer

First Place Poetry, Grenada
Second Place Poetry, 2018 MCCCWA

Forgiveness is a steep climb up a mountain.
The blistering hills and rocks before you,
The pain, still hot, like coals in a fountain.
Guilt rises as the sky dances blue.
The sunlight surrounds you, like guilt inside.
The rocks are as sharp as the words they said.
One slip, and a rock cuts deep in your thigh,
Loud cries as the pain surfaces, red.
Onward you press, still hurting inside, now out.
Closer you draw, guilt still pressed beside you.
Higher and higher, pain lingers like doubt.
A rush comes when the top is in view.
A beautiful sight makes the pain melt away.
Forgiveness makes a path, hope guides the way.

Please Don't Love Me

by

Emily Caldwell

Second Place Poetry, Grenada

Please don't love me
I'm not what you want
I'm ugly, and I'm sad
More often than not

Please don't love me
There's so many things wrong
With me and my body
I can't list them all

Please don't love me
I don't even love myself
Inside and outside
I put myself through hell

Please don't love me

I'm broken and bent
I'll just assume that
You have pity as intent

Please don't love me
It won't work out
I'll just push you away
And replace love with doubt

Please don't love me
Please don't waste your time
I'll keep my distance
Because I'm not even worth mine

Please don't love me
I'll only disappoint
Don't take the gamble
There's really no point

So please don't love me
Pretend I'm not there
It's not like anyone
Actually cares

Picasso

by

Emily Caldwell

Second Place Poetry, Grenada

I'm quite the artist
Experimenting yet
I draw with silver
And it comes out red

My masterpieces start
On this special canvas, you see
One like no other
It solely belongs to me

Next, I choose my medium
This part's important to me
Do I want it clean, rugged,
Shallow, or deep?

After preparation
Comes the fun part

I simply pick a point
At which to start

The brush glides smoothly
Across the surface, so pasty
Sorry, I must calm my hand!
It's not good to be too hasty!

After a minute
Or maybe a few
I scale my work
Of drawings new

Despite how lovely
They'll never be displayed
However, there's one place
Where they'll always be arrayed

I'm quite the artist
Experimenting yet
I draw with silver
And it comes out red

Lady Chrysalis
by

Ashley Regan

First Place Poetry, Ridgeland
Honorable Mention Poetry, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Once in every three moons,
I transform into a new being—
Raw, unkempt, and unfiltered.
A creature of change, my fins
Become legs and feet with
Toes that nestle in damp dirt.
I discovered this thing called
Metamorphosis, and soon,
Learned I could do it too.
My first time was when I was 15,
I stripped my hair of its pigment—
No longer virgin locks.

Once a brunette, I'm now an
Expert chameleon that's
Constantly changing colors.
At 18, I transformed once again.
I was a heart-broken woman,
Angry and impulsive.
I sacrificed my long hair
For better loves and an
Open future.
I am a pupa no more, I am
A glistening chrysalis,
Golden like honey.
Like a phoenix, I am rebirthed,
Baptized in the ashes and
Given wings of glass.

Acadiana Roots

by

Codi Goulas

Second Place Poetry, Ridgeland
First Place Poetry, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

I am my home.
I am cypress bones and alligator smiles.
All the dark waters of the Atchafalaya
Drift through my veins.
Like blood turned magic.

I breathe in swamp lights,
Breathe out burnt sugar cane,
Dance with the snakes coiled around my limbs.
I hear the voice of my grandma in the cicadas.
The fifelet's burn bright in me.

The tricky swamp is a lady hungry for secrets,
She'll trade you for satumas and lies.
These heron haunted eyes weep bourbon tears,
A small summer storm in an Acadiana body.
I am deep roots in warm water.

Crazy Horse

by

Abigail Proctor

First Place Poetry, Goodman

When I ride my horse, he's a ticking time bomb.
One day I know I'll break my neck,
And that ain't how I want to die.
This narrow road is stained a rusty red,
Like my skin will be after this ride.
The concrete below beckons for an embrace.
I can almost hear my horse laugh as he tenses up to buck.
Then in a snap he's sprouted wings, and we're gone.
Riding horses feels bittersweet.
Because even though I taste blood on my tongue from the jumps,
The wind in my hair makes me feel free.
Riding down the streets of Ethel, Mississippi,
Passing that old Joe Lewis every ride is my childhood.
I can still hear him shoutin', "That horse crazy as all get out!"
Yet, he asked me if he could ride when I first got the gelding.
I wave at him as we pass, and, suddenly, I've hit the ground.
I watch as my mount gallops on down the street without me.
My skin burns as people look at me.
I'm going to sell that damn horse.
"But he's so sweet," I still think.
And that feeling of the wind whipping through my hair.

Family

by

Kiya Alvarado

Second Place Poetry, Goodman

Third Place Poetry, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Shadows make lonely company
even though I can hear the friendly murmurs in
New Orleans, I have to stand by my
fading family, Alvarado
come here *turkey*, come here *pumpkin*
they would scream fight
be a
family they said
whether sober or not

the drugs still affect us
laying my head down
the pillow whispered to me,
“You will leave them and be happy”
falling asleep
The pillow’s feathers became my wings
I spread them
and flew
but they kept breaking my
wings my only escape
falling to the ground
in pain as I lay there
barely seeing
through crimson stains
on once beautiful wings
now grotesque,
through watery eyes
hitting the ground
in pain as I lay there
appearing like out of a dream
a tall man stands over me
he’s always been there
how had I not
known before
my safety net
lifting me in his warm embrace
his loving face smells like
home gently saying
“I love you”
now safe and sound
protected at a place
I can call
home
stand by your new family, Haley.

Creative Nonfiction

The Good People

by

Shunta Rivers

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Grenada
Honorable Mention Creative Nonfiction, MCCCWA

Every holiday and summer, from infancy through my teenage years, Grandma Pratt sadly packed my bags for me to go see my father and his family. Then she would deliver the same speech before I walked out the door. Because she was so religious she would say, “Take your Bible, no wearing pants, no lip chap, make sure you say your prayers before meals and bed, no talking back, and I repeat NO TALKING BACK, do you understand me? Shunta Rivers, don’t let me find out you’ve been mouthing off!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I would say as I kissed her cheek and gave her a heartwarming tight goodbye hug.

Different members of my father’s side of the family would come to my grandma’s home and get me on the holidays and then call other members of the family and brag about how it was their time to keep precious little ole’ me. This time it was Grandma Peggy and Auntie Tonia’s turn to take care of the princess. I knew this would be an awesome vacation because they were the “cool folks.” They would let me do things that I could not even think about doing while staying with Grandma Pratt, wonderful things like staying up all night watching *Adult Swim* while drowning myself in Gummy Worms and Fanta sodas. Talking back was never a problem with them. They thought my sassy mouth was a gift from God and that it showed how smart I would be once I got older.

It was the second day of Christmas break and Grandma Peggy was nagging Tonia about how we should go visit Tonia’s father since we were in the state of Mississippi. Tonia had never had a stable relationship with her mother, who was also named Peggy, nor with her father, and she avoided seeing both of them as much as she could. This time, Tonia used the excuse of needing to stay on the planned schedule because of the bad weather. She tried to convince Grandma Peggy that it was not a good idea to make a detour when the roads had patches of ice on them.

The snow was coming down heavily, so her excuse was actually valid this time. Mississippi was experiencing its first white Christmas in years, and the weather was growing rapidly worse. But Grandma Peggy could be stubborn when she made up her mind, and she did not think that Tonia’s reasons were good enough, so she nagged until Tonia changed her mind and agreed to go see her parents.

Tonia was quietly furious. The entire time she was driving she never muttered, uttered, nor stuttered a single word. It seemed as if the car was on autopilot and that she was just on night watch babysitting the steering wheel. Grandma Peggy sat on the back seat, telling me stories of her experiences during her school days. She had grown up in a time where the black and white cultures were segregated.

Grandma Peggy stared out of the window. “I remember little Sarah Jones. We were schooled together. Well, one day she was walking home from school and a truck of white guys pulled along beside her. She could not have been no more than ten. Little Sarah tried her best to get away, but she was just too little. They beat her, had their way with her precious little body, and threw her in nearby ditch. Do you know that they got off? I guess the law only works against us coloreds. I remember my mama sayin’ that Sarah’s daddy was gone put a killing on those white boys. A few days later he did just that.”

She went on to tell me how kids of the other race would hit her, knock her down, and even spit on her at times. “One time I went into a diner and the server refused to sell me a piece of pie. She had the nerves to tell me that those were *whites-only* pies. And then she said . . .”

As Grandma Peggy was talking, Tonia’s eyes continuously rolled, as if the sound of my grandma’s voice was agony to her ears. Finally breaking her silence, she said, “Mom, stop it! You’re not even that old! Everyone in the world knows that those are scenes from the movies *A TIME TO KILL* and *LIFE*.”

“Damn it, Tonia, you better just keep your eyes on the road. The snow is getting so thick I can barely tell where it begins or ends. I can’t believe it’s a white Christmas in Mississippi.”

“Your stories are so thick I can barely tell where they begin and end either, especially since they seem to change every time you tell them. Lies, lies, lies, and more lies.”

Grandma Peggy’s blood began to boil. “Latonia Ann! You better watch your mouth. I brought you into this world, and I sure as hell don’t mind taking you out!”

As they begin to go back and forth with their argument, Tonia lost control of the car. The car began to skate across the snow as if we were on a rink at New York City’s Times Square. Tonia slammed her foot on the brakes, and the car spun around like an empty coke bottle. Time seemed frozen. What may have been only five seconds felt like five hours. We were afraid for our lives. I gripped my seat so tightly that my fingers immediately began to cramp. The car was still spinning. It was finally my turn to speak, and I decided to break the silence.

“I’m going down, I’m going down,” I screamed from the top of my lungs in my best Mary J. Blige voice.

“Shunta, shut the hell up. This is ain’t the time for your smart mouth! Pray!” scolded Tonia.

Suddenly, it felt as if the car lifted off the ground.

There it was again. The silence.

I closed my eyes and felt a huge thump. The car had landed in a ditch. We sat there stranded. Grandma Peggy began to go on about how the Mississippi Delta was the wrong spot for three black women to be stranded in a car wreck. I began to grow nervous. There was no phone to call for help. We sat there for some time before a car came by, and finally a Jeep pulled over on the side of the road. Two tall scrawny white males jumped out of the Jeep and immediately went to the trunk.

“Lock the doors, Tonia,” screamed Grandma.

Tonia eased her hand over and hit the lock button. The guys raised up and walked from behind the truck—one of them was carrying a rope.

“It’s a noose! Mom, you were right all along!” Tonia yelled as she burst into tears. I grabbed her hand and began to cry along.

The guys slowly walked toward the car. One was standing at the back of our car, and the other came around and tapped on the glass.

“We’re gonna pull you ladies out of this here ditch,” he said. A sigh of relief waved through the atmosphere.

There it was again. The silence.

They tied the rope to the back of the car and pulled us out of the ditch.

“Now, you ladies, be careful. You know us Mississippians ain’t used to no snow,” said the boy as he tapped the window and then tilted his cap to gesture his goodbye.

“Grandma Peggy, I thought that you said that they would do bad things to us. That was so nice of them. All white people are not going to hurt us. You really had me going for a minute there. Those guys are my heroes.”

Grandma sat in shock and did not say a word.

There it was again. The silence.

The Nameless Game

Second Place Creative Nonfiction, Grenada
Third Place Creative Nonfiction, MCCCWA

You're such a sweetheart. I love your kind heart. You are just so sweet and pure.

I believed these encouraging words that were often said about me until one day—the day everything changed.

Before that day, I loved going to my cousins' house. My family and I would load up in Momma's black 2004 model Chevrolet Trailblazer and hit the road for their small, blue house on the edge of town in Woodland, Mississippi. We would arrive and have so much fun that we would end up staying three or four nights every time we visited them. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are endless games of "Tickle Monster" with my cousins and our mommas and tasting salty, sweet tears that ran down my face from laughter.

When I was about seven years old, my cousin Thomas and I decided that we were much too old to be playing baby games like "Tickle Monster" anymore. We migrated to bigger and better, more grown-up games like "Spy Kids" and "Sheriff and Outlaw." We left Dillon, Thomas's two-year-old brother, to fend off the tickle monsters on his own and headed out to explore the world of *big kid games*. These games were not much fun for me. Since Thomas was older, he got to be the good guy and I had to be the bad guy. Every time. Even though Thomas was only older by one year, he acted as if the one year was in "Dog Years." I always tried to impress him and defy the assumptions that boys at his age made about girls at my age.

One day Thomas introduced a new game. He explained that this new game was a game that only he and I could play. It was a secret game. I wanted to question Thomas and possibly back out of playing for fear of getting in trouble in some way, but that wasn't what "cool" cousins did, and I was striving hard to be "cool" in Thomas's eyes, since he was the most important judge of my seven-year-old self. I watched quietly as Thomas inched his playroom door shut and clicked it softly. Thomas then began to play the new, nameless game that turned my stomach in knots and made lumps form in the back of my throat.

Each time I visited his house, or he visited mine, Thomas wanted to play the nameless game. Every time we played the game, I felt disgustingly dirty and exposed. I wanted to tell Thomas no or tell him to find someone else to play with, or even suggest another game, but my voice would not let me speak. Not wanting to be one of those "dumb girls" who did not know how to handle a game, I let him keep playing. For four long years I played the nameless game with Thomas, losing pieces of myself as well as my innocence with each "new rule" or "Now, it's *your* turn."

When I reached age eleven, I finally had the courage to suggest a new game to Thomas. I told him I did not want to play the nameless game anymore. I was tired of the game, and it made me feel bad when I played. Thomas did not like the idea of playing a different game. He apparently got a different feeling when he played the nameless game.

"Thomas, I don't want to play the game anymore."

"Why not? We've played it for, like, forever. I like it."

"Well, I don't. Why don't you play it with Dillon or something?"

"Ew! I can't play it with Dillon! That's against the rules! You don't have to play anymore; you're just a dumb girl anyways."

"Fine. I guess we just won't play *any* games anymore!"

From that point on I was deemed "uncool" in Thomas's eyes. Not only did I lose my purity and myself, but also, I lost one of my only friends, and my "cool" factor as well.

By age fourteen, life was no better. Thomas never asked me to play the nameless game; he did not ask me anything. He never acknowledged my existence at all anymore. His indifference tore me down more than it should have. The rejection from my own family made me feel worthless. I could not explain to

Momma why Thomas and I were no longer “two peas in a pod” and why I did not want to be around the little blue house that I had once loved to see so much. I regretted ever saying no to Thomas, even though I hated the game. At least when we played, I still had him. I still had a friend. For the first time, I started to hate myself. I started to creep into a deep, debilitating depression.

For three years, the depression was the only thing that I felt accepted me. I hated myself. I was a self-mutilating mess. I spent years feeding the monster that had created a nest inside my mind and in my soul. I lost my faith in myself, as well as in others and God. I had become the victim in my own adventure story I called “Life.” I was the damsel in my own epic; instead of the heroine I knew I could be, I knew I had to be. I suffered for far too long with secrets, guilt, and regret, all while Thomas felt nothing, or so he made it seem. I decided that I wanted to change. I didn’t want to live filled with hatred for myself and for Thomas for what he had done to me, and for what I had done to myself as a result. I felt like a victim, something I had never been before, and something I would never let myself be again.

When I turned seventeen, I decided to tell my mother what had happened to me and ask my parents for some help. I told them that I was tearing myself apart piece by piece, and soon there would be nothing left to tear. I cried bitter, sorrowful tears, mourning, not for myself, but for my parents. They had lost the once “sweet, innocent, kind” Millie and gained an empty shell of a girl, a fake girl who acted as though everything was fine, when in reality, she was letting everything fall apart.

I started going to therapy sessions to try to regain my sense of life and accept the things that had happened to me. I wanted to learn how not to be the victim in a situation where being the victim would be a lot easier than trying to overcome the odds. At first, my therapist Cindy and I just stared blankly at each other. I answered questions as concisely as I possibly could and did not allow her to get too deeply into my emotions and thoughts. Then one day things started to change. Cindy called me back into her office, and I sat down as per usual. She asked about my day, about school, about stress, the usual kinds of things that took up about ten minutes of our fifty-minute sessions. As soon as I thought the staring would begin, Cindy surprised me by asking about my past. She probed deep inside my soul in order to find the reason I was so sad and why the therapy sessions were doing nothing for this “obviously super depressed” girl.

I told her about the bullying I had been through in school, the loss of grandparents and friends, and other things that build up sadness in someone’s life. Then she asked about happy moments. I told her about Thomas and the awesome adventures that we used to have playing “Spy Kids” and “Sheriff and Outlaw.” Cindy asked why I didn’t lean more on Thomas, and use our relationship as best friends and cousins to help with the bullying and sad things that had happened in my past.

“Well, Thomas kinda dropped me like everyone else did.”

“Oh, why do you think he did that?”

“He wanted to play this dumb “nameless” game all the time, and it made me feel gross, and I finally told him I didn’t wanna play anymore, and so he said we weren’t friends, cousins –whatever, anymore.”

“Nameless game?”

Molestation. That’s the name of the game Thomas had introduced to me behind the closed door of his room. We had not played a nameless game. I learned the name that day, and I did not know how to feel. I had been molested by my own cousin. That is something that happens to people on *Dateline* or reruns of Jerry Springer, not something that happens in real life to real people.

After I learned game’s name and had time to process all of the new information and put pieces of the puzzle together. I was ready for the next step: Healing.

Healing was something that I had already done physically, but had yet to do emotionally and spiritually. Just like any hero who is wounded, I had to heal and get back into shape before I could fight the battles that threatened my existence. I was able to process what happened and understand that what happened to me was not my fault. Cindy helped me determine to stop being the victim that I had shamefully allowed myself to appear. I came out stronger from that session in all aspects. My faith started to grow, my emotional stability started to increase, and my depression started to decrease. I finally turned the battle

around on the monster that had clouded my vision on my true self. I was defeating the monster and all of the demons of the past that had haunted me and made my life miserable and unbearable.

People say that time heals all wounds. I was once a firm believer in that, but time did not heal my wounds. Time allowed my wounds to fester until they nearly destroyed me. With time I have become stronger and I have become well, but it was therapy with Cindy that changed my life and helped me grow in ways that I would not have been able to grow on my own. Through telling my story and reaching out for help, the wreckage of my spirit and soul were not only salvaged, they were restored. I became the victor, not the victim, of my story, and I have learned the work and power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a steep climb up a mountain.

The blistering hills and rocks before you,

The pain, still hot, like coals in a fountain.

Guilt rises as the sky dances blue.

The sunlight surrounds you, like guilt inside.

The rocks are as sharp as the words they said.

One slip, and a rock cuts deep in your thigh,

Loud cries as the pain surfaces, red.

Onward you press, still hurting inside, now out.

Closer you draw, guilt still pressed beside you.

Higher and higher, pain lingers like doubt.

A rush comes when the top is in view.

A beautiful sight makes the pain melt away.

Forgiveness makes a path, hope guides the way.

Champion of the Broken

by

Austin C. Parker

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Ridgeland

I am a man of two births, the day I entered this world and the day my mother left it. In 2001, my mother and I were in a devastating head on collision. My body was ejected into the cold, wet night. Flying through the air, I landed in a nearby ditch shoulder first. I laid in the mud and the grass bloodied and broken. My head cracked open and my arm split in two. I was only four years old. My mother, on the other hand, was miraculously spared from serious injury. She maybe had a few minor cuts and bruises, however it appeared that she would survive. At the hospital, my doctors were entrenched in a heated debate. Should they save my arm or my head. The latter prevailed and so my life was saved. My Mother was not so fortunate. I'm was told that the whole ordeal was just too much for her heart to handle. On October 13th, 2001, a mother had died, and a cripple was born. For many years I loathed the sound of cripple. To me the word meant that I was different from the entire world around me. Until the day I met Ricky Morrigan. His job was to teach me how to become a genuine scuba diver. Though he taught me so much more. Ricky Morrigan would teach me how to be a wiser cripple, a better man, and most importantly, a champion of the broken.

When the bullying began, I answered its call with action. For years I had a scar on my left ring finger, a gift from the braces of a mouthy classmate. My roguish behavior did succeed in ridding the world of bullies. However, I was left with very few friends. I had become a ghoulish recluse. It wasn't even the jokes that my foes hurled that was the hurtful part. It was the laughter and applaud they received. They all acted as if it wasn't the same five jokes used over and over. That's when it hit me. I knew all the jokes, and it wasn't fair that the bullies were the ones who got to sing them. No, I would take ownership of my scars. I began to say the most self-deprecating jokes I could think of. I made it so that when someone said a jest about a cripple they would not be heralded as comedic pioneers, but rather as joke thieves. My popularity had increased tenfold. But my woes would refuse to be so easily defeated. Over time I began to hear the world laughing at me yet again. The only peace I had was in the solitude of water. For hours I would swim and think of grand adventures where I was the hero that everyone loved. I'll never forget the first time I saw a scuba diver. He was practicing his breathing at my local pool. I watched from afar as he transformed from human to god. He moved through the dark purple water like an otherworldly artist. I spent the next year or so picturing myself as that diver. I promised that one day I would become a diver and see their world for myself. That's how I would meet Ricky Morrigan.

Believing in my dream, my father delivered me to The Panama City Dive Center. A rugged man named Michael Lawson would serve as my scuba instructor. However, he told me that I'd be spending more time with one of the lower ranked dive masters. When I first met Ricky, I didn't know he was a cripple like me. He was a well-built man with two equally sized arms. Though in reality, he was like me. He had been broken when his military Humvee ran over a Russian land mine. Excitement isn't the right word to describe how I felt when I discovered that he too had lost his arm. For a long while we compared our scars, in the back of the dimly lit building.

“So, how much can you do?” inquired Ricky.

“Not very much,” I explained, “I can shrug my shoulder and flip somebody the bird, but that's about it.”

“Ha, well what else would you want to do?” Ricky said. “Besides you got me beat. My arm doesn't do anything apart from dust collecting.”

For the first time in my life I was talking to someone who genuinely understood my misfortunes. I could've stayed in that moment telling war stories forever.

“Ricky, do you really think I can become a diver?” I asked with faintest breath.

“Let me teach you something,” Ricky said. “In this life there will always be people who say that you can’t, and you won’t do something. You must believe me when I say what they really mean is you can’t, and you won’t do something the same way that they do it. You need to account for everything you can and can’t do physically. Then you look at what it takes to solve your problem at hand. All you have to do now is add the two together. That is the cripple’s equation.”

The next few days vanished in minutes. For the first time in twelve years I felt like I wasn’t an outsider. I had lived so much of my life alone and now I had a brother bound by desolation.

“Can I ask you something?” I pried.

“Anything,” Ricky replied.

“How do you deal with depression?” I asked.

Ricky took a long solemn breath. He then began to speak as he stared into the ground.

“No matter what you do in life everybody you meet will always think of you as a cripple,” Ricky said now looking at me. “The sooner you accept what you are, the better off you’ll be. You can’t hate yourself for not being normal because you can’t change what you are.”

“But how am I supposed to do anything when I don’t have anybody like me to teach me? I need help. I need someone... like you,” I said, now fighting back the stone in my throat.

“You don’t need anybody, Austin,” Ricky answered. “You have to take care of yourself. Even when the whole world is crashing down around you. You are the only person you can count on. Life will be hard for you, I promise. Everyone talks about how they want to be a hero, but heroes don’t live the easy life. Make an ally out of yourself and you’ll want for no one. That’s why I’m can’t go with you on your first dive. I won’t always be there to pick up the slack. Have faith in your own will and you’ll make it through anything.”

The boat ride was cold and ominous. The sky was grey with splinters of black. The dark blue water crashed topside. I was somewhere a thousand miles away when the captain told me it was time. I stood at the edge of the stern. When I looked down I saw only an ultimatum. I could jump and become the man I always wanted to be, or I could sit down and be a cripple. The jump seemed to last a lifetime. I saw the sky fade as I sunk into my new world. It was beautiful. I was surrounded by life. Shades of magenta and gold whirled by my feet. Each creature I saw was different from its neighbor. Though I could not recall a more harmonious place. I took a long sigh as I noted a promise well kept. Then I saw the shark. It was a young reef shark from the Caribbean. The beast was laced with scars. The bait fish could easily evade the shark, as the predator was missing part of its tail fin. It most likely had the misfortune of meeting its cousin, the Tiger Shark. The larger and more powerful tigers were known for hunting the less intimidating reef sharks. This reef shark must have put up enough of a fight to be rewarded with salvation. Though now it faces starvation. Alone and without help, the shark will surely perish. Perhaps it will be lucky and have another tiger run in before the hunger took him. The result will be the same. The reef shark will die alone, and another cripple will return to the sand.

I returned to the ship with heavy heart. Ricky was right. I believe now that I am the master of my fate. I will never allow myself to fall victim to my physical limitations. However, Ricky was wrong about how you can’t count on others in your time of need. I’ll make a new promise. I will seek out those who are like me and I will help them to the best of my abilities. They will be my brothers and sisters. Never will they ever say that they have no one in this life. None shall share the destiny of the reef shark. I will be their spine when they cannot stand. I will be their champion. A champion of broken things. I never saw Ricky Morigan after that day, but I often think of him. I dream that he is happy and that every day is better than his last. But I know that isn’t so. For I know far too well how the mind of a cripple works.

Remembrance

by

Samantha Jordan Banks

Second Place Creative Nonfiction, Ridgeland
Second Place Creative Nonfiction, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

When your eyes are closed, you can see things you would have thought were gone forever, so close your eyes and let it sweep you away. Let the darkness encapsulate you until you see him standing there, swaying and sipping from a bottle, hands wrapping around the bottle the way a snake wraps around its victim, no hesitation and no remorse. His eyes are filled with emotions that tell a story of pain and love that you can even hear when he speaks. Love, pain, family; he embodied what they stood for.

There was a time when I was little and my uncle was staying with us when a storm came through and lightning struck from the sky and thunder boomed right behind, but I never let it scare me. I sat in the center of the couch and listened to the rain as it beat the tin roof and loudly turned into hail. Uncle stood in the corner sipping on his drink, until finally, he came and sat beside me. We never spoke, but instead let the silence speak for us; I knew in that moment he would be my protector and that he was, but as I aged I started to see less and less of my protector, until eventually he was gone.

What somebody might not understand is that my uncle was not born to have an average life, but he was born for leaving. He was a nomad in his own way, never settling down or letting himself enjoy the little moments. His home was not your typical home. There were no pictures hanging on walls to hold memories or rooms to sit and laugh in. My uncle's home was located in Tent City, right off the streets of Nashville; he had neighbours, a phone, and a job the same as anybody else, but because he was 'homeless', he became worthless to society.

My uncle, a man with little to no possessions, would give the clothes he had to a stranger if they needed them more. He was not a bum or a thief, but instead a caring man who only wanted to bring happiness to those around him. However, like all humans, he was flawed. He let alcohol persuade his decisions and drive the stake further between us until his final moments. This was the life he chose to live and he suffered the consequences of it in the end.

'I love you' would be the last words he would ever speak as the car sped towards him.

Walking into the hospital room was a bittersweet moment. As I looked at my mother we shared a look of understanding and we knew. We knew he was gone. Lying in that bed was the empty shell of the man we once knew. His chest would rise and fall at a steady pace tricking one into thinking he was breathing on his own and that he was okay, but he wasn't. His heart was beating because a machine allowed it to, his lungs filled with oxygen because a machine allowed them to, but once the machines were gone his shell soon would be too. It was only a week later when the decision was made to discontinue life support, a decision I supported. My uncle and I were the same in many ways so I knew this is what he would have wanted. Freedom.

One year, one month, and three days later, my uncle came back in spirit. As I was coming home from work one night a car ran me off the road and I had a wreck that should have been fatal. The paramedics, police officers, and my parents all said the same thing- there was no explanation for me surviving with the small amount of injuries I had and that I should not have walked away alive. My uncle went from being my earthly protector to my guardian angel and that night he took control of the wheel.

At the end of the day most people judge without knowing the story behind it all and that is where humanity is failing. On the surface one would think uncle is a lowly bum trying to con people out of their money, but what they failed to see was the care he hid behind his bottle and appearance. He had a heart of

gold and would let it shatter to see his family happy. Assegid Habtewold once said, "The starting place for your greatness is desire. The desire to succeed, to serve others, to keep on going no matter what." So now whenever it storms, I pretend that the thunder is my uncle dancing with the angels.

My Grandpa's Saddle

by

Abigail Proctor

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Goodman

Many years ago, my grandfather worked in a shop creating and repairing saddles. He was a popular man, and people from all around Mississippi would come around to buy, repair and "upgrade" their saddles by his skilled hands. Many of the saddles he made have been passed down to the horse loving children and grandchildren in the family like my cousins and me, and we have truly cherished the craftsmanship.

I began riding horses when I was barely able to walk. During my younger years, I was led around the driveway on the huge Quarter horses we owned. When I turned eight I got my first pony, who was a little white Welsh Mountain, as a birthday present. My uncle Billy also gave me a birthday present that year which was an old, worn down leather saddle with intricate designs and golden plated rings for the leather bags. I didn't think much of the saddle's origin then, but I used it every day, wearing it down until the leather creaked loudly and the stirrups conformed to my feet alone. I rode it through unprofessional rodeos, weekend trail rides, and just about every day after school. Through cold and hot weather, the durable leather needed no more attention or repair than an occasional saddle soap lathered onto its form.

Six years later, I had outgrown my pony and moved up to a brown and white Quarter horse and Arabian mix named Charlie Brown. I didn't get a new saddle along with my new mount, however, because I was stubborn in letting go of the memories I had ridden out into that old leather. It wasn't until this age, though, that I discovered the saddle was created by my own grandfather in his saddle shop. Being told that, I remembered when he was alive so long ago. He had always been a gentle, laid back man who never failed to tell me when he'd gotten a new set of baby chicks. That always made me smile, so he'd take me to the back and show me the small birds that followed their mother around carefully. He often showed me pictures of back when he rode horses with my grandma Pat and his coon hunting buddies. As a typical Mississippi girl obsessed with anything about horses, it had me feeling excited every time my mom or dad announced we were heading to my grandparent's place. Now knowing that the saddle I had ridden for so many years had been crafted by the hands of that man, I cherished it even more.

I rode the black leather through two more horses as I grew up. That's a long time for ancient leather to hold out, proving more about my grandfather's skill in creating a saddle to last through generations. But as time passed, I grew out of the phase of riding horses obsessively. I used the saddle less and less, letting it collect dust on the rack in the shed. It was a year ago when I used it one last time on my current Quarter Horse, Aslan. I remember the day well because I knew that it was finally time to put Old Reliable away for good. After ten years of use from me, and countless years before that of my grandfather and older cousins, it had only received a single tear on its fender from the pressure of my feet while barrel racing. The leather creaked so loudly that I couldn't hear the clop of my horse's metal shoes on asphalt. When I returned from the long, hot ride, I placed it gently on the rack, where it has been resting ever since.

Insatiable Want

by

Chris Kalil

Second Place Creative Nonfiction, Goodman

Shelia Bender once said, “We write because something inside says we must and we can no longer ignore that voice.” I was an incredibly quiet child; always far away in my own head. And while I didn’t speak much, I was always watching and always listening. I want to do what I have always wanted to do. I want to write. Writing is something that I have always done. I have the pile of cheap compositions books to prove it. But until recently, I didn’t really realize how much I wanted to do it for a living.

Sights and sounds and smells float around in my head; always a moment’s grasp away. I remember the water trapped in our trampoline net after playing with the water hose, the smell of my grandmother’s cigarettes, the joy and exhaustion after a soccer game, the itchiness of new Sunday clothes, and the comforting sound of my native accent after a long time away from home. Those memories are so vivid to me that I feel like I can touch them. I want to write fiction and poetry and everything in between. I have waited so long to speak my mind. And now that I realized what my outlet is, I don’t want to do anything else.

I’m going to work hard in college to focus and improve my writing. I want to learn everything there is about writing; the intricacies and the contrary and the absolutely dull. I don’t care about being called a writer or being seen as a writer. I have to write. I must write. For so long, I had no real passion or ambition. Writing is my passion.

I constantly think about writing. As I walk to class, I wonder how I can write about the things and the people that I see. All those conversations and connections and sights and sounds enthrall me. I want to write them just like they are. I want to change them. I want to elevate them and make them more subdued. I want to be a journalist and a starving novelist and a poet. I want to be dropped off in some third world country and be left to my own devices. I want to live in a one room cabin in Alaska. I want to write.

Many state making a steady living as a writer is incredibly difficult. But that statement only makes me want to do it more. I want to sink my teeth in deep. I want to fail and succeed and fail again. I want to be excellent.

I have no delusions of grandeur. I know I’m just some cold sweating college kid with dreams, but I want to do this. This is the only thing that I’m remotely good at. I cannot survive in a cubicle. I hate the competitiveness of today’s job market, and I don’t have a competitive bone in my body. So I go to college so that I can gain the writing skills that I need. But, I don’t want to be a scholar and write about nonsense things that only other scholars will ever read. I want to write. Please, let me write.

Short Stories

The White Trash Superstar

by

Lake Dubois

First Place Short Story, Grenada

Coach Ben Peters did not really know what to think when he was crossing the Alabama state line from southern Georgia, 15 miles from his destination of Millville, Alabama. Coach Peters had never done much recruiting in the state, much less a small town like Millville that was home to about 1,500 people. His University of Florida basketball program was used to pulling kids from states that traditionally boasted great athletes, states like New York and California, but he had never imagined driving down to southern Alabama in pursuit of an athlete. That was until the coaching staff came across a trending YouTube video titled, “The White Trash Superstar.”

Coach Peters crossed the Walls County line. A couple of miles later he saw the 6x6 sign with peeling white paint that read, *Welcome to Millville*. The speed limit dropped to 25 mph after he passed the cotton gin and entered into the town square where a group of men sat at the picnic tables by the county courthouse located directly in the middle of the square. The square was shaped by the buildings surrounding it, but only four or five of the buildings seemed to be home to actual businesses. Coach Peters and his recruiting coordinator, Coach Werner, had been in small towns to see kids before, but something about this town felt different.

They figured out quickly that Millville was not exactly a tourist attraction, and as they traveled to the outskirts of the town, they wondered, “How did this town breed a kid that is possibly the best basketball player in the country?”

Sammy Kline was not only the talk of the town—he was an internet sensation. The world of college basketball recruiting had never seen anything like him. The six feet three inches point guard had caught the nation by storm. From the time he was six years old, he had been known in Walls county as the best athlete around, but the rest of the nation quickly caught on when they began to see his sophomore year highlight tape. The video at the time of Coach Peters’ visit had now had over 6 million views on YouTube and the junior year highlight tape was approaching 8 million.

He was the first celebrity the town had ever even come close to having. Millville moved at a pace that could be compared only to Mayberry from the *Andy Griffith Show*. In fact, people there for over a year did not know they had a true superstar in their town until recognizable coaches from around the country began to pop up at Millville High basketball games. The Klines and their son Sammy were seen as just another family trying to get by paycheck-to-paycheck. They lived in a house that had been in their family for four generations. Paul, Sammy’s father, worked on a small farm just a few miles from their home, and Nancy, his mother, worked at the hospital in Newton, around 20 miles from the family home. That was as far as their family had traveled outside of Millville.

Sammy Kline was truly a sight to see if you’re a sports fan of any level. The tall and somewhat lanky kid with shortly shaved brown hair was a dominant figure on the court. He was in his senior year and beginning his 5th year as a starter on the MHS basketball team. He had led his team to four straight district championships and had singlehandedly turned his ragtag bunch of country boys into a well-oiled machine that mowed over every team they came across in the AA division, the second lowest classification out of a six-level system. Almost every person in the town who had a television had tuned in for the *Sports Center* episode a few months earlier that featured a story on the mystery of Sammy Kline and how such a well-developed athlete could come from such an unlikely source.

People outside of Millville saw Sammy as a freak accident. Sammy’s family had a lack of exceptional athletes and Millville was not exactly a hotbed of athletic activity. Sammy’s father had played basketball for

Millville when he wasn't working on his father's farm, but his mother had never played sports, period. Sammy never had exposure to a high level of basketball, yet he had turned into one of the most sought after recruits in the nation. The only "training" he received as a child was playing one-on-one with his older brother Jaden who gave him a challenge, until Sammy was about eleven. By then, not even the much older brother could stop Sammy on his way to the basket.

As Coach Peters and Coach Werner passed the Millville post office, the GPS told them that the gymnasium was coming up on the right in half a mile. They passed the elementary school and then saw the wide metal building that had "Millville High School" in small red letters on the broad side facing the road with a dark red cheerleading poster under it reading, "Hey Henderson High, Tell Your Girlfriends You'll Be Free Next Weekend." Five banner posters of the senior players along with pictures of them in uniform stood high on the building by the entrance. Sammy Kline's handsome and arrogant face, sitting right in the middle, drew their eyes with its trademark smirk. Coach Werner drove around the old parking lot and finally found a muddy spot to park in the grass behind the lot.

"Well, we made it," Coach Peters said relieved. Both of the coaches were approaching 60 and the long road trips were taking a slight toll on them, but oddly enough they were not exhausted right now, but were instead eager to have a face-to-face conversation with the White Trash Superstar himself. Coach Peters took his blue Florida Gators hat off, ran his fingers through his short black hair, and tucked in his white Nike dress shirt with the Gators mascot logo over the left side of his chest. He pulled two bulky, jewel encrusted rings, each reading "NCAA National Champions" out of the side pocket of the door. He slipped them on his right hand and began his descent to the gymnasium, discussing with Coach Werner about Kline and other matters pertaining to the rumors they had heard about him, rehashing one more time the stories they had talked about for most of the trip.

Coach Peters and Coach Werner opened the glass door to the concession area before the gymnasium and immediately saw stares from the small town fans who were still not used to seeing high profile coaches from televised basketball games in their outdated gymnasium. Peters quickly tried to make his way across the crowd to the wooden bleachers on the home side before he was rushed by a group of JV players wanting his autograph and a picture with him before he walked through the doors to the gym. He noticed other young people videoing him but was focused on only one thing, seeing Sammy Kline.

Peters and Werner worked their way to the top of the visiting teams' bleachers, deliberately ignoring the stares and whispers of fans, before finally taking their seats in time to see the Millville Raiders and the Henderson Cougars lined up for tip off. The man himself—Sammy Kline—stood face to face with a 6' 7" star center, John Hailey, from Henderson at mid-court, awaiting the head official who was walking towards them to signal the start of the game. The crowd cheered. They knew that, although the center stood almost five inches taller, Sammy could still beat him in the air for the tip off. The official asked the two boys at midcourt if they were ready. Both signaled yes and began to prepare to jump for the ball. The official blew the whistle and threw the ball high in the air to begin the tip off.

John Hailey bent far down like he was about to attempt to jump through the ceiling and Sammy Kline lazily bent his knees to about a 150 degree angle as the ball approached the maximum height. The ball hit its peak and the boys simultaneously rose high in the air with their outstretched hands reaching for the ball. Coach Peters' blue eyes watched as wiry-built Sammy reached a couple of inches above the much taller center and tipped the ball behind him to his teammate. The crowd roared as they knew that Sammy Kline had just almost effortlessly beat out Henderson's best player to give the Raiders the first possession of the South Half championship, the game that would decide who advanced to the state championship in Mobile. Peters and Werner looked at each other with bulging eyes as if to give each other confirmation that yes, they had really just seen that, it had really just happened.

The coaches watched from the top row silently, taking notes of every detail of Sammy's game in what for most players would be a high pressure game, but it seemed like to them that Sammy did not appear to be affected by the circumstances the game held. He looked as if he was just playing a pick-up game after school.

The coaches observed closely as Sammy relentlessly but smoothly breezed past slower defenders on his way to the basket and threw up wild, off balance and highly contested jump shots from the three-point line that seemed to just keep dropping dead center between the hoop. The shots while they were in mid-air made the basketball purists cringe. They believed that Sammy's reckless style of play was opposite of how basketball should be played. One writer from a national high school recruiting website wrote that when he sat down with the town's elders at the local bar, there was grumbling mixed in with praise. He quoted one elderly man, Eugene Kondike, as saying, "It should be a team game. Sammy Kline is not a leader, only a ball-hogging thug who won't pass the ball when he knows he shouldn't shoot. He needs to let the other players on the court do more than just help him get to the basket!" However, noted the writer, these same fans were roaring their pleasure from the stands after each basket when he would maneuver his way to almost every possession. They would even go nuts when he would have the defense focused on him enough to dump off the ball to his teammate, classmate, and best friend, Allen Richards, who had been deemed the White Trash Sidekick for his assistance to Sammy in games, often fighting for rebounds after Sammy's missed shots, just to throw the ball back to Sammy and give him another chance to cultivate a score.

The Florida coaches took their final notes as the clock approached the final minute of the fourth quarter and made their way down the bleachers and down the hallway in the back of the gymnasium to the office of the Millville's head basketball coach. As they moved from the gymnasium, they listened to the home crowd cheer as the clock ran off the final seconds of a 20 point blowout victory for the Millville High Raiders. Sammy Kline finished with a triple double, 28 points, 11 rebounds, and 12 assists.

Coach Peters and Coach Werner walked silently back to their cars from the back of the gym, almost in disbelief at what they had seen, before they were rushed by a mob of Millville and Henderson fans wanting more pictures and autographs before they departed from the school. When they finally reached the car, they prepared for the next stop on their venture to Millville. The Kline Residence.

Peters was no stranger to tough living situations. He himself was the son of a widowed florist in New York City. His mother was never able to leave the city, due to the lack of business she would receive outside of it, but the lack of success she had in the city caused the family to move around to different apartments in Brooklyn and even landed them in a housing project for a few years when people were just not buying flowers during the recession in the 70's. Peters was always able to relate to the players he visited who never had many privileges and knew what it was like to go hungry at night from time to time. So when he drove up to the dirt driveway of the Kline's and saw the single wide trailer that looked like it was almost not sustainable for human life, Peter's knew that he had another speech to give to another player about promising him a better life.

Peters and Werner each stepped out of the car and felt the wood creak under their shoes when they walked up the steps to the porch of the home and took a wide step over the large hole on the porch landing leading up to the door. With Werner following closely behind him, Peters took a deep breath. This would be their first time to meet the man himself face to face. Werner reminded himself that the Kline family would likely be intimidated and that both sides being nervous would lead to some uneasy conversations, so he quickly picked himself up, took another deep breath, and lifted his hand to knock on the door with the chipped blue paint.

The family must have been waiting by the door because as soon as his hand sounded a shallow "knock-knock," the door swung open widely to reveal the welcoming face of Mrs. Nancy Kline, a short, slightly overweight woman, who was smiling ear-to-ear at the sight of the famous Coach Peters. He was just as she had imagined him to be.

Peters smiled and introduced himself and his colleague, Stan Werner, as a matter of politeness. It was evident that the family knew who the men were. Mrs. Kline quickly invited them in, and Mr. Kline came into view as he stepped out of the hallway located to the left near the door and introduced himself.

As the coaches stepped onto the brown, stained wood floor, they were quickly swarmed by the family's two dogs that had started barking from the time the car doors had been slammed before they

approached the trailer. The Kline's youngest daughter quickly came running in from the hallway, grabbed the two full-grown labs by their collars, and dragged them to the back door that was located by the kitchen.

Red-faced from embarrassment, Mrs. Kline quickly apologized and Mr. Kline apologized as well. The coaches secretly hated smelly dogs, and these two seemed to run the house judging by the look of the trailer's interior. The coaches resisted glancing at each other when Mr. Kline asked them to take a seat on the brown couch that was accented with a pillow desperately trying to cover up the gaping hole on the left side, exposing the yellow cushion underneath. The men sat down and John right away asked them their opinion of the town, which led to some quick laughs about the differences between it and Gainesville.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Mrs. Kline was calling frantically on her cell phone to anybody that might know the whereabouts of her son. She had told him to head home immediately after the game to meet with the coaches, but Sammy was nowhere to be found. She got the number of Blake Cartwright, Sammy's classmate, but he told her that he had not seen Sammy since the game. She called three other kids from the school. No one had seen Sammy or knew where he was. Coach Peters and Coach Werner sat in the living room and patiently waited for him, but after twenty minutes or so, they slowly started to wonder where the White Trash Superstar himself might be.

Allen Richards, Trevor Sykes, and Sammy Kline unloaded from Trevor's Silverado, and Sammy beelined for the cooler in the back and set it down in the sandy shore of the Cherokee River. Sammy reached in the cooler, grabbed a beer for himself, and threw another one to Trevor. He didn't offer one to Allen, knowing he would not accept anyway. Allen, who was recognized by the boys, their parents, and most everyone else in town as the responsible one of their group, was the usual designated driver on nights the boys went to parties. With his class valedictorian status, academic excellence, and well above average intelligence, everyone in town knew he would depart from Millville soon after graduation and more than likely never come back, except for family occasions, but Allen still had not figured out his own potential and hung out around guys in town who were not going to live the same life as him in the future.

The boys walked over to the group of trucks gathered around the bonfire that was keeping the party warm on that cold Alabama night.

"Sammy!" A couple of boys exclaimed as they saw Sammy walk near the fire. They shook his hand as he came closer.

"Dude, I saw Coach Peters was at the game! Did you get to talk to him after?" Reed Robertson said after shaking his hand. Several teenagers standing around the fire quickly quieted down when they heard the question to hear Sammy's answer.

"Nah, man, I was supposed to go see him after the game at my house, but I don't think I even want to go to Gainesville," Sammy said nonchalantly to answer Reed's question.

The boys sat there silently after he answered and blankly stared at him. Sammy looked around confused at the people near the fire giving him stares and said with a smirk, "What?"

Reed spoke up again and said, "You won't at least go talk to him? He won a national championship a couple of years ago, right?" and looked at Sammy for confirmation. "Hell, you could just go talk to him," he said almost questionably.

"Look, man, I already know what he's going to say. The same thing that Duke said to me, the same thing that North Carolina said to me, and the same thing that Kansas said to me. They all are promising the same thing, and I ain't having none of it!" Sammy said heatedly.

The boys sat around the fire for about 30 seconds after Sammy's outburst, not sure what to say or whether or not they should speak at all. Sammy overcome by the awkwardness was chugging away at his beer until he eventually felt the bottle become empty. He threw the bottle into the fire and disgruntledly walked away from the crowd and back to the truck to fetch another one.

Allen followed Sammy and saw how angry he was. He and Sammy had been friends all of their lives, and they understood and trusted each other. But they could not have been more different. Allen was the gentler and less arrogant counterpart of Sammy.

Allen walked up behind Sammy as he dug around in the cooler that was sitting in the back of the pickup truck.

“Hey, man, you all right?”

“Yeah, I am just really tired of people telling me what I need to do and what I don’t need to do. It’s my life, and I know what’s best for me! Those boys can suggest to me all they want, but I know what them coaches really want. Just another kid who can deliver them just another ring. I ain’t about to be Coach Peters next workhorse that he rides to the National Championship!”

“Sammy, I’m only telling you this because you’re my friend, but it really isn’t all about that. Even if Peters wants to take advantage of you, it’s like *whatever* because Florida can still be your ticket to the NBA! Yeah, I know they say you need a lot of improvement to be drafted, but, man, that doesn’t mean you can’t do it!” Allen said at Sammy and used the encouraging tone that usually brought him around.

“Awe, hell, I guess you’re just like Reed, huh? Thinkin’ you know everything about what’s going on in my life.” Sammy bowed head and stared straight at the ground as he sat on the tailgate.

Allen spoke up again quickly. “No ,dude, it’s not even like that. Sammy, none of these other folks around here will tell you this, so I guess I’ll have to.” Allen took a deep breath, questioned himself for a split second, and finally let the words fall from his tongue, “Sammy, you’re a real dumb ass.”

Sammy’s head quickly lifted up and his eyes pointed straight at Allen with a bewildered look. “Say what? I’m the dumb ass? Man, just because you got that full scholarship to med school at Alabama State don’t mean you can go around insulting people!” Sammy was screaming and Allen now and looked ready to fight.

“Sammy, you’re so damn dumb that you don’t even see what you have in front of you! Look around, Sammy! Is this really want your life to revolve around? Bonfires, drinking beer, and smoking weed? There is a chance for you to get out of Millville sitting on your couch for for the rest of your life, and yet here you are.” Allen said, looking up at Sammy but not backing down from him. “Now, I been sitting here ignoring your mom’s phone calls for about 10 minutes, but I can’t keep stooping to your level and helping you ruin your life! What do you think other coaches are going to think when they hear that Peters has done drove all this way just for you not to even show up?”

Allen paused pointed towards the fire, still crowded with beer drinking boys, took a deep breath, and lowered his tone. “You got a chance that all of them boys sitting around that fire would kill to have, and here you are wasting it, Sam.”

Sammy remained silent, giving Allen a chance to speak more if he had anything else to say, something he would not do for anyone else.

“Allen, I know you think you know what’s best for me, and I appreciate you just trying to help. I really do. But I just got a lot going on back here that I don’t know if I can leave behind. Plus, you know how bad my ankle is already. If I go there and even tweak it a little, the doctor said I’ll be done.” Sammy bowed his head. His voice was almost too low to hear., “And I’m just a farm boy man. Yeah, they might have me ranked up there with the best in the country, but I’ve been to the camps where I ain’t just playing boys like you and Trevor. I’m telling you that I can’t keep up with those guys.”

Allen sat there for a few seconds before saying anything, knowing whatever he said could influence Sammy tremendously.

“We can’t live our whole lives in fear, Sammy.” Allen said in a gentle tone. “I mean, in a different way, I can relate. I might be the valedictorian or whatever and ‘Mr. All A’s’ in Millville, but the thing is, I’m going to be competing with some of the smartest kids in the country for a spot in graduate school, and I don’t know if I can do it. One thing I’ve figured out though is as good hearted as some of these folks in this town are, they are just going to hold you back further the longer you stay. Millville has a way of just sucking you in to the point where it gets harder and harder to leave. But that’s why we gotta take this opportunity now, Sammy! If not, I’ll be just another man at the bank like my dad, and you’ll be just another farmer.

Especially in your case, we got the chance to be somebody! You only need one good year at Florida or where ever you go to get to the big time!”

Sammy still stared at the ground, contemplating everything that Allen had just told him. He pictured himself flying high in the air in a Laker’s jersey with the number twenty-two and the name, Kline, resting on his back as he ascended upwards with the ball in hand as he dunked it through the basket. However, reality quickly struck him back down with a spear of doubt and fear, creating a swarm of different thoughts in his mind before he mustered up some words to Allen.

“What am I gonna do, man? Dad can’t tend that farm by himself, and he sure can’t afford to bring in some help if I leave.” Sammy admitted with watery eyes. Allen had never seen Sammy cry after ten years of friendship, but he could tell by his tone that he was about to. “I ain’t told nobody because I don’t want folks around town talking, but we’re about to lose the house already man. We can’t afford another bad year. With me gone. . .” His voice trailed off. The two boys sat there. Neither speaking for a few minutes. “Well, I can’t imagine what’s going to happen next. That’s all,” Sammy finally said.

Allen sat right beside Sammy and put his arm around him. He felt Sam’s tall lanky body shake while he let lose some tears that he had waited many days to shed.

“Sam, this is going to sound real selfish, but you have to do what is best for you. I don’t know if you realize this, but nobody is going to do you any favors after this year. Right now everybody wants to help you by giving you these scholarships and giving you a chance to get out of Millville, but I can tell you now that after you ain’t an athlete no more, nobody is gone care about how many points you scored or how many championships you won. We only get so many chances in this life to BE SOMEBODY, Sammy. Don’t waste it. You see these people sitting around here? They aren’t like us. They are gonna go to work for some ignorant asshole as soon as we graduate and they are gonna rot in this town until they become ignorant assholes themselves. If we stay here, we are only contributing to the cycle of this town that just lets people waste their lives away sitting in diners and watching T.V. We can break the cycle, and not only us, but for everyone who comes after us. Imagine it, Sammy. Millville, Alabama, Home of Sammy Kline!”

Sammy wiped his tears and for the first time realized that someone was being honest with him. He sat on the tailgate and looked at his beer for a few moments, before throwing the half-empty bottle halfway across the river. Allen watched with a smile as soon as the bottle left Sammy’s hand before eventually making a splash into the dimly lit water.

Sammy ran over to the truck again and slammed the tailgate closed. He looked at Allen and questioned him. “Well, what are you waiting for?” Sammy said with a smirk.

“What are you talking about?”

“Go get Trevor and tell him to get in the truck. I got to get home, so I can go be somebody, remember?”

“Hell, yeah! And you are somebody, my friend. You are Sammy Kline! The man himself! The White Trash Superstar!”

Sidewalk

by

Madison Brewer

Second Place Short Story, Grenada

Abbey stared at the dead-end sidewalk while Sadie, her chocolate lab, pulled and yanked at her leash, longing for the road ahead. The once bubbly, smiling Abbey was frozen in terror. The memories she had suppressed for years slowly started forming knots in her stomach. She choked back tears from embarrassment and fear and whistled for Sadie to turn back around.

“Come on, girl, not today. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

Sadie looked at her with her big blue eyes of understanding and licked Abbey’s hand. Abbey smiled and wiped away a tear on the sleeve of her hoodie while patting Sadie on her head with her free hand. The two walked beside each other slowly, never straying from the sidewalk, back to the small, red brick house on the corner of Bailey Avenue and Lenard Street. Abbey grabbed her keys from her jean pocket and anxiously jingled them, searching for her house key. She jammed the key into the lock and turned the knob. The door inched open with a slow squeak, allowing just enough space for Abbey and Sadie to slip inside to safety.

Once inside, Abbey carefully locked the door—the doorknob, the deadbolt, the sliding lock, and the chain lock. After double-checking each one, Abbey took off her shoes and coat and sank down into the couch. Sadie jumped onto the couch and curled up beside Abbey.

“I’m sorry I disappointed you,” Abbey said as she dissolved into tears, “I really thought today would be the day.”

Sadie lay her big, furry head in Abbey’s lap as if to say that it was okay. Abbey grabbed the pill bottle on the side table next to the couch and twisted off the cap.

“Cheers.” she said in a small voice as she choked back the tears. She dry-swallowed the pill and felt it move down her throat, past her guilt, shame, and remorse, until finally hitting her stomach. She grabbed the remote and flipped on television as she succumbed to the forced relaxation the doctor had prescribed.

After watching two re-runs of “America’s Next Top Model,” Abbey got up from the couch and slowly shuffled down the hallway to her bedroom. Sadie trotted closely behind her. Abbey slipped out of her jeans and hoodie and sprawled out in the bed. Sadie circled her massive dog bed twice before cuddling up with her blanket and settling herself. Abbey lay there, numb from the medicine, and thought. *Why did I not just step off the sidewalk and onto the road? It’s not like a car was coming. It’s not suicide. It’s just walking. Why can I not just grow a pair and walk?* Her thoughts consumed her like a wildfire devouring a forest. Her thoughts eventually grew tired of bombarding her with questions and decided to remain quiet. When her thoughts went silent, Abbey prayed.

“Dear God, *please* let tomorrow be better. Amen.”

After she prayed, she rolled over and disappeared into a world where safety was found not in objects like cold, hard cement, but inside her soul. She was fearless. She trusted others and never became a victim to a cruel, unsatisfied world. She was real.

Sadie dragged her cold, playful tongue across Abbey’s cheek.

“I’m up, girlie, I’m up.”

Sadie wagged her tail with delight as she watched Abbey crawl out of bed and throw on some sweat pants and a t-shirt. Abbey grabbed her coat and shoes, along with Sadie’s leash.

“C’mon, girl, today’s the day. I can feel it.”

Sadie wagged her tail and wiggled while Abbey attached her leash to her collar. Abbey walked to the door and started to rip open layer after layer of protection from the outside world with each twist of a lock. Just before reaching the last lock, there was a knock at the door. Sadie’s ears went up to attention and she

narrowed her eyes as if she could see through the door. Abbey's heart began to flutter as her face slowly inched towards the peephole in the door.

"Who..Who is it?"

"Um..hi. My name is Nason Weathers. I just moved into the tan brick house across the street."

Sadie kept her eyes narrowed and moved closer to the door. Abbey nervously unlatched the last lock and opened the door just wide enough to see Nason's emerald eyes and sandy blonde hair. He looked friendly and was rather well-dressed in a light blue button up shirt with khaki pants. Abbey realized how long she had been staring him down and finally spoke up.

"Well, welcome to the neighborhood, Mr. Weathers."

"Oh, please, Mr. Weathers is my father. Call me Nason."

He flashed a smile that was almost too perfect to be real, and Abbey smiled back, showing off the small, imperfect gap in her teeth.

"Why'd you move *here* of all places?"

"Well, my parents actually lived in that very house, and I wanted to see what this little town was all about. What about you? Have you been here all your life?"

"No, actually. I came here a few years ago. I had to escape the city." Abbey clenched her jaw tightly as if she had said too much.

"Well, hopefully this is the place to be."

"Hopefully."

Nason eyed Sadie's pink leash in Abbey's hand.

"What kind of dog is she?"

Sadie peeked around from behind Abbey and studied Nason with narrow eyes.

"Oh how beautiful! I love labs. I have a German Shepherd named Felix. He's my life. We should walk them together some time."

"Well, that sounds fun, but I don't walk Sadie a lot. Just to the end of the sidewalk."

"That's not nearly enough exercise for a dog her size. C'mon, it'll be fun. You can show me around the neighborhood and we won't have to be alone."

Abbey felt a cold sweat run down the back of her neck, as she looked at Nason's friendly smile. She wanted to say yes, but the fear started sinking in. Her hands started getting clammy, and her mouth got dry. She could feel the tension and anxiety building up in her being.

"I said no."

Abbey felt bad about being rude to him, but couldn't think of any other way to tell him that she couldn't be brave today.

Abbey turned to Sadie, who was wagging her tail, ready for her walk.

"I'm sorry girl, not today either." she said as she unhooked Sadie's leash from her collar and walked over towards the couch. She reached over and grabbed her pill bottle, dry-swallowing yet another disappointment. Sadie walked sadly, with her tail between her legs, over to Abbey. She licked Abbey's hand and jumped on the couch. Abbey rubbed Sadie's back as she closed her eyes and slipped into another world.

The knock at the door made Abbey jump from her sleep in a violent twist of arms and legs. Sadie barked a loud, fierce bark and narrowed her eyes at the door. Abbey inched her way to the door before looking at her watch on her wrist.

"Who would be knocking on my door at 7:45?"

She carefully unlatched all the locks and slowly turned the knob to reveal who had knocked.

"Oh, Nason, what are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for earlier. I was just trying to be a friendly neighbor, and I didn't mean to upset you or offend you or whatever I might have done. I'm sure that Sadie is a healthy dog, and she doesn't even have to meet Felix if she doesn't want to. I'm sorry I just moved here, and I just wanted a friend and you looked nice and—"

“Okay, stop talking.”

“Oh, sorry.” Nason said, sheepishly, “I’ll leave you alone.”

“No, I mean, don’t apologize. I shouldn’t have been rude earlier. I’m not normally like that, I’ve just had a long day.”

“Yeah, I understand. Can we start over?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. Would you like to come in for some tea?”

“I would, thank you.”

Abbey placed some tea on the stove and waited for the kettle to sing. She slowly poured steaming tea into two cups, and added sugar to both. She carefully walked the cups over to the counter, and sat them down, spilling a little in the process.

“Sorry, I’m such a klutz.”

“That’s perfectly fine! At least you made it to the table with tea actually in the cups, that’s more than I could do.”

The two laughed at that, and shared friendly smiles back to each other. Abbey and Nason talked about moving, about friendships, about movies, about lost love, about trust, and everything that had brought them there to that moment in time.

Abbey got up to put the cups in the kitchen and glanced down at her watch.

“Oh, my word! It’s after midnight!”

“Oh, wow,” Nason said, “I’m sure Felix has been crossing his legs together for a while now. I better get home. How about I come over tomorrow? I’m just so glad to have a friend here, ya know?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I know what you mean, it’s good to talk to someone. I just feel like I’ve known you forever, but we’ve only just met. I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Agreed.”

Abbey latched all of the locks, but this time, she didn’t double-check herself before trudging towards her bedroom.

Abbey and Nason spent day in and day out together. Abbey met Felix the dog, and he and Sadie exchanged happy tail wags and butt sniffs. The couple of friends had become closer than ever, and for once, Abbey wasn’t scared to open her door wide open, facing the world ahead of her that held her captive for so many years. She loved company, which she had never been able to do before, and Sadie had a friend too. Months had passed by before she even realized it.

“You know Abbey, we’ve been friends for like five months now, and I just wanna ask you something, but you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Nason said as he fumbled with Felix’s leash.

“Oh boy, what is it?” Abbey asked, curious, but also filled with an unnerving dread.

“We’ve walked our dogs together, never leaving the sidewalk, which I get, but how come you won’t leave it? I mean, do you have some irrational fear that a car will come out of nowhere and hit you or Sadie? I’m just curious. I can tell you get so anxious when we even get close to the end of the sidewalk, so I just wanted to know what the deal was. And it’s totally cool if you don’t wanna tell me, I mean we haven’t been friends forever, just a short while, and—”

“Nason, you’re babbling again,” Abbey interrupted. She stared at his honest, green eyes and then sunk her head down and looked at her shoes. Nason walked closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. Abbey flinched and then looked up at him, her eyes red from the tears trying to force themselves onto her cheeks.

“It’s okay Abbey, you don’t have to tell me. I shouldn’t have prodded, I’m really sorry. That’s not something friends are supposed to do. I hope you can forgive me, I really am sorry. Do you want me to go? Because I ca—”

“Shut up, Nason, I’ll tell you at the end of the sidewalk.”

Nason looked at her and nodded with understanding. The two walked slowly beside each other, never leaving the sidewalk, Sadie and Felix trotting closely behind them. When they reached the end of the

sidewalk, Abbey stopped, frozen in an all-too-familiar fear. Nason took Sadie's leash and held both of the dogs so that Abbey could talk.

Abbey cleared her throat and began telling her story, the story that only few people, never anyone close to her, had heard.

"Well. When I was little, my childhood was pretty normal, but I moved to Washington D.C. when I was five. My parents told me that it was because of my dad's new job, but the truth was that my parents had gotten involved with some pretty harsh drugs and they owed a lot of people a lot of money. They moved to get away from those people, but those people followed along with new people that they owed money to because they were still on drugs. It caused my family to be torn apart." She looked at Nason, throat dry, like she was trying to swallow a pill, and continued slowly, "The bad guys came, and they beat my mom and I, and touched us, raped us, everything. It was awful. It was the worst pain I had ever felt. I still feel it and see it in my dreams at night. It's the kind of thing that you'll never forget, no matter how much time goes by. My parents were eventually arrested, and I was taken by the state. I ran away from my group home three days after I was placed in it. I was walking, barefoot, dirty, hungry, and homeless, in the numbing cold of Washington, D.C. at night, and all I could think to myself was 'I've got to get out of here.' I followed the sidewalk, and it kept me safe. The sidewalk was my safety. For that whole night, until I got to my grandmother's house, all I focused on was the sidewalk in front of me. The sidewalk is my security. As long as there's sidewalk, I'm safe." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Tears streamed down her warm, red face. She opened her eyes and saw the blurry outlines of her shoes, then scanned her eyes up to meet Nason's. Nason stood still with his mouth slightly open, trying to process what all had happened to Abbey, a friend that he loved so dearly. Before he could stop himself, Nason wrapped Abbey in a hug. Abbey felt his embrace and melted into his body. She became a ragdoll in his arms. The burden she had carried for so long had been shared with another soul. She felt the weight of the world lift off of her shoulders so fast, she thought she would fly away in the wind. She held on to Nason for several minutes, before regaining the strength to stand on her own again.

"Wow, Abbey. I had no idea you had to deal with such a horrible thing. I'm so sorry. Thank you for sharing your bravery."

"Some bravery," Abbey said, shrugging her shoulders. "I can't even leave my sidewalk. I am twenty-two years old and I can't walk my dog without having a panic attack. It's pathetic, that's what it is."

"I disagree. You haven't had anyone else in your life that truly cares about you like Sadie does, or like I do, or how you think the sidewalk does. You're brave, more than you know. You don't have to live so confined though. Look, the sidewalk is a symbol of safety, right?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, I guess so, I never thought about it in that way before. Go on."

"I'll be the symbol for you. You've never been unsafe with me, or with Sadie. Let us be the security for you. Let us be your sidewalk."

"I, I don't know, Nason, I'm just scared. I haven't been able to leave the sidewalk in years."

"I'll be right here with you, so will Sadie, and so will Felix. If you're ready to move on with your life, then let us be your sidewalk."

Nason grabbed Abbey's hand gently and lead her closer to the edge of the curb.

"Nason, wait, I don't think I can do this," Abbey said, pulling back. Sadie stood still next to Felix, watching, not moving, as if she knew what was happening in Abbey's soul and mind.

"I know you can do it, but only if you want to." Nason pulled back and let Abbey's hand go. Sadie whimpered and walked up to Abbey, licking her hand. Abbey looked down into Sadie's blue eyes, then back up to Nason's emerald eyes, and stepped closer to Nason.

"I can do it," Abbey said, wiping her tear-stained cheeks with her jacket sleeve. She took Nason's hand and slowly stepped, one foot in front of the other, closer to the curb's edge.

“You’re my sidewalk, you’re my sidewalk, you’re my sidewalk,” Abbey whispered over and over. She slowly inched her way off the curb and into a new beginning.

Jack Is Not a Girl’s Name

by

Lydia Fortenberry

First Place Short Story, Ridgeland

Jacqueline steps inside her house, closing the door quietly behind her. The air conditioning feels nice and cool on her skin even though it’s still morning, the Georgian sun is heating up fast. With the garbage cans now out by the street, her bed made and -now that she was eight years old- the coffee pot started, Jacqueline’s morning chores are done.

After brushing her teeth and changing out of her penguin pajamas, Jacqueline heads downstairs and to the kitchen, her heavy book bag bumping against her back. In the kitchen, she grabs the lunch Mama packed her out of the fridge and puts it in her bag.

“Jacqueline?”

Jacqueline is sitting at the kitchen table eating lucky charms, and at the sound of Mama's voice her first thought is that she’s clanking her spoon to loudly against the bowl. When she looks up at Mama, she knows that's not the problem.

Mama looks tired and frail, still in her pajamas. She’s standing in the doorway of the kitchen with her arms crossed like she’s trying to protect herself. There aren’t tears on her cheeks, but she’s shaking like she’s crying.

Jacqueline's older sister, Maggie, appears in the doorway behind Mama and pushes past her, speaking to Jacqueline as she began going through the kitchen cabinets, going through the motions of pouring the coffee Jacqueline made with harsh movements.

“It’s daddy.” She said, voice trembling only slightly. “He's dead.”.

Jacqueline is silent. Everything is silent, silent enough to make her ears ring. Maggie looks up at her sharply from across the counter, and Jacqueline doesn't meet her eyes, but she can feel her sister scrutinizing her.

“We think he had a heart attack.” Maggie supplies. Jacqueline has seen people on TV have heart attacks, but she doesn’t want to think about daddy clutching his chest in pain before slumping down, body still.

Mama has left the kitchen and is standing as still as a statue while she speaks on the phone. Before she even hangs up, there are sirens coming towards us.

When the police come, so do the EMT’s. While the police talk to Mama and Maggie, the EMT’s go up the stairs to Daddy’s room. Jacqueline doesn’t want them to go in there, doesn’t want them to move Daddy.

Jacqueline turns from the stairway and instead goes to the kitchen pantry instead, closing herself in the slim closet and crouching down on the floor. Through the paneled slits in the door, Jacqueline can just make out when the EMT’s bring Daddy downstairs on a stretcher, covered by a blanket. Mama and Maggie go outside with him, and the Police file out as well.

Jacqueline keeps thinking Mama and Maggie will come back in, but they don’t.

Eventually Jacqueline comes out of the closet. Everything is quiet again, and her Lucky Charms are now soggy.

She runs to look out the window, and the driveway is empty- Mama and Maggie had gone with Daddy.

Jacqueline doesn't want to go to school. She wants to cuddle Theodore bear and not think about Daddy until Mama and Maggie come home. But Theodore bear was upstairs in her room, and room was next to Daddy's room, and Jacqueline doesn't want to go near there. What if there was blood on the bed? What if a ghost flew out of the room?

Jacqueline runs from where she's found herself at the top of the stairs, fear encouraging her. She scoops up her book bag off the floor in the kitchen and dumps all of her books and homework out, instead filling it with supplies.

When Jacqueline steps into her backyard, she has her book bag, a big flashlight from her Daddy's tool shed, and one of his knives stuck through her belt loop. The backyard is vast, green grass turning into tall cedar trees half a mile in. Jacqueline knows most of the woods well- it would be easy to stay the night there. The frogs and crickets would sing her to sleep and the birds would wake her up in the morning, so she wouldn't be alone.

Jacqueline traipses through the backyard and into the woods, holding none of the usual pleasure that playing outside usually gives her. Today she's serious- she doesn't skip through the leaves on the ground, and she doesn't stop to throw rocks in the little trickling creek by the tree line.

By the time it was dark enough to the first few stars, Mama normally called Jacqueline inside. Now, far out in the woods after kicking leaves around all afternoon, Jacqueline is hungry and tired. She tries to sleep on the ground for a little while, but it's more difficult than she expected without her stuffed animals for comfort.

When sleep refuses to come to her, Jacqueline gets back up, dusts herself off, and starts walking again, one hand holding the big flashlight tightly while the other gripped Daddy's knife. She walks through the woods until she finds a road, and then she walks beside it, staying somewhat in the trees so no one driving would see her. She walks until the bright, fluorescent lights of an Exxon let her turn off her flashlight.

Inside, Jacqueline makes a beeline for the coolers in the back. She has already found a bottle of Gatorade as big as her own head, a pack of M&M's, and a box of cookies when she realizes she has no money to pay with. Jacqueline hesitates for a long time before stepping slowly behind a display and unzipping her book bag. She's just beginning to slide the cookies into the bag when she glances towards the register and instead finds the cashier frowning down at her from barely a foot away.

He is standing in front of her looking very angry. His three, perfectly waxed hairs that he'd combed over a tragic bald spot tremble with rage.

Jacqueline screams, drops her food, and runs for the door, scrambling to push at the glass door with all her strength. As soon as she tumbles outside she runs face-first into someone's stomach.

The stench hits her first, making her eyes water. Jacqueline doesn't even remember to apologize, instead putting her hands up to cover her nose and backing away.

The woman she ran into was tall, and her high cheekbones suggested she might have been pretty years ago. Now, however, her hair is dirty and her nails are long, and the smell that came off her was not dissimilar to a fleet of dump trucks.

"Are you okay little girl?"

The woman's voice is more gentle than her smell, and Jacqueline tries to answer. The only thing she can manage at first is a sniffle.

"No." Jacqueline manages after a second, though her throat threatens to close up again. "My Daddy died and my Mama and sister left and I just wanted something to eat but the scary man inside chased me out."

Jacqueline jumps at the sound that the woman makes, until she realizes it's a laugh. Harsh and raspy, more along the lines of a cough, but laughter nonetheless.

"You come back inside with me, we'll get'er fixed up right." The woman puts a big paw on Jacqueline's shoulder, encouraging her to turn around, back towards the bright doors of the Exxon. Jacqueline gulps, trying to blink back the tears that started to form in her eyes.

Back inside, the woman lets Jacqueline pick what she wants, though she only picked one thing for herself. Jacqueline nervously puts her items on the counter, refusing to look up at the man who had just caught her. The woman sets down a box of tampons and proceeds to pull a massive wad of cash from an old pocket on her dirty coat.

That night, Jacqueline stays close to the woman's side. She was homeless, which she explained after Jacqueline asked why she reeked. When Jacqueline asks next about all the money she has, the woman laughs again, and it still sounds like a dog choking on a piece of meat.

"Darlin' I can make six-hundred a day panhandling." She says, and Jacqueline doesn't ask what panhandling means. They walk all the way back to the road-side edge of Jacqueline's property line, and then they keep walking until the woman decides to stop. The road is at their backs, and the tall cedar and pine trees engulf them.

The woman, who said her name was Mary, takes her dirty coat off and lays it on the ground, and Jacqueline does the same, propping the book bag up like a pillow, with her jacket on the ground beside it. It wasn't much, but once Mary gets a fire going, it's good enough.

Before they both put their heads down and say goodnight, Mary walks with Jacqueline while she goes to use the bathroom.

Squatting in the woods with her pants at her knees, Jacqueline tries to peer around in the darkness, thinking about all the little bugs she can't see. Jacqueline stands up and reaches down to pull her pants up.

Something closes its teeth around her arm.

Jacqueline howls, blood-piercing in the quiet woods, and flings her arm to one side, trying to detach the monster from her arm. It works, and the moon beautifully illuminates the foot-long baby alligator as it sails through the air.

Jacqueline is still screaming, and crying, panic seizing her with the sight of her own blood, which is seeping through her fingers where she is holding her arm.

Mary grabs her up off the ground, cradling her like a baby. Jacqueline doesn't have the breath or inclination to insist that eight year olds can walk on their own. If daddy was there, he would have picked her up too.

Back at the camp they'd made up, Mary puts Jacqueline down on her dirty coat and pries Jacqueline's fingers from around the alligator bite.

"Three little holes." Jacqueline looked down at her arm as well after Mary says that, and sniffed loudly as she examined the three tooth marks on her arm, which, while not massive, certainly weren't "little".

Neither of them sleep that night after the bleeding stops Jacqueline feels too hot, rolling around on Mary's coat, trying to find a cool spot on it. Mary sits up next to her and told her jokes.

"Knock knock?" Mary asked Jacqueline.

"Uh?" Was all Jacqueline could reply, exhausted and on the brink of fever.

"Uh-oh! You ruined my joke, Jack."

By morning, Jacqueline feels marginally better. Her alligator bite looks pretty cool in the sunlight, and even though it also looks infected, that raises her spirits slightly.

“It’s time to go home.” Jacqueline knows it as truth as soon as she says it, and Mary doesn’t try to stop her. They walk home together, Mary occasionally giving Jacqueline piggyback rides, during which Mary would oink and squeal astoundingly.

Back home, Jacqueline takes her old bowl of Lucky Charms off the table and puts it in the sink before making her and Mary each a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Just as they sit down at the kitchen table, a key clicks in the front door and Maggie shoves it open and comes to the kitchen, unaware that Jacqueline had even been gone.

At first, Maggie stops short at the sight of a stranger in the house, calmly sitting at the table beside Jacqueline, but her surprise doesn’t last long. “Who’s your friend?” She asks, and Mary introduces herself, holding out her hand for a peanut-buttery handshake.

“Mary’s homeless.” Jacqueline explains, and Maggie gets a look in her eye like she wants to tell Jacqueline to shut up, but is too polite to do so in front of their guest.

“I thought,” Jacqueline finishes her sandwich and says the rest of her question around a mouthful of peanut butter, “That we could give Mary some of Daddy’s coats n’ stuff, since it’s getting cold.”

Maggie looks at her little sister, at the leaves tangled in her blond hair and the bandages on her arm, the grave look in her wide eyes. Maggie shrugs.

After their meal, Mary takes a very long shower, and picks out a completely new outfit of clean clothes. The bathroom looked like a swamp monster rolled around in it, but Mary was clean and happy when she told the sisters she had some animal traps to check. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be eating skunk for dinner!”

Even though it was mid-morning, Maggie and Jacqueline got into their pajamas and Maggie lifted the ban she usually had on allowing Jacqueline into her room. Maggie let Jacqueline wear some of her fluffy socks and cuddle with one of her nice pillows.

“Will you call me Jack?” Jacqueline asked when they were almost asleep, hoping Maggie wouldn’t be mad.

“Like daddy?” Maggie asks, even though she already knew it was, and Jacqueline nods. “Jack isn’t a girl’s name,” Maggie said flatly.

Moving Forward

by

Will Flasck

Second Place Short Story, Ridgeland

Part I: The Village and Trial

It was midday and the sun was beating down onto the village while the elder men gathered in the village center. They were wearing the traditional face paints which exaggerated their eyes. Once gathered they exchanged greetings and their sons, through traditional rituals, placed the ceremonial head dresses upon their father's heads. The elder men then climbed to scaffolding that had been erected in a semi-circle specifically for the trial. The old men sat cross-legged upon their towers and waited patiently for the accused.

The accused was lead in chains by a great warrior of the tribe. When the two reached the center of the semi-circle the warrior, in deep, rumbling voice, not too dissimilar to thunder announced, "The accused, Iyapo, son of Jahi!" the warrior dropped Iyapo's chains and left him to the mercy of the elders.

There was a moment of silence. The air seemed thick to Iyapo and he felt he could barely stand, but he resolved not to falter. Another moment went by and still, silence from the elders. Determined to be done with the trial, Iyapo spoke, "I am not guilty!" he called to the elders above him. "I have no crime for which to be judged!"

"You have murdered your brother in cold blood for selfish gain," snapped an elder in response, "You will not speak out of turn or you will face a punishment worse than what you have coming."

Again, there was silence. Iyapo bowed his head in shame. It was true, he had killed his brother, but the trial was stacked against him. He thought he was made to look guiltier than he actually was. Another elder spoke. His words were slower, more thoughtful than the ones of the previous elder. He seemed almost compassionate, "Who do you say you are not guilty?" he asked.

Iyapo raised his head, and spoke, "It is true. I killed my brother, Atsu, but it was not murder, but self-defense."

Another elder spoke, "And how do you call it 'self-defense?' Atsu was killed in his bed with your knife in his heart."

"Atsu threatened our family," responded Iyapo, "His disrespect of our ancestors threatened to destroy us, and I took it unto myself to stop him," Iyapo raised his head further to look into the eyes of the elders, "It was self-defense."

The elder who snapped earlier snapped again in anger, "Then you should have taken him to us! You have no wisdom when it comes to judgement! You had no reason to murder Atsu!" The old man turned to his fellow elders, "He has broken our tribe's laws. Even if we do not find him guilty of murder, he has still done wrong by taking justice into his own hands. We must find him guilty." At this, the other elders nodded and Iyapo was taken away by the warrior who had taken him to trial. The elders climbed down from their scaffolds and convened privately to discuss Iyapo's punishment.

The sun was now low on the horizon and Iyapo was led to the elders once more. Iyapo approached them with his head low. "We have found you guilty of murder," said an elder, "That should come as no surprise," Iyapo did move or make a sound, he stood as a statue. The elder continued, "As punishment you will put your brother to rest. Because of your actions Atsu's spirit will not know peace until his spirit is put down by the oracle.

You will march west. We will provide you a cart and some meager rations for the travel. It will not be a short trip, and hardly an easy one. At dawn, tomorrow we will send you on your way. You will not return to this village until your brother has been give the proper relief in his death."

Iyapo, with his head still bowed responded, "I understand."

Before the sun rose Iyapo was retrieved from custody. He had not slept the entire night. The elders saw to it that he was given a wooden cart which, as they promised, had been loaded with food, water, and the Atsu's body. Then, just as the sun began to peak over the horizon, Iyapo was sent on his way.

Part II: The Jungle

Iyapo had been marching steadily west for the better part of two days by this point, the cart pulled behind him. Then, on the third day of marching towards the west, Iyapo saw the Jungle on the horizon. As he neared it the clouds began to pile up and pour rain down upon him and his cart. By the time Iyapo made it into the jungle the day had passed and the night had risen, so he set up camp for the night, sleeping under the cart to avoid the rain.

By dawn the rain had stopped and Iyapo continued his journey, cart in tow. He followed a foot path laid out by those who treaded through the foliage before him, leaving him a trail to follow. As he marched further and further into the jungle, the brush became thicker and thicker. The air was heavy and humid from the previous day's rain and the sun beat through the trees, heating both Iyapo and Atsu's body. More than once Iyapo had to stop to swat away the pests that were so eager to swarm his brother's body.

Iyapo's progress was made slowly. The frequent stops to preserve Atsu impeded progress some, but the mud had made the trek more difficult than Iyapo had ever imagined. Every minute it seemed that the cart would become stuck in mud. Iyapo was forced to stop and dig a trench through the earthen troughs of mud so he could continue. The stress was building on his soul and he became quite frustrated. He began to curse his brother. He swore to the body that this was in all ways Atsu's fault. That if Atsu had simply respected their ancestors as he was expected to, then all of this anguish could be avoided.

As he began to hit more and more mud patches Iyapo became more enraged with his brother and with his situation. He started pulling the cart with more force, not wanting to stop and dig, but ultimately, he only drove the cart's wheels further into the muck. He began to strike Atsu's cadaver whenever he was forced to walk around the cart to dig out its wheels. A slap on the head, a punch on the shoulder, Iyapo was trying to punish his brother for forcing him into this situation.

Then came the rocky patches. The cart would not be stuck here, instead it would thrash and through items off. Eventually Iyapo resolved to simply rush over these rough patches. When he hit one he began to run as quickly as he could. The cart trashed over the rocks throwing most of the food out, but also causing Atsu's body to be thrown over the edge of the cart. It was this that broke Iyapo. He attempted to lift his brother's body back onto the cart, but the weight was immense, and Iyapo struggled under the limp weight of another fully-grown man.

Iyapo's arms gave up under the pressure and Atsu's body fell to the ground again with a hard thud. The stress of the flies, the humid air, the struggle of the cart, and his perceived absurdity of his punishment Iyapo snapped. He began to attack the body of his brother. Stomping on it, kneeling over it and laying punches across its face, and finally picking up the heaviest rock he could and dropped it on the cadaver's chest, which made a distinct crunching sound.

Iyapo flopped onto his back exhausted. He lay next to his brother's body, the embers of rage in his stomach still smoldering. Then slowly they faded. Iyapo's anger cooled and he regained his composure and he began to weep. He did not hate his brother, he knew that, he had always known it. Iyapo wept next to his brother and apologized. He was sorry for attacking his body like that. He was sorry for not doing better to keep the flies away. Most of all, he was sorry for killing him.

Like the anger that proceeded it this sorrow faded and Iyapo was filled with a new resolve to get himself out of the jungle with the cart in tow. He picked up his rations from the ground and began to lift his brother's body back onto the cart. His new found resolve also gave him a greater strength than he had before. While the job was still difficult, he managed to lift his brother to the edge of the cart and flop him over into its bed.

By this time the night had come and Iyapo was well tired. He made a fire and prepared supper for himself. Then, before sleeping, he piled his fire high with fuel to keep it raging into the night. "This," he thought, "will keep those pesky flies off my brother." And with that, Iyapo slept like a stone.

Part III: The Desert

After making it through the jungle, the air became only dryer, the sun became only hotter, and the foliage became only deader. Pulling the cart was much easier as the ground was hard and flat having been hardened by a harsh sun. Pulling the cart was also made easier in a more bitter way as well. Iyapo's trek through the jungle and taken longer than expected, and his rations ran low. He knew the desert would not be forgiving. Sweat poured down Iyapo's forehead and into his eyes with both burned them and obscured his vision. On the horizon, Iyapo saw a dead tree rising from the sands like jagged claw. Once he made it there, he decided, he would rest in what shade it could provide.

As he grew nearer and nearer, Iyapo began to notice buzzard circling overhead. The closer he drew to the dead tree the more buzzards began to flock over him. Some of the brave ones would even swoop down and perch on the cart's edge and attempt to peck at Atsu, but Iyapo fought them off.

Once near the tree Iyapo noticed a man. He was couched in the tree, not too unlike a buzzard himself. Iyapo called a greeting to him. The man responded, calling over the great distance between them, "Come closer, friend!" and so Iyapo marched on towards the tree. As he drew closer the man in the tree dropped down onto the dried ground. Now that Iyapo was close he could see the man was starving, his stomach was inset like a cave and his ribs showed through his skin like fingers that grasped around a water pot. His face was thin, his eyes were beady and set into his skull like a bird's. "And who are you?" asked the man, his voice raspy

"I am Iyapo, son of Jahi," answered Iyapo, "and who are you?"

"I am a man of no name, dear friend," said the man, "I have abandoned all that is human for I know the truth," the man laughed at his declaration, his chest pulsing and his ribs becoming only more defined with each laugh.

At this point Iyapo was suspicious of the man, but he did not like being alone, so Iyapo decided not to take any drastic measures just yet. "And what is that truth?" asked Iyapo.

"I know that there is no difference between man and beast, dear friend. My tribe did not understand my ways or my wisdom. They were scared of the truth and cast me out, so I threw away my names and titles. Tell me, friend, what need does a man have for a name? He has none! Other men are dedicated to waste, they know nothing else, and they fear those who are not put off by their aversions. You see, my friend, the beasts know the true way. The wild boar will eat whatever it can because it knows it would be awful to waste, but man? What of man? I will tell you, friend, man will cast away what would otherwise make him strong! I made use of what those fools in my tribe called 'waste' and they cast me out here into the desert where there are only the scavengers and the dead. I will outlive all of those fools for they will always be weaker than a wise, untasteful man like myself,"

Iyapo was again made cautious, but he still did not want to offend, "You seem to know a great deal, friend. But I must say, the day is old, and I am quite tired. Would you help me make camp for tonight?" and with that the man nodded and the pair set up a small fire and ate the last of Iyapo's rations. Once comfortable the two men put themselves down to rest.

When Iyapo woke, the moon was in the middle of the sky and neither the man with no name was nowhere, nor his cart was to be seen. Panicked, Iyapo made a frantic search for both before noticing a pair of tracks left by his cart in the sand that lead away from the tree under which he slept. Iyapo ran after the length of the trails. His chest burned and his legs began to feel limp as he ran, then, he saw his cart, a small camp fire, and the man with no name dragging Atsu's body from the cart. "Stop! What are you doing?" Screamed Iyapo as he broke out into a sprint towards the scene.

In response to Iyapo the man with no name lunged for the cart and pulled out a hatchet, “You were letting it waste! You are the same as the fools of my village! You and your kind are a plight on this earth, you are a fool!”

Despite the hatchet and in disregard for his own safety, Iyapo tackled the man with no name. The hatchet was dropped and the two began to spar. Iyapo over powered the man and held him back, but the man with no name strung free from Iyapo’s grasp and leapt for the axe, which had fallen next to Atsu’s body. He raised the axe over Atsu. Iyapo screamed for him to stop. The man with no name hesitated, “And why should I do that? You would rather see this go to waste, why should I stop?”

“We can make a deal, I can give you something else,” said Iyapo, “Please, I only want my brother.”

The man with no name snarled at this suggestion, “You have nothing left. Your rations are gone, you wasted them with your glutinous consumption. This too will go to waste if not for me,” he gestured to Atsu.

“But he is spoiled. He would not be good to eat,” said Iyapo, and he was right. The pests of the jungle had made their marks, and the heat of the desert had only served to ferment his brother’s body. If a man is ever fit for consumption, Atsu had was no longer that.

“Then what do you suggest, fool?” the man was laughing now, snarling while he did so. For a moment, he appeared as a hyena to Iyapo.

Iyapo hesitated, “Me,” he yelled. He paused for a long moment while the man stopped laughing and looked at him, “I will give you part of me. You can have my arm in return for my brother.”

The man with no name lowered the hatchet in a slight confusion. His beady eyes focused in on Iyapo, studying him for any signs of deception, but found none. Then a wicked smile crossed his face, “If this is what you wish, I feel it can be a worthy compromise.”

The man rose from Atsu’s body and approached Iyapo.

Part IV: The Mountain

Iyapo was now only part of the man he had been previously. He continued west, his cart in tow, pulled with only one arm. The desert was many miles behind him now, but he could not forget the man with no name. The man’s hyena laugh, his bird-like eyes, and the sheer beast like movements of the man. It was all burned into Iyapo’s mind as if with hot iron.

Progress was slowed not only due to his lost arm, but also a lack of supplies. His rations were gone, and he was forced to stop long before sundown to make camp in order to forage for nourishment. Iyapo grew thinner and thinner as his wore journey on. Despite all that tried to stop him, Iyapo made it to the base of the mountains. The sun still had many hours left in the sky, but Iyapo deemed it a good time to forage and rest before beginning his ascent the next day.

As he traveled upward toward the peak of the mountain the terrain became steeper and steeper. The ground became grayer, and made of more rock and stone than soil. The air became thinner and colder, making it difficult to breath and feeling as if the wind sliced through his skin with a blade of ice. But, still Iyapo pressed on.

When the sun fell Iyapo did not bother to search for food, there was nothing for him to eat on the mountain. He simply built the largest fire he could in a futile attempt to keep warm and did his best to sleep. In his dreams that night Iyapo saw himself falling into a grave, but he never hit the earth in the bottom of the hole. Despite the bottomless grave he saw the elders of his village shoveling dirt over him. Iyapo tried to claw the dirt away, to dig his way out of the endless pit, but it was impossible. Eventually darkness surrounded him and Iyapo did not try to fight it.

The sun rose the next day and Iyapo awoke reluctantly. He lay on the ground, a fire a mere smolder of what it was the night prior. He looked to the cart and spoke, “Atsu, this is the end for us, I think. I cannot go further. You may hate me when I die and we meet as souls unable to rest. I will not blame you, but please

understand that there is no more progress to be made. I have killed both of us, and there is no hope left for either.” Iyapo rolled over to his side, unwilling to fight the cold that enveloped him in a sharp wind.

On that wind, Iyapo heard a soft voice, “Brother,” it said, “you have no time to die, you are not finished yet.”

Iyapo rolled over again to face the cart. It stood where it had, earlier. Perplexed at the voice he heard, Iyapo stood and investigated the body of Atsu, “Do you speak?” he asked it.

Another wind blew over him, Iyapo shivered, and the voice again spoke, “You are almost over the peak do not waste any more time, the cold will only get worse.”

“But I have told you, there is nothing else to be done. I am too weak to continue, let us both be done with this. There is no point in pushing on further if I cannot finish!” said Iyapo facing the direction of the wind. Iyapo waited for the response from the wind, but none came. The voice of the wind had originally given him a shred of hope, but now it was gone, and he returned to a deeper melancholy than before. The sun was still young, but Iyapo laid down to sleep again. He had no drive to continue.

Again, Iyapo dreamt. This time he was not in a grave, but in a great field of wealth. Fruit trees scattered the area, their branches weighed down by ripe fruit. The ground was painted with the bright colors of flowers of all variety, and his ancestors stood side by side in a long line. At the very end of the line were his father and brother. Iyapo approached the two men, “what is this?” he asked them.

Then, in a thunderous roar, all his ancestors spoke at once, “You must press on,” then they were quite once again.

“I have told you I cannot!” Replied Iyapo, “Even if I could, what would it matter?”

Again, his ancestors replied in unison, “You must press on. You must press on. You must press on...” they canted endlessly, swelling in volume.

Iyapo awoke once more. Strangely the day was younger than when he had left it, and his fire still raged as it had when he built it. Though his situation was still far from desirable, Iyapo was now resolved to cross the mountain. He was resolved to put his brother’s spirit to rest. Iyapo stood and took hold of the cart and pulled it on. Before the sun had reached its peak in the sky, Iyapo and the cart were over the mountain. In places Iyapo was able to ride the cart downward, not having to pull or push it.

Once he was at the bottom of the mountain Iyapo found himself in a lush grassland that appeared to be in bloom. Scattered around the area were fruit trees laden with ripe fruit. Ecstatic, Iyapo ate his fill and then some. He filled his cart with enough food for the last leg of his journey, set up camp, and slept for the night.

Part V: The Oracle

Iyapo had marched miles away from the mountain’s at this point. He had walked for three days and grown stronger. The fruits in his cart sustained him, and now his one arm was stronger than either of his arms had been previously. Iyapo looked towards the horizon. Rising above the tree lines he saw smoke. He marched on.

The origin of the smoke was found to be the shouldering remains of a campfire. Iyapo began to search the area for the fire’s builder. In his search Iyapo had found tracks leading further towards the west. The sun began to sink behind him as Iyapo came to a small, rounded hill, the mouth of a cave was opened towards him, a soft, orange glow emitted from its depths. Iyapo gathered his brother over his shoulder, abandoned the cart, and ventured into the cavern.

Journeying deeper into the cavern’s unknown depths Iyapo came to a central chamber. In the center of it was a fire pit in which an orange flame raged. Sat on a platform opposite the entrance to the chamber sat the oracle. She was by no means a small woman. By appearance alone one knew she was a woman of power and strength. In her seat next the fire, she mediated, her strength seemed reserved, and she was, in a way, gentle on the eyes. She spoke without moving anything other than her mouth, “Iyapo, son of Jahi, why have you come here?” he voice bellowed though the cavern, surrounding Iyapo on all sides.

“To put my brother to rest,” said Iyapo. He brought his brother forward and laid him near the fire. The oracle opened her eyes, “Why did you murder Atsu?” she asked.

Iyapo said nothing for a long moment, “It was a moment of rash thinking. I made a mistake, and I am here to right it.”

“You will never make it right, Iyapo, only a fool would think that,” she stood and walked around the fire towards Atsu’s cadaver, “But I can help you tie up loose threads,” The oracle then threw handfuls of green foliage onto the fire and the room filled with a thick smoke. She stood from her seat and approached the body of Atsu.

Iyapo began to feel as if the cave was swelling around him. He heard the oracle begin to chant, but his vision became blurred and he could not see. Soon Iyapo lost consciousness.

Darkness surrounded Iyapo like water surround a man in water, but Iyapo did not resist. He did not thrash about in the infinite blackness that enveloped him. He simply let himself float atop the surface of the darkness. Then a voice cut through the darkness like a razor, “I cannot forgive you, brother,” said Atsu.

“That’s okay, brother,” replied Iyapo, “I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“I do not hate you, Iyapo,” said Atsu, “I could not hate you.”

“Likewise. I acted without thought,” said Iyapo, “I am sorry though. Your death will forever be my biggest regret, Atsu.”

“I know. You cannot fix this. The best thing to do is move on.”

“And what should I do with you?”

“The oracle will help you. It won’t be too much trouble.”

Iyapo woke up in a small hut outside the cave. It was still dark outside and he saw from a dim fire that the oracle was sitting with him, “Time to finish this,” she said before getting up from her spot and exiting the hut. Iyapo followed swiftly after her. The two walked to the top of a nearby hill. At the hill’s top was a pyre, and on the pyre rested Atsu’s body. The oracle handed Iyapo a lit torch and nodded at him.

Iyapo lit the pyre and the fire soon began to rage. The moon sank on the horizon.

Iyapo would return home soon.

Worn Blue Collar

by

Ethan Burton

First Place Short Story, Goodman
Second Place Short Story, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

I should let the old man go. I should have a hard talk with my boss and convince him why his biggest hard worker should be laid off. Why, after so many long years of working here, does the old man still break his back month after month in this factory? I've only managed the auto factory for a few years now, but he has sweated here since before the factory even installed seatbelts. He's a tough laborer, that's for sure, along with being the most horrible employee a manager could ask for.

I watch him, day in day out, always coming in with his blue plaid work shirt, his collar worn from cuts, and tattered jeans, five minutes before work, pushing others out of the way to get his coffee. He speaks very little, glaring at his co-workers with his cold, pale face whenever they walk past him. His face says he hates every person breathing in the room. Every employee the old man's age, his friends probably, have long since or retired or kicked the bucket. This one wrinkled old mug should have no reason at all to wear himself down when he could be sitting on his ass drawing social security checks. Maybe he's just too old and stubborn to know how not to work.

For as long as I've been put in charge, he's been stationed toward the rear of the assembly, where he screws large steel bolts into the rims of the car wheels. For over fifty years he's been on the same job, from what I've heard, and not one promotion. It's sad but funny seeing the company heads importing men from Osaka and Kyoto, young enough to be his grandsons, and then giving them the highest paying jobs. This old man sweats and bleeds with his arthritic hands while the imports make his whole salary in a couple of months, by pushing buttons. Perhaps that's his reason for his bitter attitude.

Over the years of supervising, I've seen that his strength and skill are dropping by the year, too. Five years ago, he could screw in a dozen bolts under thirty seconds; now, he takes twice that to screw in just eight. He's come close to passing out on the floor on more than one occasion. His blood must be thinning; his bones must be breaking down, his mind rotting away. I wish that he'd just quit, for his sake and for everyone's sake.

Workers mention that during break, the old man slips outside past the loading bay to sneak a smoke in. I've noticed how he talks to himself; I sometimes catch snippets of employees' names, paired with some colorful vocabulary. And when he's not cussing out the entire factory, he's staring into that small book he keeps in his pocket. When he opens the book, for a split-second, you can see him crack a smile. And it's a genuine smile, not the snarky one he gives when an intern trips on a steal beam.

Workers have also rumored about him talking out loud in private, as if he was speaking to some ghost. I suppose that he's still human, wanting someone to talk to. But I don't get it; if he's sad and lonely, it's his own damn fault for being such an asshole. Does he not realize this?

I would feel sorry for him, until I would remember the times he would scowl at me and call me a job-stealing Beaner whenever I would give him orders. Oh, he loved it when he saw that his grey-haired, good ol' boy manager was replaced by my dark tanned hide a few years back. He has more respect for the convicts that pick up the highway trash than he does for me. And my wife- he crossed the line when he compared her picture in my wallet to sidewalk trash; it was pretty much impossible to forgive him then.

But for some reason my wife is unhealthily obsessed with him. When I would talk to my wife about my day and work, the old man would almost always come up. I guess that she has some kind of sympathy for the man or something. Maybe it's the fact that her father was a simple laborer too (he couldn't swear in

English like the old man could, though.) Maybe she has some kind of spiritual fantasy of reaching out to her deceased father through him. Oh, my sweet Camila is one strange woman.

She is more religious than I am, though we both worship the same way at the same times. My wife speaks of seeking out troubled souls and how it's our holy duty to reach out to them. I wish that I had her sense of compassion because I honestly can't make myself care about lost people that much, especially for someone that makes my work hell.

Then, my wife asked me to invite him for a late lunch after Mass one week, down in the nicer part of town, where the white-smiled doctors and lawyers do business. Once every year she likes to invite a random guest, usually someone from a homeless shelter, to a really nice restaurant around Thanksgiving. I really didn't want him to go. I asked her why we couldn't take one of the hundreds of other old men on the street instead. She responded with something about how she felt an inner voice and that it could be a part of a heavenly plan. Whatever, I supposed.

Half-heartedly, I agreed to her wish--she is my wife after all. The next work day when I asked the old man if he wanted to go, he stared at me for a minute then broke down in awkward laughter. After he realized that I was serious, his look became shocked and confused. He didn't say yes or no, only silently walking off, but my wife told me that we were taking him anyway. We drove over to his house a few days later, out in the trashy forest behind the factory. It was a battered old home, with worn, chaffed, oak planks and a partially sunk in porch with blue paint, flaked off into patches.

I walked up to the front porch and knocked on the half-broken doorframe. Fifteen minutes had gone by and the old man didn't make a sound. His old Ford was out in the yard, so I knew he must have been home. My wife became worried about him, and I lost my patience. So I gripped the door knob and pushed it until I budged the rotted wood into the entrance. The inside of his house was dim, dusty, smelled dead and ashy, kind of like the old man himself. Placing my hand against the cragged walls to guide myself, I stepped into the foyer, moving into a small dining room, until I almost stepped on the old man's foot as I walked into some cramped hallway.

I found a light switch with my hand- the degenerate chump was sitting on a beat-up sofa, sobbing, weeping, hugging a dirty, blurry portrait of some young lady beside his golden-leafed pocket book. He must have panicked or had some kind of random fit. I picked him up and leaned him on my shoulder to walk him to the doorway. All that I could think about was how my one expensive shirt was being soaked by the poor guy's tears. My wife panicked as we came out of the dark interior, then cuddled the old man like a big, wrinkled baby.

Leading him on to the car ever so slowly, she comforted him and spent half of an hour being his therapist. He didn't say much for a while, just nodded his head a little. My wife asked if he needed to go to a doctor or a counselor, but he said that he was just having a little bout and that he'd be fine. A free meal was enough to change his mood, I guess. We then continued our way to the restaurant, about an hour behind our reservations.

On the drive over, my wife sat in the back of our Chevy with the old man. She talked to him about her own father, about how he was similar and how he would work for garbage wage hours on end every week. She talked to him about how he went tired and hungry so that he could send his six children to college. The old man only sat quietly and glanced over to my rear-view mirror once every five minutes; I don't think he cared much.

We got to the restaurant, which was one of those nice uppity places that someone on my pay could only afford once a year (our anniversary dinner is much more modest). After I changed my wet shirt into a spare one from the car trunk—ugh—we got out of the car, walking calmly to the building like the wealthy people around us. The waitress ushered us to a nice round table in the middle of the room, even the napkins felt like velvet Versace bed sheets.

My wife was content with just a garden salad and a glass of water, I ordered the- what was it called- *foi-e grac* with *crep-es* or some shit, and our guest ordered three steaks with a side of mashed potatoes. I joked

with the old man telling him that that was coming out of his wallet; I don't know why I expected him to lighten up from the comment. He just sat in silence and looked down at the table, waiting for his well-done sirloins (more like beef jerky if you ask me.)

Over fifty dollars for his ticket, and the old man couldn't even get himself to touch the free bread that came with it. The mental breakdown from before must have resurfaced. He just sat there, staring into his lap and crying like some toddler who just got told no by his parents. I thought about why I even bothered to spend my own hard-earned money on him. Then I said something in the moment, "You could at least be grateful, you know." It pushed him over. His whining turned into shouting. He cursed our family out loud, in front of my kind wife and the whole restaurant; the old man had been holding back language before. I clenched my fist on the table, resisting the urge to slap him. While he was having his verbal outbreak, I got my wife and told her we were leaving. My wife wanted to go back and check on him, but that was just too much for me. He could find a cab to get home for all I cared.

I don't know why, for pity or whatever, but I couldn't bring myself to just fire the poor, angry bastard the next day at work. He acted the same way as always, not saying a word but giving everyone the evil eye. His mind must be deteriorating or something; I wouldn't give him much time before he forgets how to speak or even eat. He needs help. And I wonder if he has any relatives that I should call to warn them, but the only link to a family that I can recall was that one old photo from his house. Hmm, Maybe Camila and I can be his family.

Dammit. My wife must be getting to me- what the hell am I saying?

Monday Mourning

by

Chris Kalil

Second Place Short Story, Goodman

It was early and James was up. The Southern sun tore through the cheap plastic blinds into James' eyes. His whole body hurt. He thought about praying. He groaned as he rose from the dirty sheets and groaned as he swung his feet onto the threadbare carpet. James shuffled down the narrow hallway and tried his best not to look at Momma's door. He tried his best to not listen to her wheeze that wasn't there. James stopped for a moment just after the door. He placed one hand on each side of the hall and thought about how easy it would be to break through. He thought better of it. The inside would be filled with pests and rotting insulation.

James Carpenter had tried to make something of himself. He was doing well in college. He dreamed of becoming a professor. Momma got sick, though. She was sick and had no one else. It was what a Christian was supposed to do. That was what Pastor had said.

The mourning period was over, and James had to open the bar. When the money was still there, James bought the old dive and did his best to fix it up. He might not have gotten all the benefits of college; the degree, the money, the sense of accomplishment. But, he sure did acquire a certain taste from it. It was a taste that James could never quite scrape off the back of his tongue. He didn't really know if he wanted to lose the taste either.

James jammed the key into the back door of the bar and kicked it open. He moved slowly through the darkness to the cash register. The day drinkers would be there soon. Nine o'clock sharp. They were easy. Didn't ask questions. They drank and gossiped and read the books that James would leave out.

Allie came in a little after the day drinkers, like clockwork.

"Hey, boss. How are you? You okay?"

"Fine."

"Well that's good to hear!"

"Mhhmh."

"Well, I'll get right to work!"

"Mhhmh. Allie..."

"Yeah, boss?"

"Make sure you clean the grill before you make them eggs."

"Okie dokie."

James like the way she did it. She wiped down the grill, sprayed the grill, and buffed the grill clean. In no time at all, and always with a smile. She put down a big ole glob of margarine and began to whisk the eggs.

"So, I heard that John Damenson would be on the T.V. today. You should watch him, boss."

"Mhhmh."

James served the day drinkers their next round.

"He says all kinds of interesting things."

"Mhhmh."

"Boss?"

"What, Allie?"

"You even listening to me?"

"Mhhmh."

The morning crawled by. The old men ate their egg sandwiches and drank their beer. Nobody came in, and nothing scandalous happened. James read and gave the men their beer. Eleven thirty finally arrived. Allie turned the T.V. to PBS.

"Look, Boss! Mr. Damenson is about to speak."

"Who is this again, Allie?"

"I already told you, Boss. It's Mr. Damenson. He's been all over the tri-state area. Been talking about changing your life for the better."

"You ever listen to him before, Allie?"

"No, boss. But Luanne, from Mrs. Kasney's beauty shop, went and listened to him last week. Next day, Luanne walked right up to Mrs. Kasney and told her that she was quitting. Said she was going to actualize her potential."

"You ain't trying to quit are you, Allie?"

"No, Boss. Oh! Here he comes!"

On the T.V. an odd man waddled out onto the stage. The crowd lost their collective minds. People were fainting left and right. James felt uncomfortable. Mr. Damenson did not look that impressive. He was very large and fat. He continuously dabbed at his sweating forehead with a soiled handkerchief. He waddled over to the podium and waited triumphantly for the crowd to calm.

"Hi, y'all!"

The crowd once again went wild.

"I am so very privileged to be here with y'all today. Now I heard that y'all was hurtin', so I am here today to tell y'all that it is going to be all right."

People in the crowd were openly weeping. James thought that the people were ridiculous, he leaned forward on the bar. Mr. Damenson quickly changed his tune. He was mad. He was passionate. He spat with every syllable.

“Y’all are sitting around here waiting for the power, but the power is inside!”

The people were now shouting and raising their hands. One woman fell out. She was shaking and screaming on the floor. Attendants ran to her and covered her with a white sheet. It was no revival, but the people in the audience sure did act like it was. Mr. Damenson continued his speech. He went on for what seemed like hours. James felt like he was under a magnifying glass in the middle of the summer. With a huff and one more swipe to his forehead, Mr. Damenson waddled off the stage. James was covered in sweat.

“Get out.”

“What?!” One of the day drinkers croaked.

“Boss? What are you talking about?”

“I said get out! Bar is closed! Get out of here!”

Shocked, the day drinkers scuttled out of the bar. Allie stared at James for a moment and then hurried out as well. James decided that he wanted absolutely everything. He was done mourning.

Literary Essays

**Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*:
Three Women, One Problem**

by

Sara Goss Lott

First Place Literary Essay, Grenada
Second Place Literary Essay, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Elizabeth Robins called the role of Hedda Gabler in Henrik Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler* "one of the great roles for women in the dramatic repertory" because of Hedda's "brilliance and desperation" (Farfan 59). However, Hedda is not the only woman who exhibits cleverness in the desperate times in which these characters live. Although women in the 1890's were still struggling to control their own lives, Ibsen creates three women, each with different roles in George Tesman's life and with different means of manipulation, who dominate him and use him to fulfill her own desires.

First, Aunt Julia, Tesman's spinster aunt, appears to be a gentle, caring woman, who constantly checks in on George to make sure his life is playing out nicely, yet she treats him as a child, calls him "Georgie," and influences his choice of Hedda for his wife, possibly in an attempt to improve her own social standing. Hedda, on the other hand, is much more direct and open with her desire to overpower George. She often talks over him and decides how situations involving the two of them will play out. Finally, there is Thea, a longtime friend of George, who is the most subtle in her ploys that leave her the victor when she entices George to succumb to her control in place of his wife's. Even though all three women play a different role in George Tesman's life, each bends his will to hers in one form or another in a desperate attempt for status and security.

George's Aunt Julia is a kind woman who makes it her mission to take care of him, even though he is now a grown man. At first, we might believe she is merely a loving aunt who wants to make sure her nephew is doing well in life. She says that she just wants to make George happy while checking in on him, but she shows great impatience in going to make herself part of his new life. Aunt Julia arrives at the home of her nephew and his wife before he has had time to rise from bed the morning after he arrives home from his honeymoon. Interestingly, she wears a new hat to impress Hedda, but, at the same time, she brings George his comfortable old slippers as if to remind him not to leave her behind when he assumes his new role in society. We soon wonder if Aunt Julia has encouraged George to seek social and financial gain with her subtle remarks over the years. For instance, when she looks around George and Hedda's house, she is overcome with emotion and says to Berta, the maid, "Oh, dear God . . . if our sainted Joseph could look up from his grave and see what's become of his little boy" (855). Aunt Julia, in a way, holds her love for George over his head. She lets George know that she has given all of her life savings to secure the beautiful home he enjoys with Hedda. Although she still calls him "Georgie," she corrects Berta when she refers to him as "Mister Tesman," and says, "[D]on't call George 'Mister Tesman' any more. Now it's 'Doctor Tesman'" (855; emphasis added). Because she is so kind to him, Aunt Julia makes George feel bound to make her proud. He must be the perfect man and will do whatever he thinks it takes to make her happy. For example, he offers to help her take off her "fine, elegant hat" (856) that she bought to impress Hedda. Perhaps George's vulnerability to his aunt helps explain why he became vulnerable to the other women in his life or perhaps his vulnerability is not unique to the time in which he lives. After all, when Ibsen was honored by the Norwegian Women's Rights League in 1898, he wrote, "True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, . . . but that has not been my whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity" (qtd. in Templeton 28).

While Aunt Julia is loving in her domination of George, Hedda comes off as both cunning and domineering and uses neither kindness nor affection to motivate her husband. From their first interaction on stage, it is clear who controls George and Hedda's relationship. Hedda walks into the house and complains

about the windows being open as well as the slippers that Aunt Julia brought. Meanwhile, George sits quietly and takes her criticism. Hedda continues by making cutting comments about his family. After his beloved aunt leaves, she asks George, "But where did she get her manners, flinging her hat around any way she likes here in the drawing room. People just don't act that way" (861), and then she dismisses the idea that she will ever refer to his aunt as "Aunt Julia" (861). Another time, she snaps at George, "Good Lord, Tesman, I can hear" (863) when George repeats Thea Elvstead's revelation that Eilert Lovborg has returned to town. Later in the play, Hedda reveals that she does not even like George and that she married him out of desperation. "I'd danced myself out, dear Judge," she tells Judge Brack. "My time was up" (874). We can see that George means nothing to Hedda when she admits, "Just once in my life, I want to help shape someone's destiny," (888) referring to Eilert Lovborg. Obviously, having power over George and helping to shape his destiny means nothing to her. George's weakness to Hedda is ultimately revealed when she convinces him to let her keep Lovborg's manuscript that George had found. We are left to wonder if George is unable to stand up to his wife or unwilling? Maybe he understands that his wife has the strength to secure his position by any means necessary. After all, her marriage to him, which she considers a life sentence to boredom, reveals her astuteness in recognizing and doing whatever she must to secure a place in society.

The woman who ends up having the most control in George's life is Thea Elvstead. From the beginning, George reveals that Thea has retained influence in his life from their earlier days of courtship when he calls her "My dear Miss Rysing—I mean Mrs. Elvsted" (862). Thea makes no attempt to hide her desperation to find a man to secure her position in life. She reveals that she married the widow of the children whose nanny she had been, but she did not love him, and she abandoned him when she had the chance for a life with Eilert Lovborg. Although Thea acts weak and insecure, we can see that she is playing the role society has scripted for her. She is fearless when it comes to getting what she wants. In spite of her memory of Hedda's cruelty when they were in school, she does not hesitate to issue a quiet threat to Hedda when she arrives at the Tesman's house in her evening dress to find Lovborg and Hedda cozy on the sofa looking at old photos. She responds to Hedda's greeting by saying, "Perhaps I should go in and have a word with your husband" (885). By the end of the play, when Thea realizes that Lovborg is dead, she wastes no time in turning her attention to George and tempting him with the opportunity to help her reconstruct Lovborg's book. George falls easily into the clutches of Thea and casts aside his wife by offering her to Judge Brack, who shamelessly flirts with Hedda whenever he is alone with her. George surely knows the reputation of the Judge, but he seems uncaring when Hedda asks how she is supposed to spend her nights while George is helping Thea with the book. "Oh, I'm sure Judge Brack will be kind enough to keep you company," he responds (910). And just like that, Thea has won George Tesman.

Ibsen created a complex relationship between George Tesman and the women in his life that highlighted the desperate lengths women in the late 1800's felt forced to go to secure their place in society. Aunt Julia bravely went through life single, but near the end, she placed her fortune and her reputation in her nephew's ability to use his education and marriage to elevate their family for future generations. Hedda gave up on keeping her status and fell into the safety net of George Tesman's family, only to realize that he offered her no security. His ambitions were placed in jeopardy by the success of Eilert Lovborg. Ultimately, perhaps, Hedda's death was a victory for her and for Thea. Maybe Thea would live for both of them. Earlier, Hedda recognized in Thea a boldness that she lacked when she asked Thea what people would say if she did not return to her husband. Thea answered, "They'll say whatever they want, God knows. But I only did what I had to do" (867). This lack of concern for what others might think was beyond Hedda's reach, but she admired courage, and when Lovborg told Hedda, "[Thea] has the courage to take action" (885), Hedda agreed that courage is the "crucial thing." Then she turned to Thea and said, ". . . then—maybe—life has a chance to be lived" (885).

In *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen creates three characters, Julia Tesman, Hedda Gabler, and Thea Elvstead, who continue to be appreciated by audiences. Ibsen uses these characters to represent the desire of all human beings "to achieve . . . freedom" (Hossian). In their pursuit, George Tesman seems reduced to a

pawn in a skillfully played game in which the women show “[utter] contempt for ordinary social ethics” (Haakonsen qtd. in Hossain).

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Fire and Desire in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

by

Ashley Hatch

Second Place Literary Essay, Grenada

Henrik Ibsen demonstrates the fire theme in his play *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda's need and desire to be in power and above everyone else drives her emotions to the fiery pits of jealousy and envy. She is filled with malice and a heart that burns for power and wealth. Ibsen creates this character to expose the cruelty of the Victorian society that attempts to control women and succeeds in pushing them beyond the limits of moral propriety. Hedda Gabler's circumstances create an explosion of jealousy and envy that burn so deeply that the fire within her heart destroys any hope she has of happiness.

Hedda Gabler is not a typical woman of her time. In his essay "Ibsen's Treatment of Women," Amir Hossain explores how Ibsen creates Hedda to be a "human being" and not a "woman." Hossain suggests, "The word 'woman,' in fact, implies the 'role' intended for her by the society or man, who sets norm for her. She would be weak, gentle, comforting, caring, tame, and obedient." Hedda is the opposite of this view of a woman. She is "strong-willed, determined, intelligent . . . and easily bored with trivial daily activities" (Hossain). The audience can clearly see when her burning desire for power surfaces.

First, the audience sees Hedda's smoldering disdain for her husband George Tesman when she goes out of her way to humiliate his beloved Aunt Julia in Act I. She sees Aunt Julia's hat lying on the chair and is quick to say that it is the maid's hat. Aunt Julia is clearly offended and says the hat is hers. When Hedda pretends to be surprised and questions that the hat belongs to her husband's aunt, Aunt Julia says, "Yes, it really is [my hat]. And for that matter it's not so old either, my dear little Hedda" (860). Hedda reveals in Act II that she had known all along that the hat did not belong to the maid, but she played this little game out of boredom and the desire to let it be known that she has no respect for George's family. Hedda also rejects Aunt Julia's gift of the maid, who is like a part of the Tesman family. She says, "That maid won't last, Tesman" (860) and further rejects the family by rebuffing the idea of referring to George's aunt as family. Tesman asks Hedda to consider calling his aunt "Aunt Julia," but she responds saying, "Tesman, for God's sake, don't ask me to do that. I've told you that before. I'll try to call her Aunt once in a while and that's enough" (861). This response, as well as her not wanting to take George's last name, shows the audience that she does not connect with the family at all. It also shows a weakness within Tesman that he cannot pull the

reigns on Hedda. This example Ibsen creates, shows the role changes in the norms of Victorian society where Hedda is stronger than George. Tesman's weakness makes it easy for Hedda to smolder the ones he loves.

Hedda's smoldering fire quickly ignites when she finds out that her former classmate Thea has played a part in Eilert Lovborg's book being published. Eilert was a one-time love interest of Hedda's, but the audience is never certain how far their relationship went. Regardless, there is envy in Hedda's heart when she realizes that Thea has helped Eilert become a success. Janet Garton, senior lecturer in Scandinavian Studies at the University of East Anglia, writes, "Lovborg is to realize Hedda's dreams, and she cannot bear the thought that silly little Thea has inspired him" to explain the reasoning behind Hedda's abrupt ignition. Hedda's main goal in life was to remain a part of the highest social class. She may have seen an opportunity with Eilert through his family connections, but then ended things when she realized she could not turn him from his alcohol addiction. Now Hedda is furious that she had no influence whatsoever on Eilert during their fling, and she has settled for moving down into the middle class through her marriage. Thea was the missing piece to Eilert's wellbeing and the missing piece to their "child" (898).

Hedda realizes that because of the book that Thea and Eilert share, Thea is ultimately gaining the position in the social class that Hedda desired. Hedda sees that Thea is moving up and she is moving down. Eilert's book is such a great success that plans for a sequel have already begun. Hedda knows that Eilert is a better writer than Tesman and knows that he will be more successful. Eilert and Tesman talk about the upcoming lecture series, and Eilert tells Tesman that he will wait for Tesman to get his lectures together. Tesman, being the blinded soul he is, reassures Hedda that he will get a chance to get them to the top when he says, ". . . Hedda, imagine, my dear- Eilert Lovborg won't stand in our way" (881). Hedda responds as if she does not want to be a part of Tesman's book. Hedda believes that Tesman will not be as successful as Eilert because Tesman can only write about the past, but Eilert can write about the past, present, and future. Her burning emotions of no power and no control heat up her fury even more.

The audience clearly sees that Hedda is bursting into flames on the inside when she gives Eilert the firearm to kill himself. Eilert is distraught as he realizes that he has lost his manuscript, but even more upset at the fact that he has lost the book that has "all of Thea's soul. . ." (899). Hedda takes this opportunity to provoke Eilert to end his life. She lacks the courage to end her own life because of fear of scandal, so she contents herself with the ability to exert the power of life or death over another human being. The flame inside of Hedda is raging out of control when she burns Eilert and Thea's book.

After the long night Eilert, Tesman, and Judge Brack had, Eilert is consumed by the manipulative ways of Hedda from when she first gets him to drink again and loses track of his manuscript. Tesman finds the manuscript and brings it home to Hedda. He does not suspect that she will take this opportunity to get rid of the one thing that troubles her. The stove in which she burns the manuscripts symbolizes the fire she feels inside. Hedda's ambitions, which have been verbal and emotional, are escalating to becoming physical. She is beginning to take action, and, as she continues, the fire burns brighter.

Hedda is engulfed in jealousy and envy and loses control of any human decency that she might have had in the beginning. Garton observes, "Hedda has internalized the repressions of her society and her exaggerated fear of scandal renders her incapable of defying public opinion." At this point, Hedda is about to explode. When the news of Eilert's death is revealed, she feels momentary power and pleasure. The fire within begins to consume her. When she realizes that Eilert did not kill himself as she hoped, it is too late to control the fire. Her power over the growing rage inside is slipping.

Then Hedda is forced to watch powerlessly as Thea moves in to take her husband from her. Hedda is disgusted at the sight of them working together to reconstruct Eilert's book. Tesman's actions reveal that once more it is Thea who has power over a man's destiny, not Hedda. Tesman is working with Thea in spite of knowing that Hedda destroyed the original manuscript for him. His actions are a rejection of Hedda and her help. The rejection is complete when he says, "I'll give my whole life to this. . . Every spare minute. My own research will just have to be put aside" (906). There is an implication that Hedda is also being cast aside

as Tesman pushes her to go sit with Judge Brack and tells Judge Brack that he will have to come keep her company as he and Thea work on the manuscripts.

Hedda's plan to get Tesman to focus on his own success has failed and now she must watch as Thea inspires another one of her mates. This makes the flames of jealousy and envy build up even more within her. As Tesman and Thea get to work, Hedda and Judge Brack discuss Eilert and his death. Judge Brack brings up the firearm and how scandalous it would be if people found out that Hedda had given Eilert one of General Gabler's pistols. With a scandal over her head, which she is afraid of, she is now blackmailed by Judge Brack and must do what he says if she wants to avoid scandal. All of Hedda's plans are backfiring on her and her emotions are burning out of control. She can no longer beat back the flames that burn brightly and engulf her inner being.

The heat becomes too much, and Hedda goes into the other room and plays one last tune before extinguishing the flames by reestablishing her identity as the daughter of a general who would win a battle by any means necessary. She uses the element of surprise to escape those who would make her a prisoner and shoots herself through the temple with General Gabler's remaining pistol. She leaves George and Thea speechless as Judge Brack exclaims, "People just don't act that way!" (910).

The character Hedda Gabler was the opposite of the norm for Victorian women during that time in society. A woman was expected to be obedient, but Hedda could not carry the burden of being anyone's prisoner. She would sacrifice her life for freedom.

American poet Robert Frost muses how the world will end in his poem "Fire and Ice" and determines "From what I've tasted of desire/ I hold with those who favor fire." Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* illustrates the utter destruction that comes from fire, especially the burning desire for power. Yet, Hedda is unable to destroy the world. In the end, she appears to be as weak and powerless as Victorian society believed. The fire within her ultimately destroys her. Jealousy and envy are two fire-producing emotions and if we let our desires consume us, we will eventually burn out before our time. Hedda's desires were beyond what she could control and the fire within her destroys everything in its path including her.

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Literacy as a Tool to Freedom in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

by

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First Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

First Place Literary Essay, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Kofi Annan said, “Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope...Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential.” Annan reveals the importance and the power of how being literate, as a roadmap, can have a tremendous impact on a person. This theme can be found in the work of Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, one is taken on a gripping tale of Douglass’ experience in chattel slavery and how he escapes it.

To grasp the struggle of learning to write and read for a slave during the late 18th century and the 19th century, one must first understand the slave codes put in place to guarantee the utter and complete ignorance forced upon those who fell victim to it and the protection it received on a federal level. The United States Constitution is by far one of many great documents this country has produced. However, when it was written it implicitly gave southern states the authority to continue the practice of slavery. The third paragraph, later rewritten with the passage of the 14th amendment, of Article 1 section 2 reads as:

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons...

The “three fifths of all other persons” refer to those that were kept in bondage. In addition to allowing human property to be counted as partially human, the constitution allowed states to continue to import slaves until 1808, after which congress would be able to intervene and impose taxes on those found bringing in human cargo (U.S. Constitution Article 1 Section 9). With such a blanket protection of the state’s investment in this dark and lucrative business, many states began to enact laws that hindered blacks from accessing education such as the 1819 Missouri Literacy Law and the 1830 Kentucky Property Tax Law which taxed free African-Americans and forbade them from voting or enslaved African-Americans from attending school (United States). The slave codes, reinforced by laws enacted by the states, helped to solidify the position that slaves should remain illiterate for fear of rebellions. In Douglass’s *Narrative* he states:

I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.
(106)

Douglass’s insight into slavery and its less than human conditions were the exact basis of the slave codes and laws that helped enforce them. Therefore, the use of literacy as a tool to escape to freedom in Frederick Douglass’ narrative had a profound effect on his route to freedom.

The beginnings of Douglass’ literary development begins with his young mistress in Baltimore. According to Douglass, Sophia Auld was an independent woman from the city whom never owned a slave prior to his arrival. Thus, leaving one with an impression that Mrs. Auld, is unaware of the laws in place to prevent her from legally educating him. He continues describing her affectionately in chapter six as “her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music” (63). The reader learns from Douglass that Mrs. Auld “kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C.” (63), breaking away from southern societal norms and law. David Blight, editor of the second edition of the *Narrative*, notes that Douglass frequently told this

part of his life in his abolitionist works and circles. To Blight, it represented slavery's effects on the kindest of people, even a potential mother figure. However, it also reveals not only Douglass' reverence for Mistress Auld, but also the profound importance this moment of his life would have on him.

Sophia's husband, Mr. Hugh Auld the brother of Douglass' master, after discovering her educating Douglass, forbids her from teaching Douglass any further arguing:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (63-64)

Thus, bringing an end to the education Douglass receives from his mistress. However, a flame is lit in Douglass. "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it" (64), says Douglass. He sees that what Mr. Auld is trying to prevent him from gaining something important to his emancipation because of the reverence in which Auld was trying to keep it from him. This denial of an education from his mistress, however, does not stop Douglass from seeking further gains in literacy. In the next chapter, having to find a new method to learn to read and write, Douglass ingeniously uses the white boys of the neighborhood, through trickery, to teach him to read and write. From this point on, the reader begins to see Douglass struggle with the concept of obtaining his freedom and the cruelties of the slave system, often losing his hope of ever gaining his freedom because of the masters he would encounter and the laws they were upholding.

By 1833, Douglass makes up in his mind, along with a group of other slaves, to run for his freedom. Prior to their attempt to escape to freedom, Douglass takes his love for learning and liberates the mental chains of bondage from his fellow slaves by also teaching them "a strong desire to learn how to read" (94). With disregard to the slave codes set in place, such as a 1740 South Carolina law prohibiting slaves to be taught to write under penalty of forfeiture of monetary value (Mitchell 85), Douglass sets up a makeshift school that met on Sundays feigning activities such as "wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky.... for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings" (94). Dr. Mitchell of Pennsylvania State University asserts:

Africans who could read often taught others using whatever means and opportunities available...Some Africans taught themselves to read and write by observing whites. In many instances this process involved great ingenuity and courage as getting caught usually resulted in severe punishment or death. (88)

This is evidenced in Douglass' choice to hold his lessons on the "Sabbath day" as aforementioned. Douglass use of their Sundays to continue to teach other slaves to read and write creates a strong sense of importance he had for the need to teach fellow slaves the power of reading and writing. Eventually, through careful questioning of members of the group to "ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition" (96), the reader sees Douglass develop plans on how he and the other slaves would escape to the north. Yet one still wonders, though Douglass mentions in the narrative that all the slaves would suffer together for their cause, if the violent consequences associated with learning to read and write weighed at the back of their minds? At any rate, Douglass' influence upon the other slaves' desire to escape to a state of both mental and physical freedom from the shackles that bound them, shows his determination to instill into others that having knowledge and liberating the mind from chains was the first step to gaining their freedom.

The *Narrative* progresses, chronicling the betrayal Douglass' group faces. Eventually Douglass brings the reader to the point where he gains his freedom in 1838, though many details of the journey are left out. Readers of the *Narrative* find after Douglass is married to Anna Murray, the couple settles in New Bedford. At this juncture in Douglass' tale, the readership sees, in the overall text and from background information already known about Douglass as a person, the use of literacy is not only used to secure his freedom but to

put an entire country on further notice once more about a socio-economic system that contradicts what the American people are supposed to represent.

“The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren...” (119) This testament of Douglass’ gives a clear and concise view of how literacy instrumental, not only for Douglass gaining his freedom, but also as a medium to speak against slavery via the newspaper and in books he would later publish. Mitchell argues “...the more restrictive, debasing and violent the treatment, the more rebellious and imaginative the African” (89). This becomes apparent when Douglass is approached by “a young man to me, and inquired if I did not wish to take the ‘*Liberator*’” (119). The doorway opens for Douglass to express his ideas to the world, especially the thoughts and feeling that are now brewing from his involvement with the anti-slavery circuit he is exposed to. However, Mitchell argues that the vernacular in which generations after the Civil War spoke was reflective of a “pervasive ‘negative’ psycho-social affect of centuries of European/White American cultural domination” (92). However, Douglass uses the *Liberator*, and later the *North Star*, to help decry the damages slavery inflicted upon a vast majority of human beings, as well as, to debunk what was deemed as a societal norm while impressing on the population of the time the truth of how equal in thinking slaves were to their white counterparts. Ultimately, the overall written account of his tale from enslavement to freedom is his most powerful agency of literacy as his tool to freedom. By using the written word to reveal the truths of Southern society, Douglass was able to leverage for his freedom and gain international recognition.

Though the belief that this country’s earliest colonial laws were structured to help support self-induced white fear of racial differences, between them and the Africans they imported, remains a topic of much debate. One thing is clear. Even with four hundred years of repression physically and psychologically, there were still many, such as Frederick Douglass, who found their way to freedom after gaining a voice via literacy. His *Narrative* joins the cannon of slave narratives, which reveals the devastating truths of slavery. It also confirms many thoughts of the south during this time, to keep the slave ignorant is to maintain power over them. “Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity”, Douglass says (62). Douglass throughout the *Narrative* illustrates how being literate set him on a path to freedom, firstly by liberating his mind and finally by setting him on a path that would forever change his life and give rise to a great American champion of social justice for previously enslaved African Americans. Shedding the mental chains of one of the world’s most brutal socio-economic systems and gaining physical freedom, as well as psychological freedom, was ultimately one of the most lucrative tools African American slaves, such as Douglass, had to acquiring their freedom.

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Monkey See, Monkey Do

by

Will Flasck

Second Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

Monkey see, monkey do. This is an undeniable aspect of the human condition, that humans are destined to imitate. The son of the loving father is more likely to be loving in the same way the son of a cruel father is more likely to be cruel. It is on this grounds that one must come to understand man and his relation to God. Not God as a literal being or deity, but God as a means of achieving one’s highest being.

To first begin understanding, one must take into consideration Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy is represented by a pyramid, at its base is man’s basic needs, food, water, so on. At the top of the pyramid is “self-actualization.” At this point in the hierarchy one is said to have reached their “full potential.” However, it is, for all intents and purposes, impossible to reach the tip of the pyramid. This is largely based on man’s inability to reach a higher purpose. It is here that one must come to terms with the philosophy of Absurdism.

Absurdism is a school of thought founded by French philosopher Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which Camus equates the human condition to that of the mythical King Sisyphus from Greek legends. Camus stipulates that the universe is cold and unresponsive to the woes of man, and that any attempt to reach out to a higher being or power will be met with indifference. It is in this way that life, for all it is worth, is meaningless. Thus, any attempt to reach out to any form of higher meaning is considered “absurd” and likened to that of Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a mountain, only to have it tumble back down to the base of said mountain.

Thus, thanks to the absurd nature of man’s being, it is impossible for him to reach the top of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs. Every time one attempts to reach the peak, they will inevitably have their boulder tumble down the side of the pyramid. It is here that man’s instinctual imitation and the idea of God come into play. Ludwig Feuerbach, in his work *The Essence of Christianity* stipulates that man invented God, instilling him with man’s highest qualities such as justice, love, and compassion. In this way man would be provided a role model to imitate. However, man later forgot he invented God, then stipulated that God must have invented him. From here God was no longer a mythical role model, but a literal deity to appease. Only through appeasing God would man be permitted to the top of Maslow’s hierarchy. However, as it has been noted previously, it is impossible for one to reach the top of the hierarchy. This was solved by the notion of an afterlife. That by following the word of God one might achieve self-actualization by becoming a part of God after death. It is here that the contemporary lifestyle comes into play.

The ideal of god, in contemporary life, has become diluted by man’s abuse of his image. Any higher being has become commodified that is sold by the likes of Joel Osteen. In this way, God is no longer a role model to be followed, but rather a cure-all sold at a profit. Furthermore, the lack of faith is on the rise. According to the pew research center, while religion is still incredibly popular, its growth has slowed slightly, while atheism continues to swell in popularity. It is through things such as the separation of Church and State that have removed defined purpose from the life of man. Previously one had no choice but to live in a country ruled by a monarch who was “chosen by God to rule.” In this way, by serving the will of one’s

country, one was serving the will of God. In this sense, so long as one was working, one was climbing up the hierarchy of needs, towards self-actualization by securing a place with God after death. However, God is no longer necessarily a part of everyday life. Further from that, his image has been bastardized to such a degree that he no longer serves the purpose of providing any individual with self-actualization, but rather serve the agenda of various groups. Take for example groups such as the KKK, which use religion, and thus the ideals of God to justify their hatred. In this way, God has been stretched too thin and deformed leading to a loss of defined purpose in the life of other individuals who might otherwise follow God. It is in this way that the individual lost the meaning of life, and once again begins to roll a Sisyphian boulder.

In this vacuum of meaning and purpose, the individual begins to search for meaning beyond God, this results in the imitation of his fellow man, rather than the ideal of God, as it was originally created. Instead of using a proposedly perfect being as a role model, the individual imitates those around him, monkey see, monkey do, as it were. It is in this way that commodities become the new ruling deities of life. Commodities, in this instance, should be considered material wealth or status symbols that can be bought and sold. In this way self-actualization is no longer found in becoming closer or more like God, but rather attempting to find fulfillment by drinking Coca-Cola, imitating actors in advertisements, or imitating celebrities by achieving a similar amount of material wealth or social status as them. This idea that commodities have replaced God is further explored in Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*.

In this novel the protagonist, Shadow, is plunged into a war between two factions, the "Old Gods" and the "New Gods." In the context of the story the old gods represent mythical figures such as Odin, Loki, and various other figures throughout different religious and myths. The new gods, on the other hand, are represented by items such as television, the internet, and various other purchased goods. By the end of the story, there is no decisive victor in the war, however this only implies that is still up to mankind to decide who should and will win the war between God and commodity.

Through the observation of man's relation to God, commodities, and his own self-actualization, one can find that each individual has a choice to make. Though it is impossible to reach the top of Maslow's Hierarchy by any means, it is possible for one to withstand the rolling of the Sisyphian boulder by means of a perceived goal through higher purpose. Self-actualization remains a light at the end of a tunnel for each individual, and each person must pick their own way of reaching the end. However, due to man's innate instinct to imitate those around him, it must be decided by society, as a whole, which means of self-actualization is best. The decision remains between that which is completion through a higher purpose, or completion through commodity.

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Joy Without a Leg to Stand On

by

Elizabeth Howell

First Place Literary Essay, Goodman

In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," Hulga is blind to everything she is missing in the world around her. Her wooden leg, glasses, and heart condition--her physical handicaps--serve both to obscure and to symbolize her other, internal ones. She acts as though she is better than everyone else, but she does not see that she is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually handicapped.

Hulga may not be aware of her internal handicaps, but she is extremely aware of her external ones. O'Connor writes that Hulga's birth name had been Joy, but that she changed it because Hulga believed that "the full genius" of its "ugly sound" fit her (171-172). Hulga acts as if she does not mind her deformities, but they secretly do bother her, hence the changing of her name from Joy. Her obsession with her external ugliness has led her to choose a name that reflects her internal ugliness. In addition, she has no joy and sees no reason to go by a name that implies that she does. In fact, she believes that "one of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn herself into Hulga" (O'Connor 172). Hulga has taken everything that has happened to her and allowed it to become who she is, blinding her to the truth of what she's missing.

Kate Oliver points out another of Hulga's symbolic disabilities in her paper, "O'Connor's 'Good Country People.'" Oliver writes that Hulga's "weak heart symbolizes her emotional detachment—an inability to love anyone or anything" (234). Hulga has allowed her bitterness at being kept from the life she wants to consume her; forced to live in her childhood home, she has grown to hate her surroundings, both human and otherwise. She does not "like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men" (O'Connor 173). Having grown up different – disfigured –Hulga was the target of more than her fair share of mockery and criticism. Over the years, she has come

Glasses, in *Good Country People*, are linked to intelligence by Manley Pointer: "I like girls that wear glasses," he said. "I think a lot" (O'Connor 177). Glasses were invented to help people see clearly, which exactly what Hulga cannot do. Oliver writes that "eyeglasses also reflect Joy-Hulga's intelligence, as she possesses a Ph.D. in philosophy. But she is blind to reality, having knowledge only of books and abstract ideas, rather than of people and concrete objects" (234). Hulga believes herself to see the world as it truly is, but her obsession with the metaphysical has blinded her to the physical. Hulga even says this herself, as she tells Pointer, "some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see" (O'Connor 180). Hulga sees exactly what she believes herself to see. She sees nothing, which is ironic, considering the entire purpose of her eyeglasses.

The final point of symbolism is the most important: Hulga's wooden leg. It, which she "took care [of as] someone else would his soul," represents exactly that – her soul and her spiritual handicaps (O'Connor 180). Hulga's wooden leg, once the symbol of her differences, now represents all that is important to her. It is her everything, and "no one ever touched it but her" (O'Connor 180). Allowing anyone else to touch, much less unfasten, her leg, would likely be akin to, if not more intense than, giving up her virginity. A person's soul is his very being, and this is how Hulga regards her leg. Yet, at Pointer's insistence, she allows him to see, even remove, her leg. O'Connor says that "it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his" (181). This echoes the language of a Christian surrendering their life to God. This is especially ironic because Hulga prides herself in her nonbelief in a higher power. Hulga states previously that she does not "even believe in God" and that "in [her] economy, [she is] saved and [Pointer or the Christian] is damned" (O'Connor 178-179). This tells us not only that O'Connor wrote

her as being spiritually blind but that as being proud of it. Clearly, Hulga has an untrue belief that she is superior to Pointer and to Christianity by believing in nothing.

By the end of the story, O'Connor has used each of Hulga's physical disabilities to show where Hulga has been blinded all along. "Good Country People" ends with Pointer leaving with Hulga's glasses and wooden leg, the symbols of her soul and her lack of vision (O'Connor 182). This leaves her with only her heart, which was already broken in the literal sense, symbolizing her inability to love or empathize. Symbolically, not only has Pointer taken the essence of who Hulga is, but he has taken her "sight," or lack thereof. He has figuratively taken both her soul and her grandiose visions of "nothing." Hulga begins with multiple disabilities, blind to the world around her and unaware of this blindness. The ending of "Good Country People" furthers her disability and strips her of the notion that she is better than those around her. When Pointer strips her of her leg and eyeglasses, he strips her of her uniqueness and her ideas about both him and the world.

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Female Rebellion in Literature

by

Abigail Proctor

Second Place Literary Essay, Goodman

Women throughout history have always been looked down upon and treated as property. Until recent times, they were "trained" to be submissive, dependent upon their fathers or husbands, and silent. Two works of literature, however, reveal characters that are above this and who are domineering, witty, and independent. In "The Wife of Bath" tale and *King Lear*, there is a sense of rebellion against women's expectations and position among society.

The Wife of Bath is a likable character who has had dominance over all of her husbands and blatantly announces her love of sex and infidelity. She is loud and blunt with every sentence she speaks, yet gives off a sense of authority and wisdom in some ways. On her own journey of spiritual revival, she preaches proudly of the fact God has no commandments about multiple husbands or remaining a virgin, which some may disagree with. These are her first words of rebellion against the Bible and the thought of virginity among women before marriage. Another specific line Chaucer has the Wife say in "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath" is, "All through my life I have the power / over his own body, and not he" (158-159). Women during this time were owned by their husbands as just another piece of property, so in saying this she is rebelling against this inequality of the sexes. *She* believes herself to be the owner of her husband, and there is no doubt in her about this.

The Wife is a character that will not be tamed by a man, not even when faced with abuse. In the following lines of "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath", she displays her untamable spirit:

suddenly I plucked three leaves
out of his book, right as he was reading, and also
I hit him on the cheek with my fist, so
that he fell down into our fire backward.
He started up like a raging lion
And hit me on the head with his fist
So that I lay on the floor as if I were dead. (Chaucer 790-796)

She will not tolerate even verbal abuse, which comes from the book her fifth husband reads about women being evil manipulators throughout every story. So, she hits him hard after ripping out pages of his book, so hard that you might think twice about women being physically weak as well. He does hit her back, though, so hard that she falls to the floor almost unconscious. In the following lines, she retaliates against him for it:

‘And have you murdered me thus for my land?
Before I die, I yet want to kiss you.’
He came near, and kneeled down gently
and said, ‘Dear sister, Alison,
so help me God, I shall never hit you;
what have I done, you are to blame for yourself.
Forgive me for it, I beseech you.’
But yet again I hit him on the cheek,
and said, ‘Thief, this much I am avenged; (Chaucer 801-809)

She moans about dying to wittingly bring him in closer to hit him once again and show him who is truly master of the household. Though most women are meant to be subservient to their husbands, she has demonstrated the opposite of that unexpectedly. The Wife is truly a feminist who can hold her own and prove herself to be more than what society once expected women to be. Chaucer knew his character would be seen as a rebellion against society’s thoughts of women to all who read his works.

King Lear by William Shakespeare has three important female characters, both good and evil. None of them, however, act as one might expect of a king’s daughter. They are defiant, deceitful, and most importantly, in charge. Goneril and Regan, the two evil sisters, manage to manipulate not only their father but also their husbands to do their dirty work to become the true queens of their new dowry. These two sisters are strong characters who show themselves to be more than submissive wives under their husband’s and father’s feet.

Regan is one sister who shows rebellion against her father and her role as a woman. After receiving land from Lear, she stands against him and wants to strip him of even more power. In this scene of *King Lear*, Regan insults her father and tries to convince him to get rid of his knights, which is his last sign of being a king:

O sir, you are old.
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of his confine. You should be ruled and led
By some discretion that discerns your state
Better than you yourself. Therefore, I pray you
That to our sister you do make return.
Say you have wronged her. (Shakespeare 2.4.164-170)

Goneril’s condition for Lear to come back to her is to dismiss half of his soldiers, and here in these lines Regan tries to convince him to do so. She has declared in the first five lines that her own father is too old to rule the land anymore in the hopes he may see his own flaws and give up his title to his two daughters. She has continuously manipulated her father through her words since the beginning of the play, though as the play progresses she becomes harsher about it.

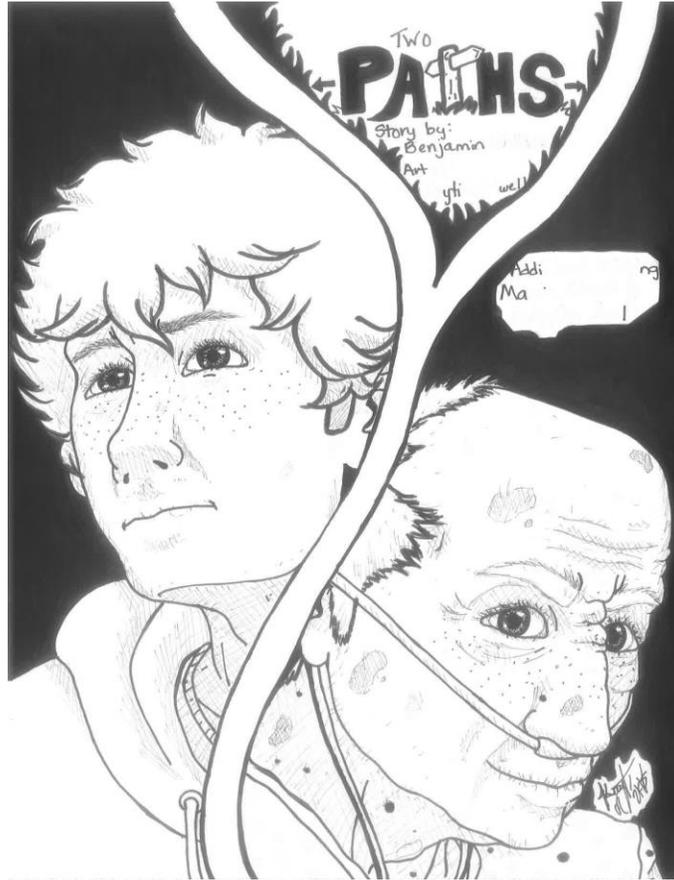
Lear then immediately grovels at her feet, not hearing the true hate in her voice, saying; “Dear daughter, I confess that I am old. / Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg / That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food” (Shakespeare 2.4.173-175). It is Regan’s duty as a woman, and especially as a daughter, to care for her father and respect him, but instead she has insulted and shamed him so that he feels the need to kneel. This is a good example of rebellion against Regan’s position among the characters of this play. Where at first, she is meant to seem an innocent and loving daughter, she turns into a cruel yet cunning woman. In this moment, positions have been switched and a *king* has bowed to a deceitful woman. Shakespeare wrote this so well; few people may have realized just how mutinous this was.

These scenes and tales show signs of feminism far ahead of their time, revealing a side of women that may not have been explored before during this era. They are a rebellion against the poor views of women, and, instead, show them with great cunning, superiority, and bluntness. These two women have stepped out of their stereotypical roles and become a great sign of female superiority. They can forever be seen as the beginning signs of gender equality in literature.

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Drama



The Two Paths
by

Ben Wilkes

First Place Drama, Grenada
Honorable Mention Drama, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Characters:

OLDER NICK: Wears all black (also the narrator)

ROBERT: little boy, also grandson of Nick.

YOUNGER NICK: Enjoys hiking

FEAR: Wears scientist coat and glasses, carries a clipboard and pen

BRAVERY: Dresses as a daring hiker wearing a book bag with a telescope, map, and compass

LOVE: loves everything and everyone, carries a basket of flowers

ANGER: Dresses like a drill sergeant, constantly picks fight (except with **LOVE** and **NICK**), carries a fake stage knife

LAZINESS: Does not care about anything, carries a pillow and blanket

SMARTS: Wears glasses, carries schoolbook, believes in hard work

ACT 1

*Lights come up on **OLDER NICK** who sits in a chair in the middle of the stage. There is a table with a large book on it beside the chair and a lamp behind the chair. There is a knock on a door somewhere off stage.*

OLDER NICK: Come in, the door is unlocked.

*ROBERT runs on stage and bugs **OLDER NICK** then sits on the floor in front of the chair.*

OLDER NICK: What brings you here, my precious grandson?

ROBERT: I just came by to see you. Dad said it would be a good idea.

OLDER NICK: Just make yourself at home. I welcome the company. So, tell me how is school going for you?

ROBERT: Well, it's going fine. I get picked on a lot, but my grades are good.

OLDER NICK: Robert, there is nothing wrong with getting picked on. Of course it hurts, but it does help us grow. I am glad that your grades are good. You're smart, like your grandmother was.

ROBERT: And like you are.

Robert starts to say some more but stops himself and there is a moment of silence.

OLDER NICK: Okay, what's on your mind? You want to talk about it?

ROBERT: It's just, I wanted to know how you are so calm, even this close to death?

OLDER NICK: Who told you I was dying? *(pauses)* Well, I guess you would have found out soon enough. But. To answer the question, it's simply because I picked the right paths in life. I stood at some crossroads for a long time, and sometimes I wished I could take both paths, but I knew I couldn't. Let me tell you of such a time. It's been ages and ages ago, the story of the two paths that seemed to go into the thickest of woods that were shimmering gold.

(Lights go down)

ACT 2

*Lights come up on a stage with two directional signs pointing different ways to two paths. **NICK** stands in front of the sign looking at both paths.*

NICK: What do I do, what do I do? Two paths and I can't take both. Two paths that do not cross. I could take the one on the right, but what would I miss on the left path? I can't decide... Let me just take a minute and breathe. Both seem to be fair paths. *(Squats down to look as far as he can.)* Oh, I guess they are really about the same. Ok I'll just go down this path.

*(**NICK** makes his way toward the path on the right when **Fear** runs in screaming frantically.)*

FEAR: STOP! WAIT! *(Fear grabs Nick's shoulders)* Are you sure that is a wise choice? That path seems like it is less traveled and a lot more dangerous; there are tree roots across the road, loose gravel, and the path is way smaller than the path on the left. *(Begins to write on his clipboard)* If you ask me, the safest and wisest choice is the path on the left.

*(**BRAVERY** marches onto stage.)*

BRAVERY: Hold the phone; do not listen to this lily liver! *(Fear's posture becomes more alert)*
He is afraid of his own shadow...

FEAR: And you would have us jump off the Eiffel Tower if given the chance!

BRAVERY: What's wrong with a little adventure, Faintheart!

FEAR: Nothing... if there is nothing that may cause any bodily harm.

BRAVERY: Listen, Yellow Belly, the path you picked looks sooo boring. If we take this path, then who knows what we will find! Plus look it does not even look like either on has been traveled today.

FEAR: Exactly my point!

BRAVERY: Treasure!

FEAR: Bears!

BRAVERY: A rare sight!

FEAR: A lion!

BRAVERY: A great camping sight!

FEAR: A tiger!

NICK: Okay! Both of you just be quiet for a second!

FEAR: Then tell Lionheart here to be reasonable.

BRAVERY: Only when the jellyfish man grows a backbone!

NICK: (*agitated*) Seriously, both of you quiet down! It is already hard enough to decide without you two arguing! How am I supposed to decide based off fear and bravery?

LOVE: (*From off stage*) All right, Boys, that's enough of that. (*Love skips onto stage wearing a big smile*) Don't you just **love** the weather? (*Fear and Bravery neither answer but instead turn away so not to look at each other*)

NICK: Hi, Love, yes, the weather is amazing, but these two have been at each other's throats again.

LOVE: (*marches over to Fear and Bravery and grabs their ears*) What have I told you two about fighting?

FEAR: Ouch! That hurts, Love. please let go of my ear!

BRAVERY: Indeed! Love, please release my ear!

LOVE: Now, Fear, is there something you want to say to Bravery?

FEAR: N...(*Fear starts to say no but sees Love glaring*) I'm sorry, Bravery.

LOVE: Bravery?

BRAVERY: Not to thi...

LOVE: (*Grabs Bravery's ear again and says sweetly*) What was that? I didn't hear you very well.

BRAVERY: Ow ow ow... I'm sorry, Fear! Now, will you let go of my ear. (*Love lets him go*)

NICK: So, Love, any idea which path we should take?

LOVE: I don't care as long as we all get along.

BRAVERY: (*pulls a telescope from his bag and looks down both paths*) The right still seems like a wonderful path!

FEAR: (*flipping through papers on his clipboard*) Yet all data points to the left being the safest!

NICK: Well, I need to decide at some point today!

ANGER: Then man up and do it! (*Marches in and salutes Nick*) Commander Nick reporting for duty sir!

BRAVERY: Great, who invited Buzz kill?

ANGER: What was that, Nature Boy? (*Grabs Bravery by the collar*) You want to fight?

LOVE: Please, Anger, I know it's hard but control yourself.

ANGER: (*Throws BRAVERY to the ground while looking at LOVE*) Anything for you, Love.

NICK: Of course, she can tame you!

ANGER: Love and you are the only masters of me, Sir! (*Salutes NICK*)

NICK: You don't have to salute me every time you know?

FEAR: That *is* kind of weird.

ANGER: What's weird, you toothpick! (*ANGER takes a step towards FEAR*)

FEAR: Na...no...nothing, sir...I got to go. (*FEAR runs off stage*)

BRAVERY: Yellow Belly! Can't even stand up for yourself!

ANGER: And *you* can? (*ANGER says without looking at him*)

BRAVERY: I'll go check on him! (*Runs off after him*)

LOVE: Really, Anger, that temper of yours is terrible.

ANGER: (*apologetic*) Sorry, Love, I'll try to do better.

NICK: Just tell me what path you want.

ANGER: I agree with Bravery. I like a challenge.

LAZINESS: (*Entering yawning*) I don't...Both look the same to me, why don't we just stay and rest here.

LOVE: Hi, Laziness.

NICK: Of course, you would want to rest instead of hiking.

ANGER: That's why we need the rough path it will be good for you!

LAZINESS: (*lays down on the floor puts his head on the pillow and covers up*) Good night everyone.

LOVE: Classic lazy!

ANGER: (*kicks laziness*) Wake up!

LAZINESS: (*sits up yawning but doesn't stand up*) I'm up! I'm up!

ANGER: You need to help us figure this situation out!

LAZINESS: (*sleepily*) And you need to relax (*Falls down onto the pillow and starts snoring*)

ANGER: (*Breathing hard*) Why I...

LOVE: (*Runs over to ANGER*) Breathe now breathe. In and out, in and out, you are a butterfly.

ANGER: (*angrily*) I am a butterfly.

LOVE: You are at peace.

ANGER: (*still miffed*) I am at peace

LOVE: You are a peaceful river.

ANGER: (*calm*) I am a peaceful river.

LOVE: Better?

ANGER: Much, thank you, Love. (*LAZINESS snores really loudly, angrily*) Wake up you useless emotion! (*ANGER pulls LAZINESS to his feet*)

SMARTS: Wh...What is all this racket I cannot hear myself th...think!

NICK: (*Sarcastically*) Just Anger being Anger.

LAZINESS: And being rude. (*Sits back down by pillow*)

ANGER: Well if...

LOVE: Anger! (*Gets in ANGER's face*) That's enough out of you!

NICK: And I'm still no closer to finding out which path to take!

SMARTS: (*pushes glasses up*) Well th...that is actually a really easy pr...problem to solve.

Considering th...the circumstances and considering what would and co...could, I would sa...say the path less tra...travelled.

ANGER: I Agree! (*LAZINESS snores*) Laziness!

LAZINESS: (*Snaps awake, grabs his stuff, and runs off stage*) Just take your time!

ANGER: (*chasing after him*) Get back here and let me knock that sleepy head right off!

SMARTS: oh brother, w...will they ev...ever learn. Lea...Leave it to **ANGER** to Ma...make things complicated.

LOVE: Let's go stop them. (*Chases ANGER, followed by smarts*) Anger, don't you dare hurt him!

SMARTS: Gu...Guys can...can't we talk this ou...out?

NICK: Well, as normal they are a bunch of characters. (*pauses*) I know what path to take. (*Exits stage right as the lights go down*)

ACT 3

Lights come up on Mind who is sitting in the same setup as before with the book in his lap.

OLDER NICK: I chose the path less traveled, the one many a man passed without much

thought. That made all the difference in the world.

ROBERT: That's an amazing story, Grandpa Nick. I guess I should be heading home. It's getting late.

OLDER NICK: Before you go, I want to leave you a thought to ponder! Remember, Robert, you are faced with two paths, one is wide and easy, and many choose this path without realizing it leads to nothing but death, pain, and suffering. But the second path is narrow and rough. Few ever find this path, but those who do find eternal life at the end of it. So which path will you take? That's up to you, and it will make all the difference.

(ROBERT hugs OLDER NICK.)

ROBERT: I love you, Grandpa!

OLDER NICK: I love you to. *(ROBERT runs off stage)* I love you so very much.

(LOVE, enters followed by the other emotions as follows: FEAR, BRAVERY, ANGER, LAZINESS, and SMARTS.)

LOVE: It's time for you to come home too. *(LOVE holds out her hand and OLDER NICK grabs it and LOVE leads him out past the other emotions. Each emotion speaks as OLDER NICK passes)*

OLDER NICK: You ok, Fear? I know how you can be?

FEAR: Yes, for once I'm not afraid. *(FEAR exits the stage waving goodbye to OLDER NICK)*

BRAVERY: It's time for one last adventure, my friend.

OLDER NICK: And I'm lucky that you were here to help me. *(BRAVERY exits)*

(ANGER salutes OLDER NICK.)

OLDER NICK: I keep telling you that you don't have to salute me.

ANGER: Negative, Sir! A soldier's salute is a perfect send off.

OLDER NICK: *(laughs a little)* At ease, Anger, at ease. *(ANGER snaps to at ease and then exits stage)*

OLDER NICK: La...

LAZINESS: Just go, the next life is waiting for you, I don't belong there. *(LAZINESS exits)*

SMARTS: Just do...don't forget me.

OLDER NICK: Never. *(SMARTS exits, OLDER NICK turns to LOVE)* Will you be leaving me, too?

LOVE: No, how can I leave you when you are going to where I am?

OLDER NICK: Thanks, Love. *(They hug and exit the stage)*

Fish
by

Elizabeth Howell

First Place Drama, Goodman
Second Place Drama, 2018 MCCCWA Competition

Characters:

- Imogene (“Em”): Main character
- Clay: Imogene’s childhood best friend

Mentioned:

- Maria: Imogene’s Mexican stepmother
- Angus (“Gus”): Imogene’s father

Setting:

Imogene is sitting on the side of a creek. It is just before sunset, and the sky has already begun to turn shades of red and yellow. Cicadas can be heard screaming from the surrounding trees, and mosquitos have begun to come out. Clay is a few feet away from Imogene, digging through a cheap plastic tackle box sitting near the creek. A simple cane pole is propped against a stump between them, its line in the water. A cell phone rests beside the tackle box; “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” by Reba McEntire is playing.

Clay: I could have sworn I threw the bug spray in here. These damned mosquitoes are going to run us off if I can’t find it soon.

Imogene: Are you sure you didn’t leave it in the truck?

Clay: (sighs) Yes, for the last damn time, I’m sure! Will you stop askin’?

Imogene stiffens and turns away. Clay looks at her and stops going through his tackle box, walking to and resting on the balls of his feet beside her to comfort her.

Clay: I’m sorry, Em. I shouldn’t have snapped. The past few weeks ... it’s been tough on all’ve us.

Imogene: Yeah, real tough on you, I’m sure. It’s not *your* dad was murdered, was it?

Clay: I deserved that. But come on, Em. (He puts his arms around her) That’s why we came out here, ain’t it? To get your mind off things?

Imogene: (standing up and shrugging his arms away) And what a fine freaking job you’re doing. I’m basically an orphan now, so you’re gonna harass me now that there’s no one to stop you? (He stands and goes to put his hand on her shoulder; she pushes him away.) Keep your hands off me.

Clay backs off, looking upset. Giving up both on comforting his friend and finding the bug spray, he picks up his cane pole and sits down on the stump, glaring into the water. They remain in silence for a minute or two. “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen begins playing.

Imogene: I’m sorry, Clay. It’s just ... with dad, and the trial, and knowing Maria might have ... you know ... it’s been rough. Her lawyer doesn’t think he’ll be able to keep her out of prison. I don’t know that he’s trying. (She pauses and throws a rock into the water) Everyone knows she married him for her green card. I guess that’s all the evidence they need.

Clay: You think?

Imogene: I don’t know. I mean ...

Clay: Do you think she might be innocent?

Imogene: What? Why do you ask?

Clay: It's nothing ... just ...

Imogene: Just ...?

Clay: I could've sworn I saw someone else there that morning.

Imogene: **(Wide-eyed)** You were there?

Clay: Yeah. Your dad asked me to come help him in the garden, bright 'n' early. And I could've sworn I saw a white person leave the house right before I walked in. Didn't see Maria anywhere.

Imogene: I was under the impression you found him later in the morning.

Clay: I did. I assumed it was you I saw leave the house—I thought maybe you'd come home a day early—so I just went on out to the garden and started working. When he didn't come out for a few hours I went to check on him, and ...

Imogene: Wait. You think I killed him? My own dad? You sick son of a—

Clay: No, Em! I'm not saying that! Damn, I was just sayin' that I thought maybe your stepmom might be innocent. That's all. That maybe someone else did it.

Imogene: I thought you're the one who told the judge that Maria and the truck were both gone when you got there.

Clay: I was.

Imogene: And you didn't mention the other person?

Clay: I tried, but the other lawyer cut me off. Seemed pretty damn sure Maria did it, and I guess all the evidence pointed to her, or somethin' like that. I don't get all that stuff. I just did what I was told.

Imogene looks at him for a moment before sitting back down and beginning to cry. Clay sits beside her, wrapping one arm around her while trying to turn off the music with his other hand.

Imogene: Give it here.

She types in her password—Clay tries not to be nosy, but she can be heard whispering “c-r-o-w-s.” She turns the music down but not off as she leans into his embrace.

Imogene: I'm sorry, Clay. You know I don't mean to be this way. I just don't know what I'm gonna do without him. Daddy's always been there for me, y'know?

Clay: I know. When Momma died, I didn't know how the hell I was gonna make it. For what it's worth, it does get easier.

Imogene: You sure?

Clay: Course I am. Plus, don't you get the house and everything, seeing as how you're an only child? So it's not like you ain't got somewhere to go.

Imogene: I guess ... but honestly, I'm not sure I want to stay there. I mean ... all the memories ... and his blood's still on the carpet, you know.

Clay: Carpet? How'd it get there? I found him in the kitchen, right near the door.

Imogene: I—I don't know. I guess maybe Maria—the killer—must've stabbed him in the living room and he dragged himself to the kitchen. I don't know.

Clay: But he was on his back. I dunno any man can drag himself on his back like that.

Imogene: **Shrugging his arm away.** I don't wanna think about it. Let's talk about something else, please.

Imogene looks at Clay's cane pole and notices that it's beginning to bend slightly.

Imogene: Clay, you've got a bite!

Clay jumps up and grabs his fishing pole. He appears to be struggling with it for a bit before Imogene gets up to help him. After a minute or two, they manage to pull a large catfish onto the shore. It flails violently, knocking over the tackle box and sending Clay's pocketknife into the water. Imogene rushes to save her cellphone as Clay swears.

Clay: That was my favorite knife! And I didn't bring a backup, damnit. Stupid fish.

Imogene: **(laughing)** It's okay, Clay. I have one.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a medium-sized knife. She flips it open.

Clay takes the knife and runs it down the length of his arm to test the sharpness. Hair quickly builds up on the blade.

Clay: Damn, Em! Where'd you get this? You shouldn't be carrying such a sharp knife around.

Imogene: **(looking offended)** I'm fine, Clay. It's not like I've never used a knife before.

She takes the knife back and cuts the fishing line before throwing the fish into the five-gallon bucket. "I Think We're Alone Now" by Tommy James and the Shondells begins playing.

Clay: I thought girls were supposed to have problems with stuff like that. Fish and knives and all.

Imogene: Clay, you've known me since we were three. Don't act so surprised. Besides, if you thought I was going to hate it, why bring me out here?

Clay: I dunno. Didn't know what else to do. Thought you might need to get out of the house.

Imogene: Why?

Clay: It's not good. For you to be all by yourself, after all this.

Imogene: **(turning up the music again)** I suppose you're right.

They sit in silence for a while. It has begun to get dark, and the moon has begun to rise above the trees.

Clay: We should probably start packing up.

Imogene: I guess so ...

Clay: Wanna come to my place?

Imogene: What?

Clay: I didn't mean—it's just—you said you didn't really like being in your house by yourself. I thought maybe, just—

Imogene: Clay, calm down. Actually, that sounds great, if you're sure your dad won't mind.

Clay: He's still out of town, actually.

Imogene: And you're sure it's okay?

Clay: Em, we're adults. Plus, you're my best friend. I don't want you to have to stay by yourself tonight. Really.

Imogene: If you're sure ...

Clay: I am.

They pack up their stuff and get into Clay's truck before leaving. The scene fades.

The two walk into Clay's kitchen from a screen door. It's a small room that looks as if someone tried to shove a dollhouse too full of garage-sale furniture. The table is slightly lopsided, and old mail and unwanted magazines are stacked onto one of the four chairs. The refrigerator is a two-door, and is covered with alphabet magnets holding up out-of-date coupons and forgotten shopping lists. There's a double sink beside the stove, which has a thin layer of grease and dust coating it and doesn't appear to have been used for a while. The linoleum-topped counter has an odd, semi-translucent stain running down one of the wooden doors. Other than this, all seems to be in order. Clay takes the now-dead fish out of the bucket and puts it in the sink.

Imogene: Why'd you put it in the sink? It needs to be cleaned.

Clay: I know. I gotta go get another knife, remember?

He walks out of the room.

Imogene pulls out her knife again, gets down a wooden cutting board, and begins cleaning the fish before he gets back. He walks in behind her while she's working. He watches in amazement.

Clay: Where'd you learn to do that? Even my daddy can't clean a fish like that.

Imogene: Oh, just ... something I picked up. I've come to learn that being handy with a knife has its uses.

Clay: I'd guess so, but hot damn. Em, you've never been so attractive to me.

Imogene: (laughing) Well thanks, Clay. But I saw you kiss a dead squirrel on a dare when we were twelve. Saying I'm attractive to you doesn't exactly mean much.

Clay: Ouch.

Imogene turns around, the knife catching the light as she does so. She laughs, and for a second, with the flayed fish behind her, she almost looks insane. Clay laughs nervously and takes a step back.

Clay: Calm down, Em. It ain't that funny.

Imogene: (still chuckling, but wiping her eyes, the knife still in her hand) Sorry Clay, I don't know why that seemed so funny. All this stress is getting to me.

Clay: Don't worry. I understand. (He hugs her and kisses the top of her head.) If you're good with the fish, I think I'm gonna go take a shower, okay?

Imogene: Okay ...

She looks hesitant to let him go.

Clay: I won't be long. I promise.

Imogene: Are you sure?

Clay: I'm sure, Em. I promise, I'm not gonna leave you.

Imogene: Okay.

Clay walks out of the room. Imogene turns back to cleaning the fish, getting out a frying pan, oil, and some flour as she does so. She has just begun to put a piece of breaded fish in the pan when the shower can be heard turning on.

Imogene: Yes, knowing how to use a knife has many uses.

The scene fades.