

**Award Winning
Poetry, Short Stories & Personal Essays
2019 - 2020**

“Seeking to encourage and recognize
excellence in creative writing.”

Selection Committee
Dr. John P. Kristofco, Chair
Emeritus Professor of English



The University of Akron
Wayne College

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First Place • Regional Poetry

At Four A.M.

Unlike me, the clock really
doesn't care what time it is.
This hour of deathly quiet,
where even the stairs
 are afraid to creak,
and imagined sounds seem
much louder than real ones.

It is the hour of distant train
 whistles,
loud humming of the fridge,
an ambulance siren,
bright lights of the clock,
and the guy who slinks around
 delivering news.

The hour between sound sleep
 and deprivation,
when the sheets lose their warmth
 after only a minute,
the hour I wish this was just
 a dream,
and that far away train was
the sweet slumber express
taking me to a place
I've never been.

JOE CHESLOCK
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

First Place • High School Poetry

birth

my arms and legs sprout from my body
hairs grow from my head
i am a plant
my roots deep into my mother
they stay there for nine months
then
like any plant
i am plucked from my home
forced to see how long i can survive
placed in a pot
confined
suffocated
my roots reaching the edge
until the water runs low
and the sun stops shining

ARIANNA LANG

Garaway High School
Mrs. Monica Bartholomew, Teacher

Second Place • Regional Poetry

Bass Idyll

On this hot afternoon wise bass
find refuge in the lake's cool depths.
Only bluegill seeking relief from frenzied spawning
follow our shadows along the bank's edge.
One could almost imagine them domesticated—
striving to please us with rolling and darting tricks
in muddy water.

It was the heavy bass we wanted—
not this bluegill choir—but
they are private fish—too proud to accept bread bribes,
their gliding shadows hidden by the glinting sun.

Someone has been here before
training this line of bluegill to drop fish chores
at a shadow's movement and dance with precision.
Their gaping mouths sing a silent water tune.

A good teacher—this bluegill master
Prompting and correcting until fanning tails
flick together—we wonder what was
the reward for such finny endeavor.
It must have had singular bluegill appeal
for surely the silent bass eluded him too.

PATRICIA WARNER
Orrville, Ohio

Second Place • High School Poetry

New Eyes of Love

Virescent eyes rivet she who grieves
Her beloved that sleeps far beyond shore,
Piercing the heart that never beats nor heaves.

Ceaseless calm allays sorrow in sheaves.
Transfix and paralyze thawing the frozen core,
Virescent eyes rivet she who grieves.

Balmy, golden sun gleaming among leaves,
Painting vivid colors on waters of hoar,
Piercing the heart that never beats nor heaves.

Entangled soul, pools of emerald unreave.
Woven net of desolation pulled until it's tore.
Virescent eyes rivet she who grieves.

Orbs of light glimmering across acheronian eyes
Evanesce rime which formed in life's every pore,
Piercing the heart that never beats nor heaves.

Bereavement incites love she nevermore receives,
Until modest soft swain bears promise of more.
Virescent eyes rivet she who grieves,
Piercing the heart that never beats nor heaves.

HANNAH KRZYWKOWSKI
Cloverleaf High School
Mr. John Carmigiano, Teacher

Third Place • Regional Poetry

Autumn in a Single Tree

Those yellow leaves descending from the top
Encounter in the middle stubborn greens,
Disturbed, hoping to such invasion stop
Despite the force that always supervenes.

There lie beneath the tree that have been shed
Some weakened leaves elliptical in shape;
Ahead of schedule has the process sped,
Desiring from the summer fast escape.

Resistance by the lower leaves will be
Repulsed as pressure from above prevails;
A treat it is within this tree to see
Through daily change that Nature never fails.

The branches in a sea of maize are soon
To sink, emerging naked afterward,
Their destiny to find another boon
In crystal beauty shared with bush and yard.

NEIL B. MARKS
Wooster, Ohio

Third Place • High School Poetry

Needle

Inspired by the novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel

A sharp shard of metal
Ink on the tip
Leers as it comes closer.
My name it prepares to strip.

I don't see the face of the man who holds it
I see only the cruel device
They use to erase my humanity
And my throat closes like a vice.

I don't want to cry
But I do so nevertheless.
I'm not crying from the pain
But because of how easily I acquiesce.

The needle punctures my skin
And I pray to nobody.
When they pull away
I'm left with A-7713.

EMILY PACEK
Triway High School
Mrs. Jillian Kitts, Teacher

Honorable Mention • Regional Poetry

Trajectory

Epiphanies and swaying trees
Through salty loneliness I believed.

You were the same person as day one
Knew better than to sacrifice the Son.

Stonewalled, gaslit, silenced in life
Became one of the nameless, faceless in the strife.

Unselfish in Her saving grace
Rise above to meet this day.

Awakened to the imbalanced path
Traveling to, never look back.

Released by courage, strength of One
Finding solace in the year to come.

LISA D. PELFREY
Wooster, Ohio

Honorable Mention • High School Poetry

Where I'm From

I am from Blood, from Sweat and Tears.
I am from the Fresh Air on top of McAfee's Knob
(The View that Took my Breath away)
I am from the Rhododendron the Pine Trees
The ones that I remember hiking through
And breathing in the fresh air

I'm from a broken family chain
Tears that ran down my face for hours
From good days and bad days.
I'm from Brendan and Kelsey
From the times they made me feel
Like part of their family

I'm from the rolling hills
The thin air from atop the mountains
The views that steal your breath
And jump-start your heart.
The rolling hills the horse and buggies
That don't satisfy anymore.

In my heart, I'll miss my family and friends
But I know I'll be happier
When I'm driving through the Rocky Mountains,
enjoying the breathtaking
Views that will be home to me one day

JUSTIN RABER
Garaway High School
Mrs. Monica Bartholomew, Teacher



First Place • Regional Short Story

To Shine

Once upon a time, my world was one of loneliness, a lifeless realm of desolation. A place bereft of all that might beget joy or hope or, at the very least, purpose. I merely existed in an isolated midnight void, unseen and unknown. Worthless.

Or so I thought—until the day I met Earth.

Twas nigh fifty orbits ago of Earth around Sun, on the day twenty July in the year Anno Domini nineteen-hundred-sixty-nine. I remain eternally changed from that day, and I will forevermore treasure Earth to the depths of my core. For it is with much fulfillment and honor that I now assert that I am Moon.

For four billion years, I watched and wondered at that variegated blue orb suspended within a distant swirl of clouds. I knew only what I could observe from these 240,000 miles afar, but I marveled at that world that seemed so vibrant, so alive. I watched from the vantage point of a very different sphere. One of craters and dust, of polar cold and parching heat.

Yes, I had always known of Earth, just as I had always known of all within Universe. Helios, god of Sun. Asteria, goddess of the stars. The constellations, infinite in their number. All so familiar to me, yet we each existed in solitude, fulfilling our respective duties—those who had duties—our paths never crossing.

So when Earth reached out to me on that day, I responded with guarded curiosity.

Oh, first I greatly feared. Here was a strange silvery craft, lobbed from that bright and vital place, roaring, hurtling closer, closer, whirling my dust into a cyclone. Then, it touched upon my surface, at the Sea of Tranquility, with gleaming, golden legs, and settled itself into my gray powder.

Earth's craft had come to me in years past, but with such infrequency that I had hardly acclimated to such impingement. I simply was not a common destination but for the celestial. The stray comet here, the misguided asteroid there.

So I watched with foreboding. The craft mocked me, neither moving nor emitting a sound. Then, a fissure, the opening of a portal. Here were one, then two beings emerging, stepping downward, bearing upon my world. I quivered and shrank, longing for the protection of Orion's mighty arms, wishing to fly away on the wings of Pegasus.

It was then that I heard a voice, its power tempered by grace.

"My dear Moon, it is my ardent hope that you welcome me in the spirit in which I come, for our meeting was long ago written in the stars."

I looked to the source of the voice, which deeply resounded even to this place of no atmosphere. Earth's vibrancy seemed to have intensified. Its peaks and valleys rose and fell in matter tinted by the color spectrum—indigo and emerald and gold and scarlet. The globe leisurely rotated,

as always, and seemed lit from within but now with even greater luster. I could barely endure its beauty, but neither could I look away.

"I... why... how..." The revelation of Earth's voice and the realization that I, too, could speak pierced my lethargy like the arrow of Sagittarius.

"Please know that I come in peace, along with my beings. They are called *man*."

I let loose of my unease. "You bring me great comfort, Earth, and delight, for I have long wished that we one day might meet. You are most beautiful of all creations in Universe."

"Thank you, Moon. But you are equally lovely, albeit in a much different way."

"You need not flatter me, my friend."

"I speak the truth," Earth said. "And now we come to learn more of you."

"What is there to learn of such an ugly, inspiring place?" My gaze dragged across my landscape at my pitted, ashen surface. "I serve no purpose. I have no life, no color, no vibrancy. I lack all that you have in abundance. I am not whole."

"Behold." Earth gestured toward man, who gathered soil and rock from my surface. "We come to know of your land, your depths, your atmosphere."

"But I am barren. How I envy you, your realm, whereas mine is a dry, silent, unremarkable place."

"Ah, Moon, you have much to learn of yourself. My beings have since the beginning of mankind observed you with great fascination, and much we have discovered. Do you know that you pull Earth's oceans into great waves?"

"Ha. A trite accomplishment, at best."

"Oh, no. The waves draw Earth's people to every shore. The waves replenish the souls of my beings, who themselves are comprised greatly of water. More importantly, the tides you so unwittingly create transport energy throughout my sphere, controlling my heat balance. They facilitate life in my oceans. Further, Moon, you brighten our night."

"Surely you know that it is only by reflection of the fires of Sun that I light you."

"But you do not keep Sun's light and warmth for yourself. You share them with me and with all of Universe. And were it not for your pull, great winds would incessantly plague me."

I paused to comprehend. "These things are of such importance that man comes all this distance to visit me?"

"Look again." Earth nodded toward the beings, who raised a measure of fabric, striped in red and white, with a plat of blue sprinkled with images resembling stars.

"What am I to make of this gesture?" I asked.

"This fabric is a symbol of one of my greatest lands. Do not take lightly our visit on this day, for much has been expended toward it. Know this, Moon. Of all the celestial bodies in the heavens, you and Sun are of paramount importance to Earth."

One of the beings then spoke words. *That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*

Perhaps I held a place of relevance in Universe after all.

Earth and I watched as the beings returned to the craft and pulled shut the portal behind them.

"Aside from the momentous, Moon, you will find amusement in the many tales

recorded by the hand of man with you as protagonist.” Earth regaled me with fables of the cow that jumped over Moon, of the man who resides in Moon. That Moon is made of green cheese.

Laughter burst from within me and peeled through the cosmos like a shooting star. “My domain may not consist of green cheese, but I understand now that it is more than mere crust and dust.”

“Without question. But lest you come to think too highly of yourself, you must know that there are those of man who blame you, when full, for wanton misbehavior amongst themselves.”

“Surely I cannot be held accountable from thus afar. And of what do you speak, when I am full?”

“From Earth, you at times appear complete, round, and bright. At other times, you present yourself as a crescent. And on yet other days, you appear not at all, my shadow blocking the light of Sun, plunging you into darkness. Even then, we watch you.”

“I am greatly moved. And what of you, Earth? Please tell me of yourself.”

“I am a place of many wonders and joys. A world of much love.” Earth’s voice deepened. “Yet my people suffer in some measure from hunger and thirst, from violence and abuse of mind-altering substance. Some among man have wished to live on Moon because of these things, but many more work to banish such woes. There is much worth, much hope.”

“Some have wished to leave a sphere of such beauty? To live here? You joke. I have nothing to offer. Earth, I am incomplete in comparison to you. I simply am not whole.”

Earth sighed. “When will you learn that

you are seen as a thing of beauty? That you are whole, in your own way? You need only listen to be sure of this. Shh.”

As I stilled, the loveliest sound I had ever heard soared through Universe.

“What is this sound, Earth? It evokes beautiful, faraway places.”

“What you hear is called music. And this is named ‘Moon River.’ It was born of your allure. Perhaps other lands are no more beautiful than yours. Listen further.”

The pure, clear melody of “Moon River” faded, and a different music—resolute, tender—flowed throughout the firmament.

“And what do they call this? It brings much pleasure to me.”

“This is named ‘Moonlight Serenade,’ and it was written for you.”

At the music’s end, my heart warm and glowing, I implored, “Please, Earth, may I hear more?”

Now strains poured slow and brooding from deep within the soul of the obscure, and all of Universe wept.

“How is it that any sound might inflict such pain, yet one would yearn that it never end? What is this music called?”

“You hear ‘Moonlight Sonata.’” Earth’s voice hushed. “Do you see, Moon? All these pieces, and many more, took inspiration from you. Furthermore, enchanting words of you are inscribed upon paper. We call this poetry. And my beings fall in love with each other under the shimmering spell cast by your very soul.”

I paused, overcome with sentiment, never more still than in that moment.

“I have much about which to weep.” Earth’s voice further waned. “In many ways, I am broken. I am often not whole, yet my

light of hope shines bright.”

The mournful ache of “Moonlight Sonata” continued.

“Millions of stars are long extinct, yet their glow remains,” Earth said, its voice now barely audible. “And you, Moon, even when you are not full, merely a crescent of yourself, or hidden by my shadow, still you are watched in wonder.”

A great blast startled me from my reverie. The craft began to lift. I trembled at its mightiness. And as it trailed away, Earth began to fade in the twilight.

I reached for her. “Please do not go, Earth. I wish for your companionship.”

“Know that we will be together for all infinity.” Earth’s whisper somehow surmounted the rumble of the receding craft. “We leave now, much knowledge of you having been gained. And you have learned much of yourself. Yet you have one truth yet to learn, Moon. But you must come to know that on your own.”

“What is that, dear Earth? Please do not go. Tell me this truth.”

“Be still, and it will come to you.”

Then, silence but for the shadowy tones of “Moonlight Sonata.” My heart lay heavy. I once again hovered alone in the sky. All of Universe’s entities went on as before. Earth’s craft shrank into a smaller and smaller speck of light as it returned home. Even the music stilled, its last note echoing from the shimmering swirl of Milky Way.

Then, a voice from beyond. Earth’s voice. “We will return one day, Moon. But until then, look. Look upon Earth and know of our dependence upon you. Know of our regard for you. Look upon yourself. Look. And listen.”

Then, from a great distance, a different

music swelled.

I ventured a look at myself, as Earth had urged. I gasped. Had the pale powder embellishing my ground always sparkled as stardust? Had my core always emanated such luminescence? My entire aura now glowed in hues of silver and platinum.

The new music gained in volume, and the remnants of Earth’s voice reached me one final time. “Always look. And listen, Moon. Listen.”

From far, far away, I heard the voice of man, raised in song. *Fly me to the...*

Joy rose from within me, erupting and sprinkling about like a meteor shower. I smiled. I laughed. My heart soared! I wanted to fly to the heights of creation and dance for all eternity! For on that day, fifty Earth years ago, I finally understood.

One does not have to be whole to shine.

* * *

DOTTIE SINES
Wooster, Ohio

First Place • High School Short Story

Palm Trees Ablaze

San Diego, California
Mira Mesa District
July 16, 1980

The palm trees burned. The inferno licked their outstretched fronds, and they danced in the hot air in plumes of red and orange. Each one had a bright, wiggly tail. The luscious green of the trees was fading to a crisp black. Looking up at them, Harry wondered how many hours, minutes, seconds ago they had been at peace, swaying with every nudge of the wind. Natural umbrellas, their wide tops cast an oasis of cool shade below and offered solace from the sweltering heat. Now their beautiful vulnerability had been perverted as the source of the heat. Harry hated thinking that they would never return to their beautiful selves.

Would they?

These thoughts only briefly blinked in the chaos of Harry's psyche as he and the rest of the fire crew pulled up to the flaming building. The truck halted, and Harry *jumped from the helicopter, M14 tightly gripped in his hands. He dashed through the tall grass, his platoon alongside him. And he was engulfed by the screams* of the soot-covered people darting from the burning apartment complex. Well-dressed men ran, coughing on ash, their white dress shirts stained a dismal grey. Teenage boys, protecting their new Walkmans, bolted from the crumbling threshold. Women, cradling children in their

arms, fled from the heavily armed men as the air suddenly erupted in a thunderous applause of clapping hellfire. Several of them dropped to the ground as the American soldiers began to hand out the equipment strapped to the side of the truck. Kevin and Rob sped away with the crimson-bladed axes. Greg, Brett, and Lenny each gripped the edge of a net. Harry stepped up, and was handed the flamethrower.

Otto knelt next to the fire hydrant planted in the sidewalk and screwed the hose onto the nozzle. He shot Harry a quick nod, signaling him. Harry clamped his hands over the handle, turned the switch, and *watched as the tiny hut erupted into a huge burst of flame. Faintly, out of all the screams that howled through the small village, Harry picked out the two that emanated from the combusted hut. They were muffled over the crackle of the fire.*

And it was then that Harry first knew true hatred.

The flames let out a sharp hiss as they clashed with the powerful stream of water. Harry washed the building like an artist stroking a paintbrush over a smudged tapestry, remedying the flaws. Some of the flames were stubborn, but Harry concentrated the stream, and eventually made them disappear. The screams grew *ear-piercingly louder* as the work of the firehose cast a spell of security over the bystanders. The building's red glow

heightened in intensity, and soon the flames dissipated entirely.

His duty completed, Harry set the fire hose down and followed the rest of the crew to the next house up for burning. *Lieutenant Grover directed Harry over to the next house. Harry thought that he almost saw the telltale edge of a grin on the side of his face.*

"You okay, Harry?" Otto asked.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You looked strange for a second there." Otto trailed behind Rob as they rushed through the doorway of the smoldering building.

The walls were scorched—some midnight black, others a foggy gray. Smoke still hung in the air, and Harry looked around to discover that much of the town had been reduced to a collection of raging infernos. *Many of the shrieks from earlier had been silenced. Harry fought tears.* The wood above creaked and moaned as it tried to recover from the fire that had engulfed it. Rob and Kevin raced past them, carrying in their arms *children who had been unable to run for cover, and now lay at their feet. Harry forced himself to look away as he lit the next house*

Harry and Otto carefully moved down the hall, keeping aware of any shifts in the ceiling. Whenever they arrived at a shut door, Otto hacked his way in with an axe. They searched each home for any sign of life. *The order from the top had been crystal clear: "There's a village with Gooks there. Make certain that it isn't there by this evening."*

For a while, Harry and Otto were happy to report that they had not come upon anyone in need of *elimination*. Then, from behind the door marked 137 in tall, brass letters, there was a barely audible sound:

a whimper. A cry.

"Help...."

And Harry had orders to "answer" it.

Otto brought the blade of the axe down on the lock of the door, inciting a shocked yip from the crying person within. Otto ripped away charred wood. He brought it down again, and *the splintered planks split.* And with one final, forceful chop, the door swung open, and inside Harry found something terrible:

Crouched in the corner, cowering from the alien men in her doorway, was a little girl, no more than five years old. Ashes peppered her black hair. The rags that she wore were scorched at the hems. Her bare feet were black from the soot on the floor. Rivers of tears etched pathways through her dusty face. No parents were visible anywhere.

For a moment, Harry's boots were glued to the floor. The magnitude of the *deja vu* (and the flashes) were overwhelming him. He felt dizzy and confused, unaware of how to proceed. He stood there, gazing at this small girl, and evidently frightening her with his obvious disorientation. Then, *Lieutenant Grover came up behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder.* Holding the axe in his right hand, *he looked into the face of the terrified boy.*

"You have orders. For the good of America. You know you can do it."

When Harry did what he did that day on August 31, 1970, two things died. As he left that hut, just before he set it and the remains inside alight, two faces hung in his mind. One belonged to a little girl, alone and petrified with fear. She was forsaken and left at the mercy of merciless men. The other was the face of a boy. A free-spirited, loving boy from Los Angeles. He had been unceremoniously

sent to a country he'd never even heard of and fought a war that he didn't understand. Both had entered that hut. Neither had exited.

And those faces continued to plague Harry. They made him lie awake in bed for weeks, and ungraciously arise in the morning to the same stinging image. That day at the hut, they changed Harry. Long after the incident, the faces of the little girl and the lost boy still haunted Harry in the form of his flashes, as biting reminders of the atrocity he had committed, and the horrific change he had undergone. The faces became his curse. And the only thing that he knew could temporarily break the spell was the cheap elixir in the green bottle that came from the witch with the American flag tattoo in the shop down the street. A brew to numb the pain for just a while.

But that day, in San Diego, Harry went through another change.

Harry steadily walked through the debris, cradling the ragged girl in his arms. He made his way to the door of the apartment building. As he passed by his cohorts, he noticed that they stopped what they were doing to watch him pass by.

Harry maneuvered through the threshold of the building, careful not to bump her head on the frame of the door. Amid the crowd, the faces of one young couple lit up with jubilant relief. The girl caught sight of them, and hopped out of Harry's embrace to fly into her mother's waiting arms. The father waved at Harry just before he too wrapped his arms around his daughter.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" the parents exclaimed. Harry, for the first time in a long time, smiled. Thank YOU,"

Harry replied.

Inside, he felt a tiny flicker, which he believed to be long extinguished, grow. Above his head, the palm trees that had been ignited by the flames, smoldered. Once wreathed in flame, the long, charred fronds now waved in the breeze. And in one tiny, pinpoint spot, Harry could still see some luscious green.

* * *

ETHAN STACK
Hillsdale High School
Mrs. Kristen Thiebaud, Teacher

Second Place • Regional Short Story

The Accident

Homer Swenson's trailer had just been loaded with ten tons of car parts that were destined for a warehouse in Rochester, New York. Homer had been driving big rigs for thirty years and knew just about every north-south, east-west route there was, including the back roads. Homer had received numerous awards for his safe driving, including the "Three Million Mile Accident-Free Award" of which he was extremely proud. He was a few miles south of Charlotte, North Carolina, in a Waffle House having his breakfast and mapping out his route. Homer decided to take I-77 north to I-81, and then near Hagerstown, Maryland, make his way to I-380 north, which would take him on a straight shot to Rochester. It was a perfect, late-November day and this was Homer's last run before the Thanksgiving holiday. After Rochester, he planned on taking his rig home to Buffalo where his wife Sandy was waiting.

Martha Livingston, a widow and grandmother of three, had been on the road for two days, driving north from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to her daughter's home in Syracuse, New York. Her 2007 Honda Civic was purring like a content kitten even though it was well over ten years old. She had just bought new tires, had a front-end alignment, had an oil change, and was singing along with the radio as she was nearing I-77 in Columbia, South Carolina. From I-77, she'd get on I-81 north, which would take her straight up to Syracuse. She planned to stay with her family

through the Thanksgiving holiday, then go back to Florida. Martha didn't especially like driving such a long distance by herself, but she'd made this trip before. She felt fairly comfortable with the drive except when she encountered the many big rigs and had to pass them. She just felt small and intimidated by them.

Frank Thompson was driving to his brother's place in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, from Charleston, South Carolina. He was on I-26 getting ready to get on I-77 north outside Columbia. From I-77, Frank would jump on I-81 north, make his way to I-99 north past State College, PA, then to Williamsport. Both he and his brother Fred were widowers and for the last few years spent Thanksgiving together, each alternating the drive. Frank felt fairly comfortable with the drive, but it seemed like the big rigs took over the interstates at times. He was always wary of them, and careful. Frank always had his two-year-old Jeep Grand Cherokee well maintained. He had never had a breakdown on a trip and never intended to.

Hugo Marston was on his way from New Orleans, Louisiana, to New York City. He had taken I-20 out of Atlanta and was nearing I-77 in Columbia, South Carolina. He would go up I-81 north to I-78 east into New Jersey, then into the city. Hugo had been on the road for three days and was on the run. He was driving his third stolen car, a 2017 Ford Mustang. He left New Orleans in

the dead of night after shooting to death his ex-girlfriend Julia Starns. Starns was threatening to go to the police and reveal all she knew about Hugo's illegal activities. Hugo Marston was a career criminal. He ran illegal betting parlors, prostitution, and extortion. But, he had made a name for himself as someone who committed murder for hire. No one really knows how many people Hugo killed, but at least a dozen bodies were found in the bayous outside New Orleans. The corpses were chewed up by alligators and that's why the police were never able to gather enough evidence to arrest and convict him. Hugo was on edge, and driving the expressways made him edgier, especially when he saw a State Highway Patrol car. He had to get to New York City fast. He knew bad men who would hide him. He looked over in the passenger seat and caressed his nickel-plated .45. If anything happened, he vowed that he wouldn't be going down alone. All Marston wanted was an uneventful drive to the Big Apple.

Virginia State Trooper Ben Simmons, a decorated Iraq war veteran, received a be-on-the-lookout alert on the morning of the twenty-first. It wasn't for sure that the stolen 2017 Ford Mustang would be coming his way, but it was standard procedure to get a notice in case it was. The BOLO didn't specify who exactly was driving the stolen car, but he was given the car's license plate number and was cautioned that the suspect could be armed and dangerous. Simmons got into his patrol car and drove out to I-81, near Winchester. He positioned his vehicle so that he could view northbound traffic coming toward him. He pulled out his radar gun and did his duty.

Homer Swenson, Martha Livingston,

Frank Thompson, and Hugo Marston were all on I-81, oblivious they were all within a minute's distance of one another. Except for Marston, they had last taken a break a good three hours before, so they all got off the highway at the service center near Roanoke, VA. Marston was not going to be caught on anyone's camera, so when he had to relieve himself, he pulled over to the side of the road where bushes were plentiful and did his business. When he needed gas, he covered his face as much as possible with a wide-brim hat, kept a low profile, and never went inside the station. He paid at the pump using a stolen credit card.

Homer, Martha, and Frank left the Roanoke service center about the same time. Marston was ahead of them by about ten miles, but he, too, was going to stop again. When he did, it was just long enough for Homer, Martha, and Frank to catch up. And for the next three hours, they were all driving a short distance from one another.

All traffic was now passing through Winchester, VA, where Ben Simmons was stationed. When Simmons spotted Marston's red Mustang, he decided to get on the road to check the car's license plate. Marston, eyeballing his rearview, saw Simmons' car leave the median strip. Even though the trooper was over a mile away, Marston worked himself into a frenzy. He sped up, began swearing, "F--- it! F---ing trooper!" He also began weaving in and out of traffic, putting everyone around him in danger.

Simmons was in no hurry and kept pace a mile behind the red Mustang. He radioed ahead to the West Virginia State Trooper station in Martinsburg and told them he was following a red Mustang,

suspected stolen, outside Atlanta, Georgia. He told the trooper that he would confirm the license number in a matter of minutes. Traffic was now nearing Martinsburg and Simmons had gotten within a hundred yards of Hugo Marston's car. The highway had just changed to three lanes and Marston was in the left-most passing lane. Simmons came up behind Marston and verified that this was the stolen vehicle. At this point he radioed ahead to Martinsburg and turned on his overhead lights and siren. As soon as Marston saw the lights and heard the siren, he grabbed his .45 and cocked the trigger.

A short distance ahead, Homer Swenson, in the middle lane, felt a loss of power in his Peterbuilt's engine. When Homer stepped on the gas, the engine revved but was going nowhere. Immediately Homer knew what the problem was. It was something that never happened to him before in all his years of driving. Other truckers behind Homer noticed his sudden drop in speed and slowed down and let Homer coast his rig to the side of the road. The Peterbuilt's drive shaft had broken loose and was lying in the middle lane of traffic.

Martha Livingston, who had been driving seventy miles per hour, was also in the middle lane. She wasn't exactly sure what she saw in the road, but by the time she saw it, it was too late. She let out a loud "Oh my God" and tried to swerve left of it but caught it with her right front tire. The drive shaft clanged around under Martha's car for a few seconds, then ended up part way in the middle lane and part way in the left-most passing lane. When Martha hit the object, it felt like she hit a deep pothole. The impact raised her from the seat. It also flattened her

right front tire. A trucker in the right lane saw what happened and let Martha pull in front of his rig and over to the right berm to safety.

At this point, all traffic had slowed except Hugo Marston. He was still in the passing lane with Ben Simmons on his bumper. He placed the cocked .45 back on the seat and was laying on the horn. The car in front, Frank Thompson's Jeep Grand Cherokee, moved to the middle lane and Marston sped past him, but only temporarily. Before he realized there was something in the road, Hugo Marston hit Homer Swenson's drive shaft. The last word that Hugo Marston screamed in his earthly life was "G--damnit" as the impact of the Mustang with the large piece of metal threw Marston's .45 against the dashboard and it discharged. Ben Simmons, right behind Marston, saw the flash of the gunshot.

If there had been time, maybe the last thoughts that went through Hugo Marston's head before the .45 caliber bullet was, "I should have had the safety on," or "how in the hell...?" But since a bullet from a .45 travels between 800 and 1100 feet per second, and Marston was four feet away, the bullet passed through his head in less than a tenth of a second.

After the gunshot, Marston's car rammed into Frank Thompson, who had slowed after his left front tire hit the drive shaft. Frank was trying to make his way to the right berm. Unable to do so, he slowed his car to a stop with Marston's car pushing against it. At this point, all traffic had slowed down considerably or stopped. It was then that Ben Simmons radioed for an ambulance and backup assistance and stopped all traffic on I-81 north.

In the aftermath of the collision, Homer

Swenson found Martha Livingston and couldn't apologize enough for what had happened. They exchanged insurance cards, and then Homer found Frank Thompson and did the same. Both Martha and Frank got on their cell phones and called their family members to tell them what happened. They both then called for tows to the nearest AAA auto repair garage, which was in Hagerstown, MD. In the days to follow, Homer's insurance would take care of both their vehicles and pay for all expenses related to the freak accident.

After two weeks, forensics was completed on the stolen vehicle, and the body of Hugo Marston had undergone an autopsy. Forensics was at a loss to explain how the .45 caliber handgun discharged inside Marston's vehicle. There was no precedent for it, and when they ran tests trying to simulate the gun's discharge, they were unable to duplicate it. Based on where the gunshot residue was found, and the angle of the entrance wound, it would have been impossible for Marston to have committed suicide.

The coroner of Berkeley County, West Virginia, ruled Hugo Marston's death an accident.

* * *

JOE CHESLOCK
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

Second Place • High School Short Story

Of Mice and Men:

An extended short story of the novel by John Steinbeck

The sun shone hot and bright as a man stood in the fields during this late summer afternoon. The man was short, slim, and muscular. He wore average clothes that were dirtied and sweat stained. The man looked to the sky and squinted at the sun. *Ten years...* he thought to himself. *Ten years since that horrible day.*

The man gathered the alfalfa he had just harvested and carried it on his back. As he neared the rustic and worn-down farmhouse, he began to slow his pace. His pace grew slower and slower until he stopped all together. The man looked to his right at *the spot*. Memories flooded his brain. Some he wanted to come back, and others he tried to catch and shove back into the depths of his mind.

A strained look came about the man's face as he continued to trudge toward his home—the house that he had bought a little over ten years ago for six hundred dollars. The house was small and square. Its walls were made of stones that had been cemented together by mud. It had many windows and a tall brick chimney. The door was slanted and was beginning to warp. To the left of the house was a large garden full of all sorts of vegetables and fruits. There were tomatoes, potatoes, squash, cucumber, zucchini, spinach, and radishes. The fruit in the garden was so colorful at this time of year. All of the raspberries and strawberries were plump, bright, and red in color. The

grapes in the vinyard were like Christmas lights of green and purple. To the right a couple yards away were two large trees. One was a big and solid Fuji apple tree. The apples were right in the prime of their season. The middle tree that was located to the left of the Fuji tree was a peach tree. The peaches were ripe and beautifully colored.

In between the two trees was a headstone. The headstone was fieldstone and it had a name engraved into it:

'CANDY'

The man pauses for a moment as memories and conversations flooded his brain about his old, disabled friend.

Candy had died about three years ago due to influenza. He and the man had been friends for a long time. They bought the house together after they left the ranch, their old workplace where they bucked barley and kept the stables. Candy was missing a hand, so he had trouble keeping up with the work that needed to be done around the farm. But the man didn't mind at all. In fact, he really enjoyed being able to look out for somebody again.

It was pretty rough for the man after Candy died. It was strange to sleep at home all by himself. And he even found himself looking for Candy in the garden a couple months after he had died.

The man found himself at the rabbit pen when he broke from his deep train of thought. In the pen was a single grey Flemish-

Giant rabbit. It lay in the corner, resting. As the man approached, the rabbit perked up and hopped toward him.

"Hi, Lennie..." the man called toward the rabbit. The man stroked the rabbit's soft, velvety fur. The rabbit looked at the man in anticipation. "Huh. I guess you're hungry, eh?" The man talked to the animal. He then pulled the alfalfa from his back and put it gently in the large pen. Lennie moved towards his dinner and began to nibble on the alfalfa. A Hyperia crawled out from under the pile that Lennie was eating. The man watched the bug crawl around stupidly. The man gently petted Lennie one last time before he went towards his home.

Once the man was inside his home, he began to get ready to make dinner. He went to his small, beat-up radio and turned it on. There was some music, the aftermath of the war news, and the usual political issues that the man listened to while he cooked his meal. When he had finished, the man sat down at the table that he and Candy had built together. He ate slowly, trying to ignore the approaching feeling of being alone and isolated. But, to no avail, he was hit by a tidal wave of all the emotions and memories he was trying to avoid.

Memories of his past came rushing to his mind.

His best friend, Lennie. He was so dumb, but the man depended on Lennie as much as Lennie depended on him. The man so desperately wanted Lennie to be here at his side at this moment. But Lennie couldn't. Lennie was dead....

And you killed him! A voice rang through the man's mind.

"Stop it!" The man tried to stop the voice.

Murderer!

"Stop."

You'll always be alone!

"Stop."

You have your best friend's blood on your hands.

"Stop!"

You're always alone.... You destroy everything you love.... You are a killer.... You should've been lynched—

"STOP!" the man yelled, slamming his hands on the table. The man began to sob. "I-I didn't mean anything mean when I killed Lennie...," he wept. The man closed his eyes, trying to keep big, wet, hot tears from falling.

When he opened his eyes, there sat the giant Flemish rabbit.

"L-Lennie? How did you g-get in here?" The man choked out.

"You don't have nothin' to feel bad about, George," the rabbit spoke.

George's eyes bugged out. "D-Did you just speak?" he stammered.

The rabbit's head turned a little to the left as it looked at George. "Do you not want me to talk George?" the rabbit asked.

George shook his head. "I've lost my G--damn mind...", " he chuckled in disbelief. "I need to be put in a looney bin, that's what!" George got up and paced around, throwing side glances at the rabbit. The rabbit watched the man with curiosity.

"George, can I feed the rabbits now?" The rabbit asked. George stared long and hard at Lennie. He scoffed at himself and the next thing he knew, he was out the door, running.

George ran and ran and ran. His legs screamed with pain, but he couldn't stop them from moving.

George could hardly think straight. He had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that he needed to get help. He was not in a good state of mind at all.

After running for a long time, George's legs eventually buckled and George fell. He shakily stood up and looked around. His eyes widened. "No!" He began to shake. *Why here? Why did I run here?*

The man stood in front of a large stone. Engraved in it were the initials 'LS.' The man dropped down to his knees, tears dripping from his face, mingling with his sweat. "God, why?" he quietly cried.

This is where George had killed his best friend Lennie.

George looked around. The moon was low in the sky tonight. George's breathing eventually leveled out. Now, he was tired. Tired of all the guilt he held on his consciousness. He just wanted to stop feeling. To stop and just forget.

The man's head fell to the soft, overgrown grass. His eyes grew heavy. He knew he needed sleep. He knew his mind was not stable, and he knew he needed to leave the world for a moment and to just have his mind in some other state right this very moment.

George quickly fell asleep. That night, he dreamed of Lennie.

Lennie seemed to be on his mind all the time these days.

* * *

GEMMA DEVINCENT
Orrville High School
Mrs. Darla Landers, Teacher

Third Place • Regional Short Story

Lights in the Sky

The digital clock on the microwave mounted above the three-burner gas cooktop in my camper read two-thirty in the morning as I stepped out the door dressed in nothing but my t-shirt, skivvies, and Crocs. I had awakened from my restless slumber for the same reason most men my age do at that time in the morning, to pee.

My first thought was being thankful that the weatherman had gotten his forecast for an all-night rain wrong. The second was the fact that no one else would be out and about in the campground except for me, giving me the advantage of not having to make a long, urgent walk up the hill to the showerhouse just to relieve myself; I could just step out the door and go.

The prolonged winter had hung on into our late March campout, which had been planned months before with my camping cousins. It gave us a break from an unusually long Ohio winter, which left us suffering with the dreary mood of cabin fever. Three of us brave souls had decided to camp for the weekend even though the Weather Channel's forecast had called for near freezing temperatures and rain most of the weekend with even a possibility of snow.

I hadn't bothered to de-winterize the camper yet, in fear of having to repair or replace frozen water lines, and since I was the only occupant of my camper for this weekend, with my wife expressing her opinion that I was nuts and the rest of my

immediate family claiming they had more important things to do, I had decided to rough it. No running water, no toilet. At least I wasn't crazy enough to earn my Polar Bear Award by sleeping outside in a tent; those days were long gone for this sixty-year-old camping diehard.

I had turned the gas on to cook a few meager meals and heat water up on the gas stovetop, but hadn't set the thermostat to heat as the noisy furnace tends to wake me up every time it cycles on and off. Instead, I elected to use the tiny ceramic electric heater, stored underneath one of the dining table seats, to utilize the campground's electricity instead of my propane gas. The tiny heater kept the inside of the camper above freezing but not warm enough to keep the condensation from forming on the inside of the cold windows. My breathing put an ample amount of humidity in the air. The heater made a low whirring sound as the fan pushed air through the glowing heating element coils into the interior of the camper, but it wasn't loud enough to keep me awake.

I also hadn't bothered to turn a light on in the camper as I had rolled out of bed and hurried to the door. Not only would it have made it harder for me to fall back to sleep, but it would have ruined my night vision before stepping outside.

I quickly found myself shivering as I walked briskly to the edge of the lake and stood next to the hundreds of baseball-sized

limestone rocks that rimmed the last ten feet to the water. A slight breeze rippled the surface of Seneca Lake and gave me pause as I basked in the feeling of exposed freedom.

It was so cold I could see my breath as I relieved myself in the solitary presence of God, whom I believe is a being who understands the meaning of being in tune with nature. As I enjoyed my feeling of relief, I noticed a distinctive glow of light highlighting the ridge line of the hill across the eastern side of the lake. Even without my glasses, the strange, bright light surreally resembled a scene from the *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* science fiction movie. I watched as the light flashed to a brilliant white a couple of times in complete silence, disappeared altogether for a few seconds, then returned in pulsating strobes of shimmering, luminescent rays reflecting off the low-hanging clouds. The whole event was similar to watching the flashes of light from a welder's arc, but the intensity was far greater than my brain would accept as the cause for this awesome display.

My lethargic mind produced images of limp human bodies being sucked up and disappearing through the cloud cover into the revolving lights of a circular mother ship from some unknown and faraway galaxy, and I fought the overpowering urge to go investigate the bizarre scene playing out just a few miles away. I couldn't tell if it was my technical curiosity or something beyond my own mental control that pulled me toward the light.

"What the heck," I thought. I stepped onto the rocks and carefully made my way across them, down the gentle embankment to the edge of the lapping water, being careful not to lose my footing and fall.

Slipping my feet out of my Crocs, I extended my right foot out over the water, anticipating the feel of the icy cold lake along with the squish of silt and mud between my toes when I stepped in. To my amazement, my foot came into contact with something soft but firm just beneath the surface, like deep-piled carpet but with a rubbery feel. I was shocked that it was buoyant enough to hold my weight as I lifted my left foot from the rocks and shifted my weight forward without sinking. My thoughts took me back in time to my childhood Sunday school class and the biblical story of the apostle Peter who had stepped from his storm-tossed fishing boat at Jesus' beckoning. I was walking on water!

My confidence built as I took a few more careful steps onto the surface of the lake, the water still shimmering with the reflection of the intense light display emanating in the distance. My feet were cold and wet, but they were definitely not sinking into the surface of the lake more than an inch or two, and soon I was splashing with purposeful strides toward the opposite shore a half mile away.

Two hours later, I awoke to a buzzing sound and a splitting headache. I was drenched in sweat even though the sheet and blanket from my bed were thrown onto the floor of my cold camper in a heap. The buzzing continued as I felt for my glasses hanging from the magazine rack mounted to the upper cabinet beside the head end of my bed. Slipping them on, I read the text message on my iPhone, which had also been wedged into the magazine rack. "Hey cousin, are you up and enjoying this beautiful sunrise?" It was my cousin Ann from her camper parked next to mine, one lot to the north.

I rolled stiffly out of bed, stretched my

aching bones for a second, and then stepped across the cold floor to the door. My head was pounding with unusual and intense pain. Pulling the latch on the door and opening it out to a blast of even more cold morning air, I was treated to a beautiful sunrise. Shining through a narrow break in a band of dark clouds directly over the hill beyond the lake, the orange ball of magnetic plasma bathed the sky in a spectrum of yellow, orange, and red beams of light.

Twenty feet away, on the rocks next to the water, I spotted my Crocs....

* * *

DANIEL L. HOLDERMAN
Orrville, Ohio

Third Place • High School Short Story

An excerpt from *Nothin' But Dust and Ashes*

Oklahoma Oh No's

"Clarabelle, I swear, if you don't put the gun down, I will make you walk the whole way to Nelly's Gorge *without your horse!*" The reforming criminal stuck her tongue out at me before lowering her revolver. I walked behind the slightly relieved man and tied a rope around his hands and feet.

"I was just try'n to help, Sheriff."

"No, you wasn't. You was just try'n to get under my skin. And let me tell you..."— I looked at her intently—"it worked." The girl stuck her tongue out at me again and I rolled my eyes before dumping the man on my horse, stomach down.

"Ma'am!" he cried out in protest as I tied him down, "I insist on knowing what I did!" I ignored his pleas and hopped on top of my brown-and-white Appaloosa, getting settled into my saddle.

"What'd he do?" Clarabelle—whom I call Clara—asked as we started into a slow trot. I didn't respond at first, staring out into the distance that was filled with sparse vegetation and rocky structures, but found myself sighing in resignation.

"County Sheriff Montez thinks this scarecrow-of-a-man knows something about the McCreary gang." This caught Clara's attention and her head whipped toward me.

"The McCreary gang?"

I turned towards her and nodded. Why was she so interested all of a sudden?

"Why? You got somethin' to do with

them too?"

"I mean, we went on a few runs—" She stopped suddenly, snapping her mouth shut and making me laugh.

"What? You forget you were talk'n to a sheriff?" She didn't respond and I sighed as the endless expanse of the Oklahoma territory stretched before us. "How is the reform program goin'?" Clara simply rolled her eyes and spurred her coffee-colored mustang into a gallop, pulling ahead of me. I shook my head.

Clara had been caught stealing ammunition from a general store down in St. Augustine, but instead of incarcerating her, I asked the mayor if I could enter her in a "reform program" (which is easy when you are both the mayor *and* the sheriff). She wasn't a bad person, that much I knew.

A few weeks after I had taken her under my wing, we had been in Patterson dealing with a drunken dueler and we saw two girls taking a yo-yo from a little boy. Clara, using words that should never be repeated, snatched the yo-yo from the girls, chided them, and then gave the toy back to the boy. I was smiling at her as she walked back towards me and rolled her eyes again.

"Shut up," she said, while flipping a brown braid off her shoulder and brushing past me. I had been told she was 19, but I found that semi-unbelievable; she looked younger. Her eyes though..., they looked like they had seen things that people her age

shouldn't have seen.

But now, after three months of riding with me, Clara was still hard to handle. She was unpredictable, hot-headed, impulsive, and trigger-happy—meaning she was *not* allowed to have a gun unless it was absolutely necessary.

About two hours later, we were nearing Nelly's Gorge when the man behind me started talking.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" I sighed and twisted around to look at the man lying behind me. "What do you want, cretin?"

"I was just wondering where we're goin'?"

"You'll find out when we get there."

"But, I was just—" I shushed him as Clara suddenly called out from ahead of me. Whipping around, I could see her riding back towards me at a full gallop.

"Run!" she yelled, spurring Silver even faster. Quickly, I turned Reba around and snapped the reins.

"Hyea!" I yelled, encouraging her to go faster. Clara caught up to me quickly and I turned around to see a horde of horses and riders following behind us.

I swore and looked at Clara. "*Who's that, and why're we runnin'?*" A gunshot rang out from behind us and I swore again as Reba immediately bucked, sending me flying through the air. I slammed into the ground and all the breath left my body, accompanied by a loud snap. I groaned as the air returned, breathing in desperately and crying out as pain radiated through my side.

Looking back, I could see Clara turning around to get me. "Get out o' here, Clarabelle! Go! Get backup!" Swearing, Clara glanced at the approaching stampede, shook

her head, and spurred Silver back towards the town we came from, but glanced back once again. "Go!" I waved my arm again and she continued, leaving me to draw my gun and defend myself as the horde finally had me surrounded.

With a hand pressed against my side, I pointed my revolver around the circle pointlessly. If they wanted me dead, I would already be on the ground. I groaned as the group parted to let through a woman riding a light brown mustang; I recognized the short, whitish-blond hair almost immediately.

"Well, well, if it isn't Laurie Callaghan," she said, dramatically sliding off her elegant ride and walking towards me, paying no attention to the gun pointed at her chest.

"That's *Sheriff* Callaghan to you, McCreary," I retorted angrily. Ash snickered and looked down at the star badge gleaming on my chest.

"So it would seem." Ash glanced at the gun in my hand, finally, and took it from me.

"Ash, ma'am..." The man I had just arrested came stumbling towards us, freed from his bindings thanks to a skinny gunslinger in a dark hat. "...Thank you—" I flinched as Ash drew her gun and fired, the bullet barely missing the side of my head. Swearing, I turned to see the man drop dead.

"That was unnecessary, McCreary." Ash simply looked at me as I said it and shrugged.

"It felt good." The gang around us laughed in response, except for the man in the dark hat, who simply jumped back onto his horse.

Ash didn't smile at the attention and walked around me slowly. "He's been a pain in my behind ever since I let him run point on a train robbery. It was a *one-time* deal, and he wasn't realizin' that." Ash sighed and

put her gun away. “How’s Rocky River been treat’n you?”

“Better’n you, evidently.”

“Now, why would you say that?”

“Uh...because you’re a murderous outlaw and I’m an accomplished sheriff?”

“See, that’s the difference between you and me,” Ash said. “You see yourself as an all-righteous good doer, but you just don’t understand. We do what we do because there ain’t enough good in this world to go around.”

“I disagree.”

“And that is exactly why you are the sheriff, and I am the outlaw.” I rolled my eyes at the smart comment. “So, exactly how ‘wanted’ am I?”

“Dead or alive.”

“And, do you intend on honoring that bounty?”

“That would be incredibly difficult considering the numbers, the weapons available to me at this moment, and what I suspect is a bruised or broken rib.” Ash smiled and looked down at the ground as I answered.

“Is that doubt I hear in your voice, sheriff?”

“Naw,” I started. “Don’t you ever doubt my overconfidence in myself. It really is something.”

“Ash, she’s stalling. There’s about 20 horsemen on their way.” Everyone’s heads swiveled at the same time to look at the man in the dark hat. “Thank you, Allen.” I smiled sweetly at Ash as she turned back towards me.

“Ruin’n *all* the fun,” she mumbled before grabbing me forcefully. Someone tossed her some rope, and soon I was restrained and

flopped on the rump of a horse.

“Aw, come on,” I said, my voice straining as all the blood rushed down to my brain.

“No special treatment for an old friend?”

“Just be glad you ain’t dead,” a voice above me said. Forcing my head up as far as it would go, I found myself staring at a young Filipino woman that I recognized.

“Sammy?” She didn’t respond and abruptly spurred her horse, making my head flop down again. Whatever was wrong in my ribcage was starting to go numb, so I thanked God for that blessing. Then I sighed, or at least *tried* to—it was more like a series of sharp exhales as my diaphragm bounced up and down.

Today was going to be a very long day.

Close Isn’t Close Enough

When the first gunshot rang out, Sammy did a quick 360 and was immediately sitting on her horse backwards. I let out an impressed swear before putting my head as far down as it would go. (She had two revolvers out and was not being careful to spare my hearing.)

A few moments later, I shimmied out of the ropes tying my hands together—without alerting Sammy, somehow. With a pathetic wiggle, I flopped off the horse and grunted in pain as I slammed into the ground, rolling to a stop before using my recently freed hands to untie the ropes binding my feet. I tossed the rope aside and dove behind a large rock, glad for any type of cover.

Bullets zinged over my head, and I ignored the sharp throbbing of my ribcage that made every breath laborious.

Looking out from behind the rock as I propped against it, I could see Ash herself galloping towards me—her gun blazing as

she madly shot at the approaching horde. I smiled as I saw who was leading it—the small army was more than I had expected from Clarabelle.

“Callaghan—don’t make this difficult!” Ash shouted suddenly. I ignored her and, instead, made it as difficult as possible.

She wasn’t *quite* fast enough to react as I clambered up the rock and launched into her, sending both of us careening into the sand.

Almost immediately, Ash punched me right where my rib injury was, and I let out a painful moan, unable to move for a moment.

Swearing, Ash looked up, and then back down at me.

“You’re running on borrowed time, McCreary,” I said with a wheeze. Her short, white hair blew in the wind for a moment before she stooped down, frowning, and put her cowboy hat back on.

“I always have been,” Ash reached up with a hand and stood, “and, I always will be.”

They timed it perfectly. Just as her arm extended fully, her horse swooped by—like an eagle dive bombing its’ prey—and she was whisked away.

I tried not to laugh at the pure perfection she had for theatrics and forced myself onto my knees. She galloped away without looking back and I could see her gang waiting for her on the other side of Nelly’s Gorge.

A smile crossed my face. We would always be enemies, but I couldn’t help but wonder if in a different life...in a different world... maybe we could have been friends. At a time when we didn’t have to choose so drastically between right and wrong. Somewhere life was maybe just a little bit better.

Clara pulled to a stop and helped me

to my feet while the rest of the entourage galloped past, chasing after the woman that had taken so much from them.

I put a hand to my chest and breathed lightly, but the pressure in my chest wasn’t from cracked ribs..., it was this undeniable feeling that this is how it would end—with one of us riding off towards the sun being chased by our past, and the other condemned to watch.

* * *

KAYLA VANKIRK
Dalton High School
Mr. Zach McFarren, Teacher

Honorable Mention • High School Short Story

Dead Man

In the center of the square, there was a statue. It was a man in a suit with an axe buried between his eyes, his hands and shoulders raised in a shrug as he contemplated his unseen killer. The townsfolk considered it bad luck to look at the statue, so it sat in the center of the dirty, run-down square, ignored. The statue had been made of dark stone long ago, but wear in the sun and rain had bleached it nearly white, giving the man a ghostly look.

Because of the Dead Man, as it was simply and aptly called, the square was well avoided by everyone. So one day, when a man stood at its base looking the Dead Man in the eyes, news travelled quickly, and soon there was a small gathering of confused townspeople carefully avoiding looking at the statue but inspecting the strange man.

The man wore a suit of black, and his face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat and a cowl, but his piercing eyes could be seen glinting between them. He gave no sign of noticing his audience or anything other than the cold gray stone. As time passed and the shadows grew long, the townsfolk lost interest and started wandering home, disappointed in the lack of action. Only a young boy remained, who had slipped away from his mother as she left the square. He watched the odd man for a while longer, then grew tired of waiting. The boy approached the man and tapped him on the arm.

“Sir? Sir?”

“Hello, Weston,” said the man. He had a low voice that sounded raspy from disuse.

“How do you know my name?” the boy asked.

The man turned to look at the boy, but still only his eyes could be seen. The boy looked into those dark eyes and decided he did not have to be afraid.

“I know everyone and everything that happens in this town, for it is my town, too.”

The boy was confused. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before, sir.”

The man laughed, a sound that resembled gravel being crushed between two metal wheels. “No, Weston, no one ever does.”

“Why’s that?” the boy asked.

“You ask a lot of questions,” the man answered. “I like that about you. No one sees me because I choose not to be seen.”

“But you were seen today,” the boy pointed out.

“I chose to be seen because I hoped to speak with you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you spoke to me first.” The man turned his gaze back to the statue. “Look at the statue, Weston. You don’t have to be afraid.”

The boy turned his gaze to the Dead Man.

“What do you see?”

“I see a man with an axe in his head, sir.”

The man laughed. “Yes, yes, you are right. But what else?”

The boy thought hard. “He is wearing

a suit. He is shrugging like he doesn't care about the axe in his head."

"Right again, Weston. So let me ask you a question. Why should the statue mean bad luck to the townspeople if the man himself is not troubled?"

"It's because he's dead."

"Is he?"

The boy frowned. "No, he isn't. But he *will* be."

"Will he?" the man pressed.

The boy looked over at the man, who adjusted his hat. In that moment, a long, deep scar could be seen running down the man's face from his forehead to the bridge of his nose. The boy looked back at the statue.

"Maybe he won't be," the boy faltered.

"So why, I ask, do the townspeople associate the statue with death?"

The boy furrowed his brow as he thought. "Maybe... maybe the statue shouldn't represent death because the man *should* be dead..., maybe it should represent life because he *isn't*."

The man laughed again. "There, Weston. Was that so hard?"

"That hard to what?" the boy wondered.

"To look at things from another perspective."

As the boy considered those words, the man turned and disappeared into the lengthening shadows. The boy looked at the statue with new eyes and smiled.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Living Man."

* * *

EMILY PACEK
Triway High School
Mrs. Jillian Kitts, Teacher



**Award Winning
Regional Nonfiction
2019-2020**

First Place • Regional Nonfiction

Postcards from the Heartland

When I was a child, my favorite way of passing a rainy afternoon was to sort through my mom's postcard box. Mom saved every postcard she received. She may have saved letters, too, but I paid no attention to her correspondence. I was fascinated by the pictures.

My own family seldom traveled. My dad was a homebody, content when tending his garden or building furniture in his basement workshop or smoking his pipe and solving a crossword puzzle in his armchair. He grew anxious if he spent too many nights away from home. He'd told my mom, during the Second World War when he'd been a Lieutenant in the Army, that when the war was over, he was going back home to Dover (a small town in Ohio where he'd grown up) and he didn't plan to go any farther away than Canton (a somewhat larger town about twenty miles from Dover) for the rest of his life. And he came remarkably close to keeping that vow.

But Mom had friends who took trips and sent travel greetings to our mailbox. Once the postcards had been passed around our supper table, they joined the collection in Mom's box, where they offered me glimpses of settings quite different from the only landscapes I'd ever seen near home. There was a black sand beach in Hawaii, the Space Needle in Seattle, a burro descending into the Grand Canyon, a bear grabbing salmon in an Alaskan stream, even the interior of a hotel room in Las Vegas featuring a large,

round bed and the caption "Liberace slept here."

I imagined that someday I'd see some of those places, and others as well, but that didn't happen. After I grew up I married and had eight children. For the past decade I've been a single parent, and there's never been extra time or money to think about traveling very far from home.

But one of the gifts my father passed along to me was the knowledge that staying put in one place, and learning to know it well, can occupy a lifetime.

Here, then, from my own mental postcard box, are half a dozen images I treasure, all of them scenes glimpsed within a few miles of my home.

This is a farmer's plowed field, the furrows filling up with snow, the field edged with dry stalks of Queen Anne's lace, each spent flower head turned brown and curling upward to form a delicate cup that collects the snow. Late winter snow used to be called "poor man's fertilizer" because it contains nitrogen that releases slowly into the soil as it melts. The color contrast between the snow and the varying shades of brown in this scene, from the rich dark earth to the pale tan of the scattered remaining cornstalks, is stunning.

This small and elegant tree that seems to be engulfed with delicate reddish-purple flowers is a redbud. Each April I am impressed by how many redbuds grow in my

small town. They are easy to identify when in bloom; later in the summer they return to relative anonymity, a small and nondescript tree with gray bark, although some have trunks and branches that twist and curve in uniquely graceful arrangements. But when the flowers appear, there is no mistaking. Unlike the flowers of most trees, which grow each bud from the end of a stalk, redbud flowers are, botanically speaking, cauliflorous, which means the flowers can appear almost anywhere, including directly on the trunk and branches. They bloom early in the spring, before the trees have leafed out. With no competing green color to distract the eye, a redbud in bloom can be fully taken over by the tiny purple flowers that outline each limb and twig.

This is a family of wild turkeys that appeared almost daily, for a brief season, in a yard just a few miles from me. A stately male, complete with blue head and red wattles, was usually accompanied by several adult females and a gaggle of four or five half-grown young birds. They might show up any time of the day, but most often around dusk. They would emerge from the small woods that abuts the lawn and make their slow and regal way, heads bobbing, across the grass, making a long stop at a birdfeeder on the other side of a driveway, picking at everything that remained on the ground from the recent visits of the profligate, messy birds who scattered seed as they ate. Never seeming to be in any hurry, those turkeys would mince their way around the house and eventually disappear back into the woods. Most days, anyone watching at the right time would be treated to at least one viewing of the male's tail feathers fanned out in full display.

This profusion of flowers along the side of a summertime road is wild blue phlox, native to not only Ohio but all of the eastern United States. Phlox can thrive in many environments and is so common that many passersby probably mentally edit it out of the landscape. But it deserves a second look. Legend has it that phlox was John Chapman's favorite flower and that he'd sometimes broadcast phlox seeds along the road when he undertook the journeys, to tend his nurseries and plant more apple trees, that earned him his nickname, Johnny Appleseed. Phlox are beautiful, the flowers ranging from a deep bluish-purple, through lighter shades, all the way to an off-white, with the full color palette sometimes appearing together in the same spot. Johnny Appleseed is known to have traveled through the area where I live and to have owned land within thirty miles of my current home. When I see phlox blooming along the road each summer, I like to imagine that Chapman himself may have touched one of the ancestors of the plants that grow here now.

This dark purple flower is another that thrives along roadsides in my area. It goes by the name ironweed. I've known people who've watched for the appearance of goldenrod or listened for subtle changes in the afternoon noise the insects make to reassure them that summer is moving along and autumn is approaching. I like to watch for the first ironweed I see blooming, maybe because I love the deep-purple color. Ironweed is a tall plant, sometimes growing to over seven feet, and got its name from the toughness of its stem. Hardy and tenacious, it's difficult to pull out of the ground. Ironweed is a nuisance weed in a pasture or

field, but along the edge of a woods or by a roadside I like to see it blooming in the late summer, a splash of deep color when many other flowers are over and gone.

This bushel basket is loaded with black walnuts, still encased in their dark yellow-green husks. The black walnut tree is native to much of the eastern United States, including Ohio, and one grew in our front yard when I was a child. I spent so much time sitting under it, my back leaning against the trunk, that I believe I can still remember the patterns of deep grooves in the bark. But the most memorable time of year with a walnut tree is when the nuts are ripe. The nut meats are delicious, and my mom used them in her baking, but it takes a lot of work to remove them from the protection that nature provides. The shell is thick and hard and contains tannins that stain almost anything, including one's hands and clothes, black. We used to wear gloves and pound them with hammers to crack the shell and remove the nut, which always seemed so small to me in comparison with the outer covering it hid within. I've heard of other people who drive over walnuts with a pickup truck or place a piece of lumber over a layer of unshelled walnuts, then jump on it, hoping to crack those shells with less work.

I haven't abandoned the idea that one day I might have the opportunity to travel to Europe, or Hawaii, or even someplace as relatively close but also far away as the Grand Canyon. But I never forget that I might glimpse a memorable scene every time I step outdoors. And most days I do capture scenes for my mental postcard box. Sometimes that scene is as spectacular and showy as a rainbow or a sunset, and others it's as

humble as an earthworm on the sidewalk wriggling its way back to the shelter of the soil after a rain prompted it to emerge into the air. In between those extremes are limitless possibilities. It might be a chipmunk, perched on its hind legs on the drain spout for a brief second before it whisks itself into hiding. Or, on the slower-moving end of the spectrum, it might be a lichen, that amazing bio-partnership of a fungus and an alga, that grows on the bark of the oak tree next door. And one day this past summer it was a monarch butterfly I saw in a parking lot when I was running errands. I stopped to think that very monarch would probably be spending the winter in Mexico, from which nation a postcard of a beach in Acapulco found its way to my mom's postcard box fifty years ago. I'm always pleased when my mom's and my own postcard boxes can cross paths, however briefly.

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MARY ANN LIESER
Wooster, Ohio

Second Place • Regional Nonfiction

Back When People Wrote Letters

*Yesterday we got our vaccinations.
We're shipping out next Wednesday.*

Words from a timeworn letter written by a family member serving in the military, back when people wrote letters. We love old letters, don't we? They provide history lessons and unlock family secrets and allow us a peek at the personalities of those who died before we got a chance to meet them.

*It's hot here and the food isn't great,
but it isn't too bad otherwise.*

There's just something about discovering old letters tied with silk ribbons in musty steamer trunks in cobwebbed attics. We devour the romance of them with fascination and nostalgia. Some of our favorite novels and made-for-TV movies center around vintage letters, many written during World War II by lonely young soldiers far from home for the first time.

*I miss rock-n-roll music.
They don't play it here.*

Wait—what? *I miss rock-n-roll music*? Obviously not a letter of the WWII era. Actually these excerpts are from letters written by my brother while serving in the U.S. Army—letters dated in the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties.

I recently unearthed these, and many

other letters and postcards, while finally getting around to going through several plastic containers of such artifacts in my basement. And, while much earlier eras come to mind when society considers the handwritten letter, it occurred to me that not only was letter-writing still firmly a thing with my generation, we may have been the last to communicate on a widespread basis through this manner—through the heartfelt, lovely, bygone written word.

Handwriting requires time and effort. It's the conveyance of what someone wants to say, flowing from their mind and their heart, through their hand, and onto paper. The slant and pressure of their writing—and the drawings sometimes scrawled in the margins—can disclose excitement, boredom, amusement, love.

Sure, military enlistees still write from basic training, that being their primary medium of communication with those back home. And those who simply haven't climbed onto the technology bandwagon, as well as some cultures, might still pick up pen, set their thoughts to paper, and mail them off in a stamped envelope via snail mail. But aside from the letters written by those and perhaps a few other minority factions, letter writing virtually went the way of the pony express when email and cell phones rode in and declared that *this town ain't big enough for the both of us*. Email, after all, offered a quicker, less laborious way to send a letter;

and cell technology brought not only less costly telephone calls but also texting. Who wanted to sit down and handwrite a letter, given these modern conveniences?

But I am grateful at having received, and saved, all these letters. What a wealth of history, life changes, humor, and pop culture they represent. They form a timeline of life, with all its hills and valleys. They are documentation of decades of the lives of my family, my friends, and myself. The type of documentation that later generations won't have.

A note scratched onto the back of an envelope by my future husband, promising to give me everything I would ever need. (He did).

A letter from a close friend telling me that *I can't believe I have to tell you I'm sorry about your dad and congratulate you on your new baby boy in the same letter. Your dad would have loved him.*

From a school buddy of my husband's, a few years later: *Congrats on the new son! Three more boys and you'll have a basketball team.* At the bottom, he's drawn something resembling a basketball.

And a note scribbled by my husband on a scrap of paper, along with a heart: *I love you and always will.* (He didn't.)

I wasn't the only one with a dramatic love life. On a 1978 postcard from Florida, my best friend with whom I regularly frequented the discos and compared dating woes writes that *I've seen some good-looking guys here. I may have to break up with what's-his-name when I come home!* Hand-drawn artwork adorns the postcard—a peace symbol and a smiley face.

And this 1979 missive from a friend out

to sea on a Navy submarine: *I hope your love life is better now. Lord knows it couldn't get much worse!* (Who knows to which current dating crisis of my young life he was referring.)

A couple years later, my military brother writes: *I got a letter today from some woman I don't know. She saw my picture in the paper. I'll probably write back, but I don't know if she looks like the woman on the deck of Old Maid cards or Jaclyn Smith. Anyways, the envelope smelled good.*

Then there are the somber memories that these letters evoke. A happy-go-lucky, always smiling guy from high school frequently exchanged letters with several of us back home—from prison. Shortly after graduation, he had inexplicably committed a non-violent felony and been sent away. His letters are gut-wrenching even as I re-read them now: *It shouldn't be too much longer 'til I'm out for good, and I'm sure counting on coming home March or April of next year.* (He eventually did get out...only to spend the next two decades in and out of other prisons.)

I laugh out loud at other letters. A friend who had always been somewhat of a braggart boasts of the dozen bands he's seen since moving to California—two weeks before. When I write to my brother in the Army and mention this amazing feat, he writes back and tells me to let our friend know that since he recently left home, he's seen Bing Crosby, The Beatles, and Elvis. (This is 1980, by the way.)

I also found a long-forgotten note written to my future husband in 1984 saying *Here is the latest photo of your fiancée. Are you sure you still want to get married? I'd better stay*

anonymous. Enclosed in the envelope is the worst photo of me ever. (The handwriting suspiciously resembles my mother's, but she recently, with wide eyes and a smirk, proclaimed her innocence.)

And from an always-hilarious high school friend of my husband's, a postcard addressed in 1994 to my husband and me, with the address *somewhere in Smithville, Ohio*. (It obviously made it to us.)

Then there are the signs of the times reflected in all those letters. An aunt mentions having tried Jazzercise in 1977 and that *It's very cold here today; I actually wore a pair of slacks to work*.

My brother writes from his barracks in 1980 that *I just watched J.R. get shot*, and in 1982 he asks *Do you have MTV there? That's a TV station that plays rock and shows the bands singing their songs 24 hours a day*.

My newlywed sister, writing in 1983 from Germany where her husband is stationed, tells me that *We listen to Armed Forces Network here. On Sunday mornings they play Casey Kasem's Top 40 Countdown, just like at home*. The following year, she tells me she's seen the movies *Footloose* and *Scarface* at the theatre and likes the songs *Oh Sherry* and *Dancing in the Dark*. She writes that *I bought a rap record. You know, half talk / half song. We don't have a record player yet though*. She also mentions watching *Soul Train* on television and that *Right now I'm watching a Dynasty episode that Dad taped for me. I can't wait to see if Alexis is guilty or not*.

I'm told that Sis and the hubby rang in 1985 with a party at their apartment for some of the other military couples. *We watched rock videos on TV, and one of the guys brought some cassettes so we'd have*

more music. On Christmas Day we watched the Bob Ho-Ho-Hope Christmas Special.

A couple years later, little sis writes that *You'll have to come visit us when we move to North Carolina. It shouldn't be that far from you. If you have a map, maybe you could figure out how far it is*. She has included a rough sketch of North Carolina with a star marking Fort Bragg.

And after my sister moves to North Carolina in 1997, she writes *I'll write again soon, or I'll write you online if you've set up a Hotmail account. Let me know*.

Aside from the pop culture, many of these treasured letters exude poignancy.

From my homesick little sister in Germany, 1984: *Sometimes when I'm at the PX, I look at the Rubbermaid stuff cause it says Wooster, Ohio, on it*. The following year, she writes: *I watched Donahue today. The topic was sisters. I'm glad I have two!* And in 1987: *I think about Dad every day. I told him at the hospital he would get better and he said, 'No honey, this time I'm too sick.' That was the last thing he said to me*.

Then, in 1990, her husband deployed to the Middle East, Sis writes that *I don't know when he'll get to come back home. They're saying it may be awhile. This mission is called Desert Shield*.

An aunt tells me in 1991 that *The company has been laying off and I could lose my job. But I refuse to worry about it! Where there is an ending, there is a beginning*.

In 1993, a good friend who had recently moved to New York City pens this: *Thanks for checking on me. I'm fine. My building is about four and a half blocks from the World Trade Center, so I really didn't know anything happened until later that afternoon. It's*

scary to think of terrorism happening in our own country.

From another aunt, writing from Columbus in late 1999: *What are you doing New Year's Eve? We're planning to stay home. It sounds like things are going to be crazy, everything from all the computers crashing to the world ending.*

And then, the letters abruptly stopped.

The world didn't end when the crystal ball dropped in Times Square at the stroke of midnight, heralding the year 2000. But I've realized that with the expired millennium, handwritten letters also ceased.

As research for this piece, I Googled *When did people stop writing letters?* My findings seem to corroborate my personal experience. Letter writing did indeed cease as a regular form of communication around the turn of the century. It's said that the first handwritten letter was generated by Persian Queen Atossa around 500 BC. How sad that this 2,500-year-old means of communication—this tactile, lost art—has all but died out.

Sure, we still communicate. Only now it's via impersonal texting, auto-pilot Facebook liking, brief Twittering, briefer yet Instagram posting, and non-permanent Snapchattling. No paper. No handwriting. And today's emojis can't begin to compete with a hand-drawn heart, a crude diagram of new living quarters, or a pitiful sketch of a new outfit just bought at the mall.

The intimacy of handwriting simply cannot be replicated electronically. There's no way an austere, 12-point Times New Roman dispatch glaring from a screen shares a part of a person the way the handwritten letter did. Of course, there's no reason we can't print emails, tie them with a polyester

ribbon, and tuck them into a plastic box. But I uncovered only two or three printed-out emails in my basement expedition, and I have to say that they hold none of the charm of their handwritten counterparts.

Reading these old letters transports me on a journey in a time machine. With all the memories and emotions the letters awaken, it's an experience not unlike riding a rollercoaster. Of course, it's a rickety, old, wooden rollercoaster. Some of the letters feel like a warm sweater around my shoulders on a frosty day. Others are a stab to the heart. But all of them take me in vivid Technicolor back to when people wrote letters.

* * *

DOTTIE SINES
Wooster, Ohio

Third Place • Regional Nonfiction

Hattie Gets New Shoes

I kicked off of my house slippers and put on my pair of \$94.00 Nike Frees. I have been lucky and maybe blessed, so I spare no expense for foot comfort. The Frees are the new wave minimalist shoes, flat soles with no heel elevation and support. Proved to be better for your feet and up to your lower back. I get in my car and drive to Kent State to attend a Veterans' Writing Circle.

Andy, one of the group, read a story about his famous ancestors, an admiral of a ship called the Constellation, a captain in the Civil War, and some legendary Scottish hero. After his story, as customary, a discussion followed. It seemed everybody there had some famous people in their lineage—generals, presidents, descendants of the Mayflower, Revolutionary soldiers. I sit tight-lipped as I had nothing to offer as I am the product of a bastard, washroom maid, and broke-ass immigrants.

Henrietta Bliss worked as a maid for a wealthy Jewish family somewhere in Prussia. One day, she slipped and fell on the floor, and the man of the house got her pregnant. He paid a small sum of money to John Sitzenstock, the son of a poor farmer, to marry Henrietta and take her and the baby to America. After the baby was born they departed from Bremen, Germany, on the ship named the Bark Cedar. Like most of the nearly broke passengers, they were assigned between decks. John, Henrietta, and the eleven-month-old baby named Ferdinand

arrived in New York in 1866. For whatever reason, they settled in Cleveland, Ohio. They had six other children—all of them tall, blonde hair, and blue eyes—Aryan. Then there was Ferdinand with brown eyes, olive skin, and although short, he was well built. Grandma said. "He looked like a fireplug with legs—round and thick through the body. It appeared as though he had no neck, with his head just resting on his shoulders. He had short arms that seemed to stick straight out."

Ferdinand's stepfather treated him like a bastard and shunned him. The only attention he got was from the beatings. After three years of schooling, they shuffled him off to the brickyards in the flats and worked as a laborer. In his late teens, he became a teamster—driving a team of horses pulling wagons filled with bricks. Around 1885 he married Mary Amidon, a wash girl. She worked in one of the mansions on Euclid Avenue, then called Millionaire Row. Ferdinand, who was later called Fred, took to the drink. As a hobby and a vice, he also raised racing pigeons and gambled on them. Hattie, my grandma, was their third child of eight.

1959

I finished cutting the grass and climbed a couple of steps to the back porch, opened the screen door, entered the mudroom, then knocked on the door leading into the kitchen. Grandma opened the door and immediately

looked down at my shoes. I knew. I had to take them off. I put the right toe into the heel of my left shoe and lifted my foot out, then did the opposite with the other toe and heel-kicked my shoes off without untying them. Grandma said. "You should take better care of your shoes. Ya' know I had to wear my older sister's hand-me-down shoes till I was 14. That's when I got my first pair of new shoes."

She invited me in, and I sat at the white porcelain kitchen table with chipped edges exposing the black metal underneath. Like always, she got me a glass of water, and she made herself a cup of coffee. Grandma made coffee the old-fashioned way. The hard way. Dad told me cowboys used to make it like that, so I liked to watch her. I smelled the coffee simmering in the pan. Coffee, like cigarettes, smells better than it tastes. She set her blue-with-white-speckled-porcelain cup on the table, placed a fine strainer over the top, then poured steaming dead-black tar from the pan into the fine wire strainer. After filling her cup, she set the strainer and the pan back on the stove and sat down.

Grandma grabbed the cup with both hands, blew the steam away and took a big gulp. I looked at her hands while she held the cup. I always looked at her hands as her fingers were crooked, bent sideways. I wondered what happened to them. That day I planned to ask her.

After a couple of gulps of coffee, she put the cup down. Grandma always told me a story, even though I heard most of them before, but I enjoyed hearing them again. I figured since she said something about my shoes, she would tell the story about her new shoes.

"You know, they only sent me to school for four grades. They thought if I knew how to read and do simple numbers, that I knew enough. I worked with my mother washing clothes for those rich folks up on Euclid Avenue. Never did see any of that money as it went to the family cause—my old man." I knew she meant her dad.

Grandma took a couple more gulps. I couldn't help but stare at her bent fingers again. She put the cup on the table. "When I turned thirteen, I got a job at National Electric Lamp. I welded the filaments on light bulbs. Guess how much money I made?"

I remembered from the last two times she told me the story, but I shrugged. "Well, I started at 14 cents an hour and worked ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week. They would pay us in cash and put the money in little manila envelopes. I would have to take it home unopened and give it to the old man. Guess how much I got to keep for myself?"

Again, I knew the answer but did not like this question because maybe she thought I should be mowing her lawn for free. I shifted in my chair. "Not a darn penny. The son of a bitch kept it all." Grandma only said bad words when she was talking about her old man.

"After a year or so, I came to be one of the fastest welders there, and they gave me a penny raise to 15 cents an hour. I decided to keep the extra money. On payday, I would carefully open the envelope, and pull out my extra money, and reseal it." She took a couple of gulps of coffee, and I looked at her fingers.

"Ya' know I never had a new pair of shoes. I had to wear Minnie's shoes when she outgrew them. Did I ever tell you Minnie

died of the flu in 1918? Anyway, I decided to save my money and buy a new pair of shoes just for me. In less than a month, I had enough money to buy my shoes. I paid a little over a dollar for them. I was proud of myself.” Grandma sat straight up in her chair and put her head back.

“I wore my new pair of shoes home. The old man asked me how I got the money to buy new shoes. I told him. ‘I saved it.’ He told me I had to take the shoes back and give him the money. I refused. So he beat me, but not with a strap or an open hand like usual. Since he was drunk, he used his fists. I guess he knocked me out as I didn’t remember much when I woke the next morning.”

Her voice turned firm and hard. “I was bruised and swollen and dizzy, but I still had my shoes on, so I got up and walked the three miles to work that day. I kept them shoes till they didn’t fit.” She looked out the window and seemed to be looking back in time. Grandma then turned to me, smiled and softly said, “That was back then. I’m glad things are different today.”

Grandma gulped down the remains of her coffee, and I finally asked. “Grandma, how did you break your fingers? Do they hurt?”

“Oh, hon, they hurt sometimes, but they’re not broke. Life just bent them sideways, the hard way.”

She reached in her handbag lying on the table and pulled out a change purse—the oval-shaped ones with the balls that crisscross when they close. She pushed it open with her bent index finger and thumb, reached in, and pulled out some coins. “Let’s see. You worked two hours at 35 cents/hr., so I owe you 70 cents.” She handed me the

coins as she stood up—the signal for me to go. I put **my** money in my pocket, put **my** shoes on, and walked home.

I kicked off my shoes when I got into the house, then went to my bedroom and put the coins in my shaped-like-a-log-cabin bank. Summer was almost over, and I would start 6th grade in a couple of weeks. Before then, mom would take us to the shoe store in Painesville and buy us new shoes.

* * *

DAVID AGARD
Wadsworth, Ohio

Honorable Mention • Regional Nonfiction

Can't Stop the Rain

When I was little, I didn't like rain. Lots of children, before realizing that weather is just a part of life, are afraid of storms and thunder, sheltering in their parents' beds in the middle of the night. I was no different, and I remember snuggling with my older sister in the big double bed, the covers over our heads to diminish the flashes of lightning. But though the thunder and lightning were frightening, I didn't like storms because storms brought rain.

It would seem odd that I didn't like rain. I lived with my parents and six siblings on a farm in northern Tuscarawas County. On a farm, rain is essential for the crops and pastures to be abundant. We lived from the bounty that the land produced. My mother got most of our meals from the farm, whether grass-fed beef or vegetables by the bushel. We had a huge garden, and summer days were spent hoeing rows of potatoes, beans, tomatoes and sweet corn. These staples, canned or frozen, got us through the winter till the next growing season. If it didn't rain, we watered by hand, carrying bucket after bucket to be poured from a tin cup onto the thirsty plants.

But it seemed to me, at my young age, that rain was not a very reliable ally. Rain came and went how it chose. It was like an annoying friend, never seeming to be around when needed, or leaving you dreading it when you saw it coming around a corner, then hanging around not knowing when to

leave. If it didn't rain, the pastures would not grow and there would be no grass for the cows to graze. If it didn't rain, there would be no crops to produce seed for the next year's growing season or to sell, to buy all the things a growing family needs. On the other hand, if it rained too much, a crop could be ruined. For me, it seemed like a war between us and the weather, and rain was more like the enemy. And I took it personally.

My father, on the other hand, was a true farmer at heart. He had grown up near Sandyville, Ohio, and he and his brothers had worked alongside their father doing the farm work. When he married Mom, the first thing they did was buy our farm. Over the years, there were herds of sheep and cattle and hogs, and all the while Dad worked hard making the farm productive, plowing or planting or harvesting crops. He loved working the land, and I can still hear him singing as he drove the tractor. He seemed so accepting of what the weather brought, and at times, it seemed to bring calamity. I remember a time when there was a good field of oats, thick and ready to harvest, the best crop he'd ever had, Dad said. But heavy rain came overnight, making the seed heads so heavy that the stems couldn't hold them up, and most of the field was flattened to the ground, with Dad losing most of the crop. Another time, there were days of rain, just when the wheat was in full head, yet unable to be harvested. The wheat actually sprouted

on the stalk, making it useless for seed wheat for the next year.

Making hay was the worst. Hay was important on the farm. It was essential to have enough baled to feed the cows through the winter, and it had to be of good quality to keep weight on them. If we were lucky, there might be enough to sell.

But when Dad hitched up the old sickle mower to cut a field of clover or alfalfa, I would start getting anxious and restless. Baling hay was not a simple one-day chore. To be done properly involved at least three to four days of nice sunny weather. The hay had to be cut and dried, then raked and baled. At times I would go with Dad as he daily examined the cut hay. He would scoop an armful, feeling it for dampness, and smelling it. And then he would look at the sky. Ideally, the sky would be blue with puffy white clouds gently moving across. We would be able to take our time, with Dad driving the tractor and baler, my brothers stacking it onto the wagon, and all of us then helping to unload it in the barn. Afterward, we would sit on the empty wagon drinking ice water and eating watermelon and enjoying the fact that a hard job was done successfully.

But it always seemed that on the day the hay was cured perfectly, instead there would be a different feel in the air. There would be a breeze and the trees would be showing the undersides of their leaves, a sure sign of rain, my mother would say. By afternoon, there would be a line of blue-black clouds on the horizon. Soon we could hear the sound of distant thunder. Then it was a mad scramble to get the hay in. At other times, the weather never cooperated at all, and the cut hay would lay day after day, getting wet and brown from

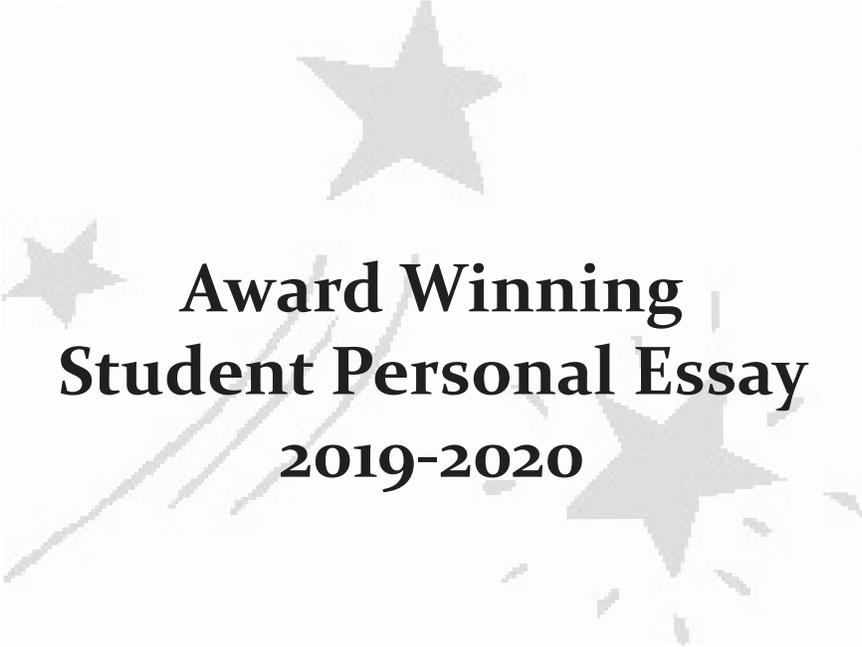
one rain shower and then another. I could see the disappointment on Dad's face. But he would just shrug his shoulders and sigh. "Can't stop the rain," he would say, and then wait for the sun to come out again.

How did my dad do it? It had to have been a source of worry for him. There were bills to pay and us children to raise. Maybe his years of growing up on a farm had given him a resilience I had not yet acquired. And, indeed, it would be a long time before I came to accept what the weather brought and I came to terms that there are some things we cannot control.

I am grown now. All my siblings and I are well established in our lives. The farm is sold, but I am still farm-raised at heart. I still watch the cycle of farming going on around me. From the earliest days of springtime, I watch the farmers working their land, plowing and planting. I see the oats and wheat ripen and turn gold. But whenever I see a field of hay being cut, I still get a touch of anxiety although I am completely separated from the situation. I keep an eye on the sky, hoping for those perfect sunny days that spell a good crop, but when that doesn't work out, when those blue-black clouds appear on the horizon, and thunder is heard in the distance, I just shrug my shoulders, sigh, and mumble Dad's words, "Can't stop the rain," and with acceptance carry on.

* * *

BECKY SOEHNLEN
Beach City, Ohio

A decorative graphic featuring three large, light gray stars of varying sizes and orientations. The stars are set against a background of faint, light gray streaks and smaller, scattered star-like shapes, creating a sense of motion and celebration. The text is centered within this graphic.

**Award Winning
Student Personal Essay
2019-2020**

First Place • High School Personal Essay

For Now, We'll Blame Aaron

I joined the crowd shoving down the middle school hallway on my way to band. As always, my bright yellow drumsticks, nicknamed the Bananas, stuck out of the front pocket of my Trapper. I was weird back then, you know. When I finally arrived at my destination, I proudly surveyed my kingdom, the percussion section. I fancied myself a benevolent ruler, but oof, did I get some things wrong.

Aaron, a lanky boy my age, sauntered up to me. He shook his hair out of his eyes and focused the cunning gaze I once found cute on me. "You know Joe can't play that part, right?"

"Aren't you assigned to help him?" I wasn't about to start playing his games again.

"Yeah, but he can't play it, so you should let me."

I glared at him as I set the bass drum down on its stand. "Take that up with Mr. Negro, not me."

"But you're the one with all the part assignments..." he artfully trailed off, giving me time to flatter myself that I really was the one in control of part assignments. I shook my head, and thankfully Mr. Negro started class.

About halfway through "Greensleeves," Mr. Negro cut us off. We were playing a relatively difficult Alfred Reed arrangement, and it was boggling our small, middle-school brains.

"I can't hear the timpani!" Mr. Negro

barked. Aaron, looking over Joe's shoulder, made a face. Joe was almost shaking. Aaron was right about one thing: Joe really couldn't play the part and was hardly trying to learn. "Would it help to hear Aaron play it, to get it in your ear?" Mr. Negro asked. Joe nodded quickly and practically threw the mallets into Aaron's hands, obviously relieved. Aaron shot me a smug look. What a snot bucket.

At the end of class, Mr. Negro informed us that he was considering cutting "Greensleeves" from the concert that was a day away. And here was the first fateful folly: I decided I would do anything I could to keep my favorite piece in the concert. Aaron, holding the bell set as I collapsed the stand, decided to give it another shot.

"You heard how bad it was today!" I hesitated a moment, wanting to stick to my guns and refuse him again. But it *could* save the piece from being cut... and we didn't have much time....

"I don't care who plays it, as long as it's heard," I said. Fool! Foolish girl, thinking I had that kind of power. Foolish girl, thinking I had the right to change something as major as a part assignment. Foolish girl, sending myself headfirst into the idiot abyss!

I showed up to the concert sweaty and nervous in my new blue dress and too tight silver flats. Bustling around the stage, getting equipment set up (and bossing around members of my section) gave me a sort of satisfaction I was just learning to appreciate.

Once everything was set, though, I practically ignored everyone else. The middle school doesn't have a set of chimes, so if I wanted to play well, this would be my only chance to practice on real chimes before the concert. I wanted to play well, and even more than that, I wanted to keep "Greensleeves" from crashing and burning.

Mr. Andrews called for percussionists who would be playing timpani, so they could go to the other side of the stage and learn how the tuning works. (The high school and middle school timpani are different; I remember when I was in seventh grade, my section leader cried after a concert because the timpani had been tuned wrong and she didn't know how to fix it). Aaron went with Mr. Andrews in Joe's place. Joe didn't say a word, and neither did I. Mr. Andrews, his face always as easy to read as a book, asked me with his expression if Aaron should be there. I nodded, pleased to be considered the manager of everyone in my section. Mr. Andrews seemed satisfied and took Aaron, Ethan, and Jagger over to tune.

"Greensleeves" came and went, going better than expected but worse than desired. Panic flooded me the moment I got lost looking between my music, the chimes, and Mr. Negro, but I managed to make it to the end in one piece with the rest of the band. The other two pieces went well, nothing unusually good or bad about them. But out in the audience, a father leaned over to his wife and whispered, "Has Joe played anything yet?" She shrugged, and on the way home, they asked Joe the same question. It just so happened that Joe had not played a single note during the entire concert, and that was my fault.

The next day in band, I waited excitedly for Mr. Negro to pull up the concert recording on his laptop. Instead, I was startled to hear Mr. Andrews call my name from the front of the room, along with Aaron and Joe. I happily went to the front along with the others. It kind of reminds me of a lamb going to slaughter, except nowhere near that dramatic, and unlike the lamb, I wasn't innocent. The hypothetical lamb and I were both blissfully unaware what awaited us, though, so maybe the likening isn't so far off. In any event, I practically bounced up on the stage, where Mr. Andrews was waiting.

Mr. Andrews' brow was furrowed, and it suddenly occurred to me that he looked displeased. Mr. Andrews, displeased with me? No way. Whatever was going on, it had to be Aaron or Joe's fault.

"Let's go talk back here," said Mr. Andrews, heading toward the instrument storage room. Apprehension set in.

The four of us stood facing each other.

"Do you know what this is about?" Mr. Andrews asked us. We shook our heads.

"Mr. Negro got an email this morning from Joe's dad about how Joe didn't play anything at the concert last night." Joe's expression showed that he had no idea about any email. Something made me think that maybe Joe didn't mind not playing.

"Didn't you have a timpani part?" Mr. Andrews asked Joe. Joe nodded.

"Who played it instead?"

"I did," said Aaron. I relaxed a little; he'd fessed up. "She told me I could."

Any relaxation gained from the previous moment vaporized. I blushed hot and deep. Mr. Andrews and I, we're two of a kind. Our faces don't lie.

Three surprised faces focused on me, one of genuine surprise, one of mocking, and one with the blank surprise of someone who was betrayed but hadn't realized it until that moment. You guess who was who.

"So it came from you?"

In an instant, I saw my options mapped out. I could deny everything, making it all Aaron's fault. I could maybe even get away with it. But Aaron knew the truth, and the right thing to do would be taking responsibility, not to mention the fact that my face had already given me away. There's no saying the damage I'd done with Joe, which made me feel terrible. It was important to me, maybe a little too important, what my section thought of me. Had I just ruined my chances of being a good section leader? Of Mr. Negro liking me? Of being an officer in high school marching band? How would a true leader deal with this?!

"Yeah," I said, and in one word, assumed all blame, regardless of who it truly belonged to. My insides boiled, but I didn't know if it was out of shame for what I *had* done or my inner conscience angry with me for admitting to something I *hadn't* done.

"I'm sorry guys, that was a rotten thing to do, taking your part," I looked to Joe, "and giving it to you," I directed to Aaron. "I had no right to do that and I feel awful about it."

Joe ducked his head in discomfort and mumbled that it was okay. Aaron just stared at me. After a beat, Mr. Andrews opened his mouth to say something, but the bell rang. Never had I understood the phrase "saved by the bell" as I did in that moment.

I went home that night confused and upset, so I did exactly what anyone else in my place would've done: I made my own

version of the story in which it wasn't my fault. I was at the YMCA, doing homework and waiting for my sister's gymnastics class to finish, when Rachel Platten's "Fight Song" came on the radio. Suddenly I was filled with anger, perhaps not righteous, but anger all the same. I dug through my backpack and grabbed a wrinkled piece of graphing paper, and on it, I shouted exactly what I wanted to believe into existence:

I'm done with this! I can't stand Aaron anymore! He's so manipulative, I don't even know. I haven't trusted him for a long time. I'm done... no longer. Today I was blindsided, and I wanted to save face with everyone, but I really just put myself into deep doo doo. Aaron manipulated himself into that spot. He kept trying to get me in trouble, even before today.

1. Aaron is assigned to help Joe with timpani
2. Aaron decides he wants to play timpani
3. Both Mr. Negro and Emma tell Aaron to play it so Joe can hear it correctly
4. Aaron tells Emma Joe sucks and will never be able to play it
5. Emma tries to help Joe
6. Aaron asks Emma to tell Mr. Negro to make Aaron play the part
7. Emma doesn't
8. Aaron grabs the part at the concert
9. Joe is relieved (unless he's saving face) and doesn't play a note at the concert
10. Mr. Andrews talks to all three like they're kindergartners, blaming Emma.
11. Joe is suddenly disappointed?
12. Emma dies inside
13. Aaron walks off victorious

14. *Emma talks to Danielle, Sadie, and her mom*

15. *Emma declares her innocence to her teachers*

Reading over it, it looked true, or at least true enough. That was the version of the story I told almost everyone from then on. It kept the parts where Aaron was a villain, but left out the parts where fault could be found with me. And so the story remained, until now.

I walk down the hallway in the stream of bandos heading to band. When I finally reach my destination, I shove my backpack into my slot and pull my snare down from its cage. As I warm up, I once again survey my section. Next to me, my snare guys get their equipment ready to go outside.

“Emma, you think we’ll need our music today?” Josh yells over the din of the loud band room. I shrug and tell him to bring it just in case. Behind me, Cassie wonders aloud when we’ll watch the recording of last Friday’s performance. When Mr. Andrews comes in, I pull him aside with a new idea about how to use our new stand bags, and he reminds me again, half jokingly, that he only takes the fundraiser money and makes photocopies. Needless to say, things are pretty good. I still make mistakes, of course. Just last week, I was the one who forgot her music!

Since I have the power to tell the story however I want, I could smooth every bump out of the plot, make myself the hero of every instance. But I don’t, because truth is more important than pride. Someday I won’t be around to tell my own stories, so while I can, I had better make them the absolute truth, nothing more, nothing less. Lin-Manuel

Miranda put it best: “You don’t control who lives, who dies, who tells your story.”

* * *

EMMA ZEMANCIK
Northwestern High School
Mrs. Kristen Hudson, Teacher

Second Place • High School Personal Essay

Spiritual Playground

Recess was full of whispers and stares. I was blissfully unaware for a while, strolling in circles on the worn asphalt, discussing all those vitally important things fifth graders talk about. Slowly I began to sense it. First, a girl looking at me, then quickly averting her eyes the moment I met them. Then, a group whose whispering turned to silence as I walked by. More and more, the feeling of stolen glances and hushed rumors crept down my back until the words started to meet my ears. "You know, she doesn't even go to church." No one would say a word directly to my face. "She doesn't believe what we believe." As the rumors drifted and swirled from one person to the next, I reached out and caught hold of them all. The voices all whispered: "She's different!"

As I heard more and more, my stomach dropped. My throat closed and I felt the hot sting of tears as the faces around me began to blur. My friends stood beside me, exchanging anxious glances with each other. They wanted to support me, but they couldn't see why this would bring me to tears. How could they understand how I felt like an imposter whose cover had just been blown? The girl who had maliciously spread those rumors looked into my tear-filled eyes. "Cry me a river, build a bridge, and get over it," she told me.

And I did. I cried a river. In middle school, being singled out as different feels like the end of the world. I wanted to run far away from those whispered words, still swirling

through the air. I retreated back into the school, where I tried my best to act like nothing had ever happened. But something had happened. Once the rumors escaped to roam the hallways of my school, I couldn't just act like nothing had happened.

That's the thing about rumors. No one knows the truth, and no one takes the time to find out. Even if they had sought the truth, the conversation would have probably gone according to the usual script. Since I can remember, I have always dreaded hearing the question: "What church do you go to?" For the most part, I've found ways to avoid it. I'm always surprised by how many people will believe that I "forget" what church I go to. But the issue was not that I didn't go to church, nor that I was ashamed of my church. I was just tired of the same response every single time.

"You're a Unitarian Uni—what?"

Unitarian Universalist. The name alone is complicated enough. At its essence, Unitarian Universalism is a religion based on shared principles and spiritual exploration rather than on any one creed. The Seven Principles, a main aspect of the religion, are a set of shared values focusing on the inherent worth of every person and the freedom for spiritual growth. For me, Unitarian Universalism is a community that allows me to discover who I am, rather than a community that tells me who I am supposed to be. The diversity, knowledge, and freedom I have gained

from growing up in this environment have fundamentally impacted who I am today.

The Unitarian Universalist community has been a part of my life since I was 2 years old.

I grew up running around in the big open sanctuary, looking up at tall banners of a deep blue and gold, proudly displaying the symbols of almost every world religion. I didn't know what they meant, but that didn't matter to me. During the service, I would stare out the tall windows at the front of the sanctuary. As I watched the leaves dance to the tune of the piano or the choir, my eyes would drift to the banners, hanging next to the windows. The symbols had their own meaning to me. They meant comfort and community. I did not understand the religions they came from, but I understood their meanings in my own way, and that was enough.

After those rumors spread during recess in fifth grade, I stopped seeing the symbols the way I used to. My childhood spent playing underneath symbols of acceptance and religious diversity was gone. In its place was my resentment for how it made me feel different from my peers. The voices on the playground had screamed at me: "Being different is wrong!" And I believed them. I was in high school when I finally began to see the beauty in those symbols again. Participating in a program focusing on shaping and forming my spirituality, I explored all those different religions and learned the traditional meanings of the symbols on the banners. I learned in greater depth about world religions, their common misconceptions, and the lessons I could take away from each culture. I found that every religion had something to share, a piece of

wisdom, or story to tell that made me who I am today. I visited a mosque, a Hindu temple, and other places of worship to understand other religions and share my own. I was met with such acceptance and kindness. They did not tell me that being different was wrong.

Although my journey of spirituality is only just beginning, my upbringing as a Unitarian Universalist exposed me to the ideas of diversity and tolerance that I would never have otherwise experienced. My religious upbringing has affected my life in so many ways, both good and bad. When the voices on the playground told me that how I was raised was wrong, I learned how to put my hands to my ears and embrace every part of who I am. To be ashamed of what I believe is to be ashamed of myself. I'm still working to understand that even today. I still have moments where I dread having to explain my church and my beliefs, but I'm beginning to stop seeing my differences as wrong. Instead of crying a river, I'm beginning to build the bridge.

* * *

FAITH GRIFFITHS
Ashland High School
Mr. Richard Wasowski, Teacher

Third Place • High School Personal Essay

I Declare War

It was September 20, 2019. The sky was a bright blue hue, the sun drifting in and out of white cotton-ball clouds. I internally cursed the sky for being so bright. Today was not a cheerful day. The least it could be was cloudy. As I opened the icy glass doors, my legs awkwardly walked forward to the car. I had left school early, not daring to mutter where I was going except to school authorities. I felt as if I wasn't even moving, that I was trapped within the repetitive motion. As I got into the car, my parents greeted me with a forced smile. They were dreading this nearly as much as I was. My mom handed me a chilled bag of sliced apples. She softly tried to bargain with me to eat. I had one slice. The rest sat limp in my lap as I stared out the window. Trees slowly began to evolve into towering buildings.

I shivered as I walked down the corridor. Vibrant colors of the rainbow reflected on one another through the spotted carpet and pictures that hung on painted walls. Kids passed me who were in casts, in wheelchairs, while some traveled throughout the building with oxygen tanks hooked up to them. These kids battled something that was forced upon them. I had no excuse. For a split second I contemplated dashing out of the hospital—never stopping, just keep running. As much as I wanted to do that exact thing, my sensibility kicked in reminding myself I was too weak to do anything near that. My thoughts traveled to the idea of whether I would make it back

to school next week..., *not that anyone would notice. Besides, you're not even that bad*, the harsh voice whispered. This lobby was supposed to be warm and inviting; instead, it felt as if it was made out of concrete. A short, young nurse walked out. Due to my being the only one in the waiting room, she looked over and made eye contact with me. It was as if for one split second my life stopped. I knew that once I walked into that office, my life would never be the same. This would always be a part of me. As she said my name, the sharp vowels and consonants rang through my ears.

I numbly followed the plump nurse into a room, and I unconsciously slipped on a gown to be weighed. I stared into the mirror as if I would find answers or at the very least peace. But all I saw was a skeleton staring back at me. Yet in the midst of all of the horror, I relished in pride. After I was weighed, standing backwards, they took my blood pressure multiple times. The only thing I could think about was the hazy road that got me here and how I could do better.

As I lay on the cot for what felt like an eternity, I let my mind wander. I was horrified at the fact I was here. I remembered when I was little, and when I worried about spending the night away from home..., *not in a hospital. I was one who loved to do dolls' hair..., not watch my own fall out. I was one who did fashion shows with barbie dolls..., not one who's own clothes hung off them.*

Yet every horror I could come up with was countered with an achievement. At least I was a size zero. At least I was starting to look like models. It calmed me to think of all my achievements; it made my fear sizzle down. Just as my breaths became slow and steady, they were stopped when the doctors abruptly walked in. I had to stand up, my legs mechanically shifted, slowly retaining the weight being applied. For one second everything was fine. I had proved to them I was fine. Now I could go. Just as the thought entered my mind, the world began to sway. I felt like a daisy bending in the wind..., except it was a daisy in a storm. My head began to throb and my eyes couldn't focus. Then as quickly as it came, it was gone.

The doctor who would be in charge of my 'recovery' came in. He shook my always-cold, icy hands. My cheeks flared with heat. I had only just met him and I despised him. He told my parents that my heart rate was low. I was on the borderline of going home or being admitted. I quaffed at the possibility. Not once had I ever passed out. I placed my hand on my chest reassuring myself I was fine. The doctor continued on talking, but it sounded muffled and mangled. My parents looked over at me and exchanged worried glances. People who have anorexia are ones who lose 40 pounds. I had only lost 15. This was starting to become time consuming. I just wanted to lay down. It wasn't until my dad said something that I snapped back into reality. He had honestly just asked what the treatment would be like if I stayed. Repulsion flooded me. How could he even say that? How could my mother even let him say that? I wasn't sick. Sure, I struggled with things, but I wasn't that bad. Before I even registered

what I was doing, my head snapped up to reveal my angry, horrified expression. But they let me go home.

The car ride home was very quiet. I can recall my parents telling me how lucky I was. I was furious. If I was so lucky then why did I have to eat? Luck comes to those who deserve it. I don't deserve it, I brought this upon myself. Over and over again I was told this is my chance to change things..., that I was the one that could change. What if I didn't want to change. I would have to give up all I had worked for. All the meals I had skipped, repetitive exercises, finding ways to motivate myself, and the lying would have all been for nothing. Yes, I understood these things were horrible, yet it got me to where I wanted. Yet when I would try to plead my case to adults that knew, they would only give me sad sympathetic smiles. When you hear anorexia, you think of losing weight, not trying to gain it back.

I was tired of getting nowhere with losing weight and gaining. If I lost weight, I was happy. If I gained weight, they were happy. My life became this repetitive cycle of weekly or biweekly appointments to the hospital. I began to dread every day I opened my eyes. The amount of food I would have to eat was unbearable. This battle was a weight that I begged to be lifted. I wished only to go back to my old habits, yet I did what they wanted. I was tied to my old ways and getting better.

When I was forced to start practicing recovery, I assumed that once I started eating, I would prove to everyone I was fine..., that I would just eat and forget about all of this. It's the beginning of December, and as much as I go forward, I go back. I would have never imagined it would be this hard.

I remember the day I was diagnosed. I felt as if I was soaring. Being labeled with anorexia meant I was doing something right. I was finally beautiful. Every pound I gain makes me as worthy as the carcass of a bird. A pain. Ugly. Disgusting. Unwanted. Eating is like taking a spoonful of lard, placing it in your mouth, and feeling the fatty, oily substance dissolving into your body. And I expected it to get better.

Looking back, I was tired of everything going on in my life. Tired of being treated below my classmates, not getting anywhere with my depression, and just the pressure from seeing beautiful, skinny girls. I wanted to be someone people liked. Someone who others inspired to be. No one likes to be the shy, depressed girl that everyone walks on. I was going to prove them wrong, prove them that I am better than they think, to shame them for not caring. So I stopped eating. At first your stomach rattles within you, letting out an audible growl. Then after you tell yourself you're not hungry enough times, it slowly stops. Then all those skipped meals, excessive exercises, start to pay off. Your hobbies fade away because food becomes your life. It revolves around it. How many calories you eat, when you eat, and how much. This voice telling you to keep going takes over your mind. It's a subtle voice that you don't know has taken over until your own voice is gone.

I am laying down on the couch, hardly moving because all the strength has been wiped from me during the day. My parents, confronting my continuous bad decisions. Their worried looks overcome by hard words. Tears slide down my mother's cheeks. Pain and anger mix into their words. I want to take

care of everything I was causing. But as much as I want to, I can't. The words and reaction they want won't appear. The control I wanted has caused my life to spiral out of control.

It's been a little over a year since all of this started. Only a few months since I've been in treatment. This whole thing is a burden, yet I can't bare to live without it. I am stuck in this repetitive cycle: thinking I am better without the eating disorder, that it will get better, then I have to eat. Every moment is a battle..., one that I often lose. I am out of the threatening stage; however, one wrong move could send me right back. Treatment is like climbing a mountain, only to find there are many more to come. It would be so much simpler to slide back down, yet if I do, this weight of disappointment comes flooding upon.

It is easy to fake getting better. I can eat in front of them, yet that doesn't mean you stop your practices. I can't stop. This voice in my head screams at me every time I am not burning calories or restricting calories, telling me after everything it's done for me, all I do is disappoint. Some days are better than others. They make me have hope in the future, that I could actually beat this demon. Yet the bad days bring me to my knees. Food is not the problem, the problem is within me. And with this I have wished myself away.

I hate knowing all the pain I am causing everyone around me, especially my parents and sister. Every time they begin to hope and trust in me more, I destroy it. I don't mind what it is doing to me, that's my problem. If I could continue my ways and affect no one, I would. I despise the tears shed because of me, the hours at appointments, time prepping meals, loss of sleep because of their anxious minds. No one will ever know

how much I loathe myself because of it.

No, I'm not better. Am I getting there? Sometimes. Do I go backwards sometimes? Yes. Every moment of every day is a battle. It's a long, exasperating battle, but it's my war—wanting to take it all back, but not moving a muscle to change. I desperately want to feel something, to get myself to remember the taste of life and joy. This battle that rages within me is that I can't even make up my mind on whether or not I want to survive this. So, Anorexia, I declare war.

* * *

EMMA HOSTETLER
Dalton High School
Mrs. Jodi Augspurger, Teacher

Honorable Mention • High School Personal Essay

Pineapple Tart

I have always loved tarts. Apple, lime, lemon, you name it. I loved them all. But pineapple tart has always been special to me. The sweet yet sour and somehow savory mix was delicious. The first time I made a tart, it was a pineapple tart. It had been burnt in some places, some parts were too doughy, other parts had too much powdered sugar. Yet somehow, it was one of the best things I have ever tasted.

Maybe this is the reason that when I think of my heart, I think of that pineapple tart. It's split into pieces:

One piece is sweet. Melts on the tongue like a burst of beauty and amazingness..., with chunks of sweet pineapple. This piece reminds me of warm hugs and sweet memories. It reminds me of a whisper in the ear after a nightmare, *I will be here when you wake up*, a warm cup of milk when I was sad, and random hugs all the time. *You held the universe together*. It reminds me of late night card games. Trips to Aldi's. Gardening. Laughing. *Loving*. (Grandma)

Another piece is a mix of sweet and sour, with a hint of savory. Funny, kind and one of my best friends. *You were my hero, and you still are. Did you know that?* But at the same time, annoying beyond all reason. He is one of the sweetest people I know, one of the few people who can envelop me in a hug and make me feel safe. He is the one I go to when I need anything. Whether it be a hug or a helping hand or a cold, hard dose of reality.

Things will get better, brighter. He gets on my nerves constantly, but at the end of the day, I trust him with my life. *The nightmares we share, we pass through it all, together..., always stronger together*. His piece of the tart is savory, with a slight saltiness. Salty like tears. Right now the piece is only slightly savory, *but next year? When Facetime is the only time I will see him besides vacations? You leave me with shoes far too big to fill*. However, you will always have a piece of the tart that is my heart, no matter how far you go. (Big Brother)

The third piece is mostly sour with a hidden sweetness. Annoyance and arguments on the surface. *Whose turn was it for dishes? Ugh, why do I have to take him trick-or-treating, isn't he old enough already? You are soooooo annoying!* Love and sweetness inside. You and I may not always get along, but when we do, we make an amazing team. This piece reminds me of long talks about Percy Jackson that lasted late into the night. Arguing over conspiracy theories, memes, and who makes the best tea. Playing pretend with my toy dolls and your Hot Wheels. Arguments about dishes and a million other random small things. A cup of hot chocolate after spending hours playing in the snow. Crying together, and hugging each other. *War is never cheap, dear. But we will soldier on together*. Pillow fights and movie nights. *All things great and small*. You will always have a place in my heart. (Little Brother)

The next piece of tart is burnt. *We die of cold, not darkness. When you left, it became cold. So very cold.* The edges burnt with lies, hurt, and sadness. But the inside remains. *I still love you.* I remember the good old days, the days of baseball games and sunflower seeds. Days like these. Long talks about life, the idiosyncrasies of the universe. The stars were our playground. *Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Orion, you taught me them all.* I remember the days when your piece was whole, perfect and unburnt. *When did you grow up? you ask. While you were gone, I respond.* The edges are burnt but the inside is still sweet and filled with beautiful memories. You taught me to dance, to hold my head high no matter what, to be who I am. Our relationship is plagued with invisible fracture lines, and visible burnt crusts. But you will always have a piece of the tart that is my heart. (Dad)

It is said that the worst feeling in the world is when someone is a part of your heart, but you are not a part of theirs. The next piece of my heart is filled with bittersweet sadness, and tangy pineapple chunks. Your piece reminds me of so many things. Of dancing, of gardening, of card games. Of random trips to McDonalds as a breakfast treat. Of trips to the creek. *We used to look at salamanders. You used to go to the library to research them so you could answer all of my questions. Do you remember that? Of watching fourth of July fireworks. You used to cover my ears when I got scared of the loud noises. Remember?* Of letting me play with my toy stethoscope and letting me give you “herbal remedies”—a mix of whatever I could get my hands on in the kitchen—when you were sick. *I want to become a doctor now; do you know that? In a parallel life, you might know*

all this. You might remember all of this. Your piece is also sour. The sour that I taste when I heard the diagnosis. *Dementia. You were the unshakeable mountain that was blown to pieces.* You may not remember me, and I may no longer be a piece of your heart, but you will always have a piece of mine. *I hate to see you go. Stay, please? Remember, for me?* Your piece will always be bittersweet. *You taught me to dream.* (Grandpa)

One tart piece has everything pineapple tart has to offer. Sweet, sour, and savory flavors all combined. This piece holds the memories of a loving childhood. Of baby teeth. Of learning to say please and thank you. Pottery and painting. Dancing. Board games. Monopoly. Twister. Scrabble, *we used to make up our own silly words to fill up all the spaces.* This piece includes the sourness of arguments over clothes, bedrooms and chores. *But underneath all of it, Love.* As I became older, we drifted further apart in our differences. Soon, we realized we were more alike than we thought. *Not all scars are visible.* We reconnected, and as our bond grew, so did the sweetness of your tart piece. You taught me a woman can do anything a man can. You taught me to always be strong. *You showed me how to dust myself off and start all over again.* The world told you that you were built to fall apart, you showed the world that you were more than spare parts. You are my inspiration and my hero. *As the years go by, we will find some kind of normal. Together.* You will always have a piece of my heart. (Mom)

Some people scatter their heart into the stars, some scatter their heart into their actions or words. Others scatter their hearts into memories. I scatter my heart

into a slightly burnt, sour, sweet and savory
pineapple tart.

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