

**It's All Write!**  
**2012 Short Story Contest**

High School

Love Story...Ivy Duerr...First Place

Tissue Paper...Dianna Kasen Ritchie...Second Place

Breathe Today...Tricia Copeland...Third Place

Honorable Mentions

Blue and Yellow...James Casser

Enola Girl...Eryn Tim

Family Reunion...Victoria Durand

Gargoyle...Geoffrey Payne

How Jessica Rose...Amy Alizabeth Camire

Mortimer of Monkey Run...Timothy G. Rhein

Paradise...Gabrielle Wolfe

A Love Story

By Ivy Duerr

Grade 11

Purcellville, VA

## A Love Story 1

The chair sat and stared at the girl. It had never seen anything like her before. She was small - probably the smallest person in the whole world.

The girl had danced over and was gazing with wide clear grey eyes, making the chair slightly uncomfortable. It was used to being looked at - just part of being a household item - but no one had ever peered like this, as if looking for more than stuffing and springs. Eager to make a good first impression, the chair smiled politely.

“Christine? Christine! Come here!” The girl was roughly jerked away by a tall thin woman with dark roots and a snub nose. “Don’t wander away again!” They both vanished from the furniture store.

The chair asked its neighbor, a wise antique writing desk, what sort of girl it was who was so small and had such large eyes. The desk kindly explained that it was a child, which would grow larger and become a person.

Fascinating. It wanted to see the child again.

An exceedingly nice chair it was, tailored with rich brown leather.

The chair was purchased and taken away, along with a young grandfather clock and an overly excitable chest of drawers. Christine danced around them as they were loaded into the car, singing nonsense songs to herself.

It was placed in a small room, by a door it had been unmercifully shoved through, across from a chatty redwood table and a silent glamorous mirror, and next to a tall, thin coat-stand. The chair was slightly afraid of the coat-stand, with its imperious height and solitude, but was determined not to be prejudiced.

## A Love Story 2

That night there were people. They hung their long coats on the coat-stand, which accepted them graciously, and checked themselves in the mirror, which sweetly complimented them, eliciting a few shy smiles. They passed through into the room beyond, from whence people noises were issuing.

The mirror shuddered as a sound of breaking glass permeated the room and someone began to cry.

Christine was forcibly led through the doorway by the woman and was sat down on the chair, which made every attempt to soften the fall.

For the first time in its life, the chair felt a stab of worry. What was wrong?

“If you can’t control yourself, you can just sit here until you decide to be a little more grown up.” Christine’s grey eyes scowled. The woman, in the act of strutting out in her click-clacking heels, didn’t notice, but the chair did, and was struck with admiration, mixing with the anxiety to create a slightly sickening sensation.

“I hate her.”

The chair understood. It hated her too.

Over the next few days, the chair learned that it had been given a new name - Timeout. This was thrilling. Christine spent time with it every day, sometimes crying and raging, sometimes nonchalantly coloring in a little book. The chair realized that she was an artistic genius, and also sometimes managed to color in the lines.

Time doesn’t mean that much to a chair.

### A Love Story 3

Older, taller, and wider, Christine was no longer ordered to the chair, but went willingly. She was never happy. The chair wanted her to know that she had a friend, and was always sure to hug her, and enclose her in pillow softness, but it did little to help her mood, and the chair began to sink into a depression, lifted only by Christine's presence, which was awaited in anticipation every day. When she didn't come, the chair would despair. But every day was a new day, brimming with potential, and even being busily passed over shed a tiny ray of grey light on the leather upholstery.

On some days, Christine would sit for hours, breathing in cigarettes - a term learned from the redwood table. These burning sticks terrified the chair, but their smoke and fire was endured for her, and the little box lay dormant and hidden underneath a particularly huge cushion - their secret. If Christine wanted them hidden, they would stay hidden.

She would go out, and the chair would wait patiently, trying not to worry. One night she came home later than usual. Something was wrong. Her bright grey eyes were clouded, and she was muttering and swaying. She fell and the chair caught her, careful to cushion the landing, staring at her worriedly, begging to know what the matter was. She only giggled.

"Christine!" The chair trembled at the voice.

The girl was on her feet, unsteady, but tensed for a fight.

The woman was snapping and growling, "Where have you been? Do you know what time it is? ...That had better not be alcohol I smell. For God's sake Christine, if you-"

#### A Love Story 4

“Mother, stop!” The words were broken and angry, and the chair felt the welling frustration and entrapment. She needed to get out of here, and the chair would go with her, follow her anywhere to escape from this oppressive woman.

“Fine, I’ll stop. But you are not out for the rest of the year. Do you understand?”

“Mom, no-”

“Do you understand?”

“Mom, please-”

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Good night.”

Christine flopped down dead on the chair and was enveloped in a huge hug.

“I hate her.” The chair understood. It hated her too.

She slept there that night and the chair stood guard, watching her every stir, keeping her safe and warm.

She was gone.

Christine had left, without a glance back - clutching a suitcase, she had simply danced out the door. The chair had begged her not to go, had tried to follow her, but to no avail. She was gone.

## A Love Story 5

The chair was waiting. It no longer spoke, or even thought much, but simply stood at its post, reinvigorated with every creak of the door, sinking back down again when Christine repeatedly did not appear.

The woman shrunk. She became colorless as the world became older and older and Christine did not come.

One day, while waiting, a large group accompanied by sirens arrived in a hurry. It didn't matter - none of them were her.

After some time, they returned, carrying a great plank amongst them, slowly and silently marching through the door.

She was back, but she wasn't happy.

The chair couldn't stop worrying. Whatever a funeral was, it was making her sad.

When the sun went down, and all the unimportant people had gone away, she sat with the chair again. It hugged her, and told her that everything was going to be fine. She didn't notice, just sat there staring at nothing, smoking a cigarette.

"I loved her."

The chair understood. It had loved her too.

This time she didn't leave. She had brought children. She loved them, but she was exhausted and always yelling. The chair loved the children very much, and gladly

## A Love Story 6

suffered their little fingernails scratching the leather and tearing out stuffing. The chair had endurance, and Christine's children deserved everything it had.

Times were hard, and much of the furniture began to disappear. A man came and took away the redwood table, and the coat-stand. He tried to take the chair, but Christine stopped him.

"The chair is special," she said in her perfect voice. "I picked it myself when I was five." The chair glowed under the approving grey light of her eyes.

The children became people and left, but Christine was getting smaller. The chair could see it, and worried. The cigarettes were stealing her breath away. When she sat, the chair could hear her crackling. It kept trying to warn her that flames are dangerous, but she didn't listen. Her hair roughened, her skin wrinkled and she no longer danced through rooms, but her eyes were as clear and grey as ever.

Christine was sick. She coughed, she rarely left the chair, which relished every second spent with her, trying to give her strength.

She shuffled in and sat, settling down, and the chair hugged her as usual, making her as comfortable as possible.

She was alternately coughing and dragging on her cigarette.

Cough. Drag. Cough. Drag. Cough.



## A Love Story 7

She settled in, breath crackling, and the chair held on to her with all its might, but she was slipping away, like she always had before.

The crackling stopped. The cigarette dropped from her shrunken fingers. Flames rose. She was at peace. And the chair was happy.

Tissue Paper

By Dianna Kasen Ritchie

Grade 11

Sterling, VA

## Tissue Paper 1

Half written papers and cigarette butts littered every surface in the drafty New York City apartment, kicking up and floating about whenever a strong wind gusted outside. The few people who had ever entered the building offered politely that it simply needed “a woman’s touch,” though what it really needed was anyone’s touch at all. The most recent housekeeper, a short plump woman with a habit of impudence, quit her job maintaining the apartment after a particularly bloody quarrel with her employer. Months later, the position had still not been refilled, nor had anyone the notion to do so. The space lay as it was, accumulating failed poems and forgotten characters like a graveyard collecting the departed.

If stripped of all the waste and the curtains drawn back, it would become clear that there had once been an effort to keep the apartment structured. Dissecting each room, one would notice every individual piece of furniture was extremely tasteful and most items new enough to still smell of the tree they were carved from. Earth tones connected the apartment, though the terra-cotta browns and olives were too dark to be distinguished in the poorly lit residence; the curtains were scarcely drawn back and never had a burnt out bulb been replaced. Books, most of which were visibly worn, reread out of their meaning, lined the walls and became more concentrated as one approached the bedroom.

The intoxicating musk of aged paper almost visibly fogged the room where Samson lay. He’d shut his eyes and taken his face in his hands, only to find himself, minutes later, in the state between consciousness and sleep. If he focused, a few moments of clarity were his, but his overwhelming biological drive would quickly trick

## Tissue Paper 2

him back into submission. A song he faintly remembered hearing the day before was omnipresent. He concentrated on the few sweet chords he could actually remember, hoping it would help reveal the rest of the melody to him. Realizing the futility, he began rewriting those missing parts. He reasoned with himself that a majority of the song remained vague because if it were any good, he wouldn't have dismissed it in the first place.

He sighed audibly and swung violently onto his left side; annoyed that he'd never be able to transfer the edit out of his mind. Samson's left hand lay trapped underneath his head, while his right roamed freely, gently tracing the topography of his chest. Straining his eyes, Samson read the bedside clock to be twelve thirty-four. Noon or midnight, he wondered. In the absence of natural light, time was truly subjective. He contemplated standing, rolling a small patch of dark hair on his stomach between two slender fingers. In his home, Samson wore only boxers and a robe, if that much. Even alone, Samson was self-conscious about the coarseness of his hair, scrutinizing each brittle strand as it was pushed and pulled.

The last thing the young man wanted to do in that moment was stand, but he did so anyway. He took five heavy steps to the window, parting the thick cotton drapes and discovered it was night. Samson watched the streetlights outside flicker statically. Samson had tried for many years to appreciate the constant shimmering and blinking as his city's natural art, but he could not convince himself to accept the eyesore as anything with greater meaning. Florescent yellows and reds made visible Manhattan's air, swirling with pollution and a certain breed of insolence native solely to the island.

### Tissue Paper 3

Directly behind a particularly bright lamppost, Samson watched a cloud of the mixture twist, the ashy haze slowly expanding only to be quickly whipped into a thin wire of smoke. Above the lights reach, Samson imagined the air was purified by this exchange, as if the chemicals in the illuminated air filtered out the debris and heartache, returning the cleansed oxygen back to the sky to be whisked away to a mountain top, or a farm, or some remote tropical island.

Samson blinked away the thought, forcing a scowl and quickly drawing the curtain shut. When he was in the state of self-loathing he'd been in for the last few weeks, he preferred to wallow in the emotion.

He traveled down the hall to his study, carelessly stepping on papers he'd written. All his papers, all his thoughts, concepts he had once believed to be the most profound ideas he'd ever conceived, they now lay helpless, neglected and undesired by even their creator. He bent down at the doorway, picking up an unlit cigarette that had fallen out of his pack the night before and hung it out of his mouth. The paper stuck to his lips, sticky from just waking up. Samson wiggled it with his upper lip habitually, knocking over more potentially brilliant papers in search of a lighter. The lined paper floated gently to the ground, cutting the air silently; a dramatic last stand to get the attention of their author. The beginnings of the next few Great American Novels were knocked out of publication before Samson became aware of the rusted red lighter in his robe pocket. He pulled it out and flicked it a few times without actually lighting anything then sat down at his old mahogany desk.

#### Tissue Paper 4

The desk was an antique he'd inherited from his grandmother several years ago. If one could focus on the design of the apartment, the artifact would have been noticeably unfitting. The entire relic was hand carved, extravagantly so. The family boasted, though the sources of this "fact" were entirely unquestionable, the desk had belonged to the first Tsar Nicholas himself. Samson's apartment seemed to mock the regality of this piece, to which the desk responded as any nobleman would to this humiliation; devastated in private, but with the same upright posture and artificial vigor it had had before.

The only other piece in the house that rivaled the desk's stature was the focus of Samson's attention currently. His gaze rose against the wall, meeting eventually the feet of a woman. His entire body remained absolutely still as he traced her body cautiously with his eyes, as if he would surprise her if he were to make any sudden movements. Samson's breathing slowed down, as the woman subdued him.

As his eyes reached her face, Samson allowed himself to see the painting in its entirety. The subject of this portrait looked even lovelier in full than she had in pieces. Each detail of her appeared plain if analyzed separately, if assembled however, she was strikingly beautiful. Her waist was tied in dramatically by a corset which both exposed a better portion of her breasts and pulled in her midriff beyond anything near a woman's natural circumference. Her body was further exaggerated by a yellow Cinderella dress worn over this, its full skirt hung separate from her body, finishing the synthetic hourglass figure and rendering her entire lower half invisible.

## Tissue Paper 5

Scrawled on the lower left corner in quick charcoal read “Anna Marie c.1734” and an indecipherable signature was written beneath. He’d found Anna Marie at a busy street fair in the city many years ago, paying only eight dollars flat for her. Despite her age, which would have led one to believe she was of great value, her artist died, as many do, anonymous and without proper home, making the painting of no worth. Samson kept no art in the house other than her.

As was characteristic of her time, Anna Marie’s mouth did not grin in her painting, but when Samson thought of her, he always did so with a smile on her face. Several times, he even indulged a vision of Anna Marie throwing her head back in laughter, her long, black curls enveloping her arched back playfully. She was truly radiant then, possessing a soul of her own. She seemed so warm, so tangible. In his memories of her, she was more real than any person he’d ever met. He knew her face better than he knew his own. Every dimple and crevice had been memorized until her face was so distinct in his mind he could picture the two of them together in such felicity.

Samson knew if he did not remove himself, the next few hours would be spent studying her, as he had spent many nights occupied the same way, but it was too late; she had already consumed him again. Samson gave her a soul, and now he would suffer for it. Anna Marie could never be touched or spoken to, but she captivated him nonetheless. Samson communicated best in writing, but he knew no words that would describe her effortless perfection. Thousands of half written papers and cigarette butts littered every surface in the drafty New York City apartment, all dedicated to Anna Marie.

## Tissue Paper 6

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he lit his cigarette, closing his eyes as he took a deep, warm breath. Repositioning himself, Samson reached for an unmarred sheet of paper. He rushed through the ancient drawers in the desk for a pen that hadn't yet dried out, ultimately settling on a blunted pencil. He pressed his first character on to the paper with enough pressure to etch stone. Again, Samson began the impossible task of conveying Anna Marie's virtue justly. Each sentence wrote itself on the page, the pencil was merely her instrument, as was he. She leapt down, throwing herself onto the page, wishing to be possessed by him in the same way he was possessed by her. Each thought flowed evenly onto each other, his mind more fluid than it had ever been.

As he wondered if tonight would be the night that he would finally be articulate enough to profess his true affection, all thought was interrupted by the unmistakable banging of an insect trapped inside a glass lamp, desperately fighting to escape. Anna and Samson were not the only lives in the apartment, nor would they ever be. He heard a buzz once more, glancing over instinctually, to find the cause of this commotion, only to watch the helpless creature attempt escape, battering itself against the surface with such force, it killed him instantly.



Breathe Today

Tricia Copeland

Grade 9

Rosie, Arkansas

## Breathe Today 1

### Introduction:

It takes light from our Sun eight minutes and twenty seconds to reach the Earth. If our Sun were to suddenly go supernova, we humans wouldn't even feel it for eight minutes. It would probably take the scientists about a minute to discover the disaster and post warnings to Twitter, Facebook, and national news, but it would already be too late. What could you possibly do in the seven or less minutes you would have before you were blown to atom-sized pieces? Or, what if you knew ahead of time? You'd still have time while you waited for the the Apocalypse to come to you. But what would you do? Call your best friend, fiancée, or relatives and tell them how much you love them and then listen as their screams filled you, and they were burned to a crackly crisp? I couldn't. Would you try to find a way to escape the inescapable? Do you think there might just be enough safety in the tornado shelter in town to protect you from the star which makes up 98% of the mass in our solar system? Would you run there screaming, shoving old women and little children, at the chance of saving your own life? Is it really worth that to you? A tornado shelter wouldn't protect you anyway, even if it was built at earth's core. *Nothing* could save you.

Would you spend your futile moments praying to God? Asking him PLEASE to remember you when His purpose was fulfilled? Many would. I doubt there's anything that could bring a prodigal human back to his Creator like knowing that he had eight minutes to live, and there wasn't a single solitary thing he could do about it.

## Breathe Today 2

Some would despair; many would leap over buildings or try to throw themselves off a bridge. What's the point? You have 500 seconds to live; why try to shorten it?

The stupidest people of all are the ones who hear that they're all going to die and immediately whip out their iPhones and start taking pictures of everything. Idiots! Those 200 pictures you just uploaded to Facebook will mean NOTHING when everything crashes and burns. I shake my head at such futility and waste of the seconds.

So, since anything you can or would do is futile, what SHOULD you do while waiting the indefinitely agonizing eight minutes and twenty seconds while the Sun's supernova blast crawls toward us at light speed?

My answer:

~~Run for your life~~

~~Find all your friends and tell them you'll miss them, even though it won't be true~~

~~We're all dying anyway, might as well jump off a building~~

~~Spend your last moments trying to find your family~~

I honestly have no clue.

### Breathe Today 3

August 1.

5:15 PM

I bob my head as I sing along to the radio. It's turned up and I'm thoroughly enjoying the song. If Mom were here, she'd disapprove of me having "distractions" while I'm driving HER Altima solo for one of the first times, especially close to twilight, but she's not here. I'm only going to the store, anyhow. It's not like there're that many ways to wreck in the two miles between home and Circle K. I turn it down a little as the song changes and flick on my left blinker and ease into Circle K, which serves as the nearest convenience store to my house.

I park the Altima quickly and twist the keys out of the ignition. Before getting out, I peek in my mirror to make sure I don't look like something that crawled out from under a rock. My longish chestnut pixie bob isn't sticking straight out, at least, and my Irish eyes don't look *too* bad. Good, I guess.

I hop out and up the curb to our dead-quiet Circle K. The cleanly new building looks out of place compared to our dusty little town, I notice. Even the chime-y bells that greet me as I shoulder the door sound new and foreign.

Colby, the sole cashier today, is slumped behind the counter until he hears me come in. When he sees me, he runs his fingers through his crew-cut reddish-blond hair--which could use a glop of gel, in my opinion-- and straightens his shirt. Colby's cute enough, I guess, but he's so cluelessly obvious about his crush on me that it's hard not to treat him like a puppy.

## Breathe Today 4

Colby stands up, trying to play the part of the helpful (cute) store clerk. His cover breaks when I catch him watching me closely in the surveillance mirror. He sees me watching him and I roll my eyes. Boys.

"Hi, Colby," I say a little pointedly.

"Ah-I-Hi Kali-- Kalyssa. Wha'can I get ya today?" He fumbles his words and brushes at his hair again. I almost giggle.

"I'm just here on a run for chocolate chips for cookies. Still have any semi-sweets?" I try to ignore his nervousness.

He doesn't say anything, just gestures expansively in the direction of where I already know the chocolate chips to be. I grab the goods and head to the counter, already digging in my pocket for money and slapping a five on the counter. My iPhone is going berserk in my other pocket, so I haul it out and happen to glance at the time. It's 5:15 PM. This time my noti list says:

Twitter:

The Solar Research Institute (@solar\_research): Recent solar readings indicate expected supernova is occurring NOW. Worldwide emergency declared.

Karsten Astronomy Labs (@karsten\_labs): Previously predicted solar supernova occurring NOW. Go to [www.karstenlabs.1org](http://www.karstenlabs.1org) for more info.

United Nations Breaking News (@UNbreakingnews): Worldwide State of Emergency declared due to impending supernova of the sun. More info pending.

United Nations Breaking News (@UNbreakingnews): USPresident to deliver worldwide speech on all radio stations/TV channels Re: Solar explosion.

## Breathe Today 5

I don't look at it for more than a second, but the list seems endless. What the all-loving HECK is going on?! Is the SUN really going to explode? Or supernova?! This HAS to be a prank, right? A bunch of terrorist hackers deciding to have a few minutes of fun and scare the daylights out of everyone in the world?

I hear radios outside blaring the nerve-grating sound that always plays before a National Weather Service announcement. I catch a sentence or two after that, something about the President speaking to the country in a few moments.

I don't hear anything else, though. My phone explodes with new texts, tweets, news messages, and a call all at once, as does Colby's. The town outside us is erupting in chaos, starting with a bloodcurdling scream from a woman in a business suit running out of the post office and looking at the sun. She's followed by people from businesses all over the Main street who must have all just heard the same thing we did.

I answer the call automatically, somewhat in a daze.

"Hello?"

I hear a click, then the mechanical voice of a woman starts speaking loudly in my ear. I flinch.

"This is an important news broadcast brought to all citizens of the United States.

Scientists have confirmed a suspicion that because of an unexplained and uncontrollable phenomenon, the Sun is going prematurely supernova. This means that

## Breathe Today 6

in eight minutes, an enormous explosion will reach Earth, destroying it completely. All life on Earth will likely perish. You are advised to remain calm..."

I drop my iPhone and the chocolate, unfortunately. I'm in a disbelieving shock, a paralyzed fog covering the stabs of horror in me. All life on Earth, destroyed? In less than eight minutes?! And their only instruction is to remain calm?!? How in the name of Suzanne Collins are we expected to keep CALM after being given the death sentence?! This can't be true, it's gotta be a hoax. I must be dreaming. MUST be.

I look at Colby. I get the stupidest urge to hug him like you would a teddy bear. I do end up hugging him, for half a second. Step outside to look at 90% of the working population of our little town, who're all holding their cells to their ears, their expressions matching mine. I see Kaleigh Sanders, the realtor who sold our old house and always had cream soda lollipops in her office. She's in shock; in fact she looks like she's about to faint. I see Margaret and Jason Breck, who moved here from Alaska last year and have terrible taste in clothes. Their kid goes to my school; his desk is next to mine in Biology. I see Brennan Matthews, who used to be a teacher but now works at Walgreens as a pharmacist and is the only person in town who drives a "boxfish car." I see them all. I know them all.

They're all looking heavenwards, toward their own destruction. *They're--we're--all going to die.*

5:17 PM

## Breathe Today 7

That thought echoes in my head as I look at the quirky people I see every day. A shock like lightning goes through me, and I suddenly find myself in the car, driving--flying, really--toward home. The blinking seconds on the car's clock seem to be crawling, dragging.

Around me, people are standing on the sidewalks, all of them gaping at their life-giving betrayer as he glows innocently in the noon sky. None of them are breathing, I know. None of us can. Perhaps no one on Earth can breathe today.

Then I'm home and the car must be somewhere in the driveway, but I don't remember parking it. I slam the front door open and fall into Mom's arms. She smells like perfume and cookie dough. Her arms are so protective and familiar as she wraps me up that it immediately calms me down. She's crying; I can feel her tears press into my cheek as she hugs me breathtakingly tightly. I hug her back and tears of my own well up.

"Where's Lacey?" I ask Mom when she finally lets me go. Lacey's my older sister, and she volunteers at our local animal shelter during the summer.

"You haven't heard from her?" Mom says around the lump in her throat. I shake my head. I haven't seen Lace since breakfast.

I hear something pounding outside, then Lacey explodes through the door, bawling. Tears are marking rivulets of mascara down her face. It's the only flaw in Lacey's otherwise perfect complexion.

"You're back!" Mom gives Lace a hug as crushing as the one I got, then she pulls back and looks at her eldest daughter. Her daughter who was going to go to college and become a veterinarian, or maybe an animal surgeon, or maybe just a nurse. Her eldest



## Breathe Today 8

daughter, who'll now never live to see 21. She won't even live to breathe in the freshness of tomorrow.

"I would have left as soon as--\*sniff\*-- I heard the announcement, but they asked me to stay and help with something. They were going to--\*gasp\*-- gonna put--\*hiccup\*-- all the animals--" Lacey loses her voice and sobs into Mom's shirt. I make out one more word, "sleep," and I know why she left. Lacey's too tenderhearted to ever hurt an animal.

I guess it really hits me then: the world is ending TODAY. In less than five minutes, if the scientists and the countdown playing on the radio are correct! I'm going to die.

Mom's going to die. Lacey and Colby and Suzanne Collins and David, our next-door neighbor's dark-eyed son, and Chrysanthemum, my green parrot, and Karra, my best friend who lives in Maryland, and--everyone I know or have known is going to die today. That's when I break. Tears free-flow from my eyes and my soul crushes, shatters and I fall down to the grey carpet I've always hated and I feel like *death*. I scream and grab fistfuls of grey shag and throw myself away. I hate the Sun, hate the canned voice of the announcement for telling us to be calm. Hang it ALL!! But I'm too broken to do more than sob into the carpet. I can't breathe. I don't think I'll ever breathe again. The world's going to end all around me and I'm helpless, everyone's helpless!

5:18 PM

There's a knock on the door.

I almost fall out of my skin.

Mom answers it; she's the only one not completely broken down.

## Breathe Today 9

It's Mrs. Bryant, David's mother and our next-door neighbor. She's not alone: a posse of almost everyone I know from town follows her, some carrying crying children. I start sobbing again at seeing them. Mrs. Bryant speaks to Mom for a moment. I can't hear what they're saying over the sobs.

Mom comes over and whispers to me, "She's arranged a community vigil. We're all going to sit and hold on until it ends."

That sounds nice. I don't think I have any more tears to lose.

5:19 PM

Ninety seconds later, and almost everyone I know sits in a circle on the bridge over the river, holding hands. No one breathes a word. We're all waiting for something yet hoping to God that it doesn't come. I sit between Lacey and Mom, completely blank. I'm empty. Tears still spill from my face, but I don't feel anything but despair. Looking around the circle, I see that most people are wearing the same look. David's dark eyes watching me draw my gaze. He nods at me almost imperceptibly and his lips twitch sadly. I know it's a goodbye and the hello that he never said.

A couple of people have already gotten up and hurled themselves over the bridge. Their agonized screams are echoing numbly in my ears. Are they the smart ones?

Someone shouts out the time. There's about a minute left. It's making me insane, knowing exactly when I'm going to die.

5:21 PM

The sunset is gorgeous. Too bad that in one minute, the blues and pinks will be burning my body to ash. It's redder than usual. I wonder if that could be the start of the

## Breathe Today 10

supernova. My heart leaps into hyperdrive. Is this it? Is the end really coming now? Am I really going to die, sitting on West Bridge, in a few moments? The sky is so red... And it's too warm, for a summer night. This must be the end. It's getting hotter. I'm so scared, I don't know how to think. I just sit there on the bridge, waiting and watching, wondering at each breath if this will be the last time

I

will

breathe

today.

Blue and Yellow

James Cassar

Grade 12

Leesburg, VA

## Blue and Yellow 1

The ballroom was caked in a thin layer of dust, the skeletons of an ancient romance out in the open. Faded streamers hung loosely by their frayed ends, reaching down towards the cracked and splintered floor like outstretched, flailing arms. The remains of glittery balloons were jammed unceremoniously in the bent, exposed rafters of the ceiling, each pipe housing imperfection transparently. Ten years ago, this was the scene of Carver Denton's final homecoming dance. Finality was always a word he didn't quite understand. Sure, caps would soon hover in the air momentarily, echoing the last hurrah in high school, but just because he was ascending the pulpit and snagging a diploma didn't mean he would have to say goodbye to her. He was wrong; the sting of that fact was incredible. That's the thing about being wrong. It hits you harder when you dwell on your mistake. And there he was, wallowing in it like some sick mess.

Carver let out a heavy, weighted sigh, each exhale fragmented, punctured by the gravity of his surroundings. Slowly moving around the perimeter, he snapped mental photographs of the closing scene of his wasted youth. Tables were toppled over, their frail legs bent awkwardly. Several forbidden cigarette butts were visible, jammed in the intersection between two ruptured decorative centerpieces. Red cups littered the floor, grainy and peeling. *Nothing to see but memories. Nobody sees those, anyway*, he thought aimlessly, *no one's alive but me*.

He remembered the blur of madness, the sirens, and the wails of several robotic, detached symphonies. The fragility and sanctity of slowdancing was interrupted forcefully; fear gripped the dancefloor with tyrannical precision. It wasn't until the green

## Blue and Yellow 2

light descended from the skies of an unknown god that everyone started to run.

Everyone except Carver, and her.

The two of them remained seated on the desolate dancefloor. His girl had her legs crossed nonchalantly with her arms hung loose at her sides. Her soft chocolate-brown hair fell in messy waves down to her shoulders; her sighs made her locks bob and sway like palm trees in torrents. She batted her eyelashes frequently as if a rogue moth was obscuring her view, and she bit her bottom lip, dialogue frozen. A sense of dramatics rises.

He remembered biting his tongue, swallowing his pride, and spitting out the burning question. His hands shook madly, like an addict aching for another hit. He wanted to feel the rush of acceptance, an invitation to clasp her hand in his, gaze into those cerulean eyes, and tell her he felt light, the worries in his life erased. The worries stayed scorching his insides until she responded. One ear was hearing the subdued longing of Brand New's *Deja Entendu*; the other ear was ringing with anticipation, the pull of promise, hope.

She bit her lip and let her head bow low, gazing at her feet. Her breaths accented the awkward pause in between his question-marked request and whatever she wanted to be her response, her respiration like a typist punching keys in an empty cathedral. She was writing his alleluia or his eulogy. Her answer would either be his lifting or his burial. *You are the smell before rain*, his left earbud confessed, *you are the blood in my veins*. She spoke up as the track faded into nonexistence, the suppressed hum of dead air occupying half of his hearing. *I am either the boy who blocked his own shot*, he

### Blue and Yellow 3

thought, referencing the eponymous song that just ended, or *I'm what you want*. He closed his eyes, gasped inaudibly, and put one uneasy hand behind his pallid neck. It was unusually clammy, a reflection of uninhibited nervousness.

The next minute of uninterrupted nothingness elapsed in a painful, lethargic manner. Carver's free hand was now occupied in a lonely dinner party with his mouth, the main course his roughened cuticles. His teeth cut deep, relishing the distraction as a way to channel pain into a different avenue than emotion. He removed his scavenged hand moments later to discover the battered remains of his flesh, teethmarks visible from yards away.

"Hey," she answered his plea in a voice that was both hurried and beautiful, staccato notes that matched his irregular, sporadic heartbeat. "Why not?" Her question was rhetorical, and she finished her unrequited conversation with a smirk. After Carver let his white-knuckled fists lose their suffocating tension, he held out his hand.

"Since you're so keen about taking chances," he reasoned, "take this."

Her hand melded into his, they took off walking, to no particular destination. But now, their destination seemed closer to the end of their lives.

"This would make for a really great painting." She looked up at him with eyes that could sink ships and cure cancer all at once, two azurite diamonds in the increasingly emerald world.

"The world might be ending, and this is what you're thinking about?"

"Might as well go out a dreamer, and not a screamer." She let out an airy whistle, and twiddled her art pencil between her thumb and her forefinger. Chalky residue

## Blue and Yellow 4

rubbed off onto her soft, petite hand. The other hand was locked in his, intent on staying prisoner in the grasp forever. That was the thing about Katelyn. No matter how messed up the outside world was, she always stayed right there, in between daydreams.

“Do you ever think about the future, Kate?” Carver spoke feverishly, a twinge of nervousness in his voice, while his free hand pressed his crooked, dirtied glasses up onto the bridge of his nose.

“Why are you so curious about what's going to happen, if you never know what's happening?”

“I do, it's just....”

Electricity seemed to surge through Carver's veins as she inched closer to him, her grip on his hand loosening only to return to his jawline. This wasn't the back row of a movie theater; he couldn't hear the reels spinning idyllically, the background to his first kiss. But his second was the last he'd reminisce about, and the last one he'd ever want. She pulled away from him and shot a hard, searching gaze.

“Look outside,” she dictated quietly, “see that green light?”

Carver cleared his throat, stomach still doing gymnastics. “Mhm.”

“The Smiths wrote a song once called 'There Is a Light That Never Goes Out.' Morrissey was a frickin' genius. He knew about this thing called hope, man. Sure, everyone's going crazy outside, but here we are, tangled up in silence, perfectly fine. The sky could be falling down, we could be falling apart, breaking bones in alphabetical order, I don't know. But you know what?”

Carver didn't respond; he was too intrigued to answer.



## Blue and Yellow 5

She continued in a hushed, sluggish tone, relaying her words with thick pauses.

"I'd rather waste my time with you."

"Even if we're almost dead?"

"That makes me want to even more." Her hand drifted down to meet his once again, and her grip locked their arms in place; a moment suspended in time.

A hum akin to the whirr of fan blades shattered the beauty of the spectacle. The abrasive yelp of several horns and buzzers awoke the fear that was only subdued within Carver moments before. *The cops?* A likely hypothesis. Some kids never learned. But one thing Carver never learned was to expect the impossible.

The dusty scene that surrounded Carver only made him lonelier. The paint that was sliding off the drywall mirrored his spirits; the mercury in his emotional thermometer downscaling to new, frigid lows. He brushed his unkempt brown hair out of his piercing green eyes, and looked at his hands. Maps of unknown cities were inherently scrawled on their surface, a world that he couldn't access or travel to.

He had this suppressed *wanderlust*, a desire to scavenge the world for its worth and its purpose, but he knew it would prove fruitless. Katelyn gave him meaning, a song in his heart, and he let her go. Nothing was sound anymore. Just static.

The haphazard *whoosh* of wind seemed to gradually overtake the atmosphere, choking it in its vicelike ice-cold grip. Papers were flung across the hardwood randomly, and the force of the storm was so great that glasses scattered across the area started to lose their shape, breaking into a million indistinguishable pieces, lost in mania. Carver's thought processes became slurred and sloppy, but one clear, concise proposition rang

## Blue and Yellow 6

from his mouth so confidently, so coolly that the imposition of the sentence seemed to shock him more than he intended.

“I think we should run away.”

“You're kidding. After that rad inspirational speech?” Katelyn gave her companion a rough, sardonic look.

“I don't just mean from this dancefloor.”

“Then what do you mean, exactly, hm?”

“See that green light?”

“No. I see blue and yellow. The component colors, they mix and blend to form green. Two blobs with different backgrounds and hues clash together and make something beautiful. I know that that bond exists between them, but I know that it's equal, that both of them are in this together, burning brighter than the sun.”

As if on cue, a brilliant streak of light seemed to break its way through whatever remained of the structure. The roof had since caved inward. The light seemed to hover to directly where Katelyn was planted firmly on the dirtied and dilapidated ground. It was calling to her. Carver knew this couldn't be a routine police protocol.

Carver digested this amid the chaos, and then began to stitch together words. “Let's escape this together, Katelyn. Let's find a place to hide. We can slowdance on some empty rooftop somewhere and I'll let you paint your crazy pictures. We can be almost dead together. We're not gone, but we're living like that light is almost out, everyday, just you and me,” he exhaled mightily, “blue and yellow.”

## Blue and Yellow 7

From under unruly long brown hair he saw a smile creep across her face like a welcome virus, infecting the whole deserted room with happiness. "Look who's living for today now." Katelyn clasped Carver's hand, using his body to support her journey to an upright position and jumped up excitedly. "Let's go waste time."

They exited the ballroom with a brisk pace, not hesitating to look back at their previous location. After all, why would they? Carver knew he'd make her happy some way or another. That's all he ever wanted, to have something to hold onto. That hand was more than enough.

Outside, the sky was on fire. The horizon seemed to be exploding in several different shades of blazing orange, leaving Carver temporarily blinded. His hearing also seemed to disintegrate automatically; the sirens a deafening timbre with crushing vibrato. His touch never faltered; all he knew in that moment was to hold on. It wasn't until they came down from the godless skies that he couldn't help but break his grip.

He couldn't tell what they were; the glare from all the unnatural color blocked his vision. All he could process were garbled screams, and when he reached up to touch his ear, he felt the unpleasant stickiness of fresh blood. And then he realized what he had done, and before he could fix it, they seized her away from him, breaking his plans up in one fleeting moment. Blue and yellow became just blue, the intrusive, brooding ocean that separated him from consciousness and his heart.

Scores of pubescent bodies started floating. Gravity seemed to disappear. Soon, Carver could feel his feet lose touch with the cracked, worn earth. He was ascending far above the world he once knew, the planet in which he had found the only girl he

## Blue and Yellow 8

could've ever fought for. He already let her fight for herself. Carver was only waiting for the final bugle blast at this point; a signal that the war was lost. Compliance seemed obligatory, life had proved meaningless. If Katelyn could see the world she was leaving, what a tapestry she could paint...

Carver could barely focus on the objects that were beckoning him towards where no god was stationed. He made note of the shapes of the foreign vehicles, like elliptical discs, vessels of horror, unfathomable malice. That was all he could process. The world grew hazy, he was weightless, his consciousness was slipping away. *Wherever I end up, I hope it's with you.* A pinprick of light pockmarked the charcoal sky; Carver was falling back to earth. They had taken their fill. They had taken everything but him. He was the boy who blocked his own shot. He could've kept her if they just stayed put. She would've painted this world with a whole different viewpoint; the lone color scheme of blue and yellow.

The ballroom was caked in a thin layer of dust, the skeletons of an ancient romance out in the open. It all looked the same to him, decadence put on display. He stood up to leave, but he thought better of it. Hands shaking, he started breathing in more irregular bouts, his lungs in an eternal boxing match. He spoke aloud, slowly, methodically; he couldn't hear what phrases were spilling out. "I left you once. I let you go. I looked away from what I wanted for two seconds and lost it all. But I won't lose this. I won't lose that blue. You won't lose that yellow. I'm almost dead. And until I die, I'll

## Blue and Yellow 9

always remember what you showed me. I wouldn't want that light to go out in any other way."

*Should've said something, but I've said it enough.*

*By the way, my hands were shaking; I'd rather waste my time with you.*

Enola Girl

Erin Tim

Grade 9

Ashburn, Va

## Enola Girl 1

There is a little speck of a town right at the intersection of highways 310 and 107 named Enola, Arkansas. Population: 212. Nothing more than my hiding place. Tiny farm houses keeping me safe.

I had driven up through Mississippi from New Orleans before that crappy truck broke down in front of Rick and Sadie's humble home. Sadie said I didn't look seventeen. I must be underfed. Sadie's naive at heart. Rick had believed me too; Pa was abusive and Wes was no better. They had both been drunk when they kicked me out of our apartment. My bruised face testified this to Rick, letting him trust me.

It's funny to think it had only been two months ago that I sat at this round table choking through my tears. They had accepted me into their family, as long as I helped them with the chores and aided Rick on the farm. Honestly, I think they realized that they were getting old and needed my help. Still, I was eternally grateful.

I sit here today, eating my breakfast with Rick while Sadie brushes my hair back. "Our little girl," she sighs, "had hair like yours before the good Lord took her up. Of course, she hadn't gotten a chance to grow it out this long..."

Rick smiles a sad smile over his coffee. He doesn't talk about their late daughter like Sadie does. Instead, he just pats my hand before pulling on his boots and heading out. Sadie is still chatting on and on about nothing and everything when someone starts pounding on the front door. She smiles at me and tells me not to stay out too late.

Carson has let himself in and stands in the hallway waiting for me. He lives on the chicken farm two houses down, and has been my best friend since I turned up here. All I wanted to do was tell him the truth when he had pulled me into his car that rainy

## Enola Girl 2

night two months ago. He had looked at me with such kindness that night- the same night Rick told me I could live with them- this is the boy I love.

When he had picked me up out of the parking lot, soaked to the bone, the story had just spilled out: "I was five years old when Pa pushed Mama down the stairs and she broke her neck. Wes was too young to know that Pa was evil. He told the police that she fell. Wes didn't want Pa to go, too."

Carson didn't interrupt, not even when I told him I knew that Wes hadn't meant to hurt me; he had only known what Pa had taught him. "You have to show her you're in charge," Pa would say. "She deserves it."

Somehow, I told Carson that Pa had hardly let me go to school. He didn't want me telling anyone. He didn't want them to see. He said I was just a girl and I didn't need to learn. I just had to do what I was told, because being smart was what got my mama dead.

Staring out the windshield at the pounding rain, Carson had muttered something like, "It hasn't rained in months."

I continued on: "I got in a fight with Wes and Pa and I had to get out. I packed up a bag, grabbed the keys to Pa's Mazda and took off. The next day I bleached my red hair blond, sold the clothes I brought for new ones at a thrift store, anything to make me unrecognizable. Once I was halfway through Mississippi, I sold the Mazda and got the truck from a junk yard. I even stole license plates to replace the ones on the truck, just in case. I was lucky no one realized how old I really was."



### Enola Girl 3

I begged Carson not to tell. I couldn't go back. The impact, the scream, and the blood...I wouldn't go back. His blue eyes had met my dark ones, and he said: "As far as I'm concerned, Sara, you're an Enola girl and always been one."

That became his pet name for me: Enola Girl. All of his friends caught onto it and, soon enough, even the old folk of the town knew me as such. Carson is the town's golden boy. When we walk into Marty's Diner together, all of the regulars want to talk to us...to me. If Carson had faith in me, how could they not? Seventeen year-old Carson is the kind of person everyone loves.

He is your typical blond haired, blue-eyed, country boy. He slouches slightly and wears clothes just a tiny bit too big. He's a teaser and a hand- holder. His smile is just like Sadie's; it reaches all the way up to his eyes. His eyes are always glowing because Carson's life is too wonderful for him to spend a second worrying.

Now, his green pickup truck parks at Marty's Diner. Every Friday he drives all over town dropping off crates of eggs from his pa's farm. I tag along and we talk the whole way. Carson tells me about the high school and how it's too bad that Sadie's going to be teaching me at home, but how that's okay, because I can come over after school with his friends.

Carson keeps talking about his friends even though he's walked out of earshot. I just take my place in a lawn chair by the old guys that never leave. Mrs. Daily sets her newspaper down. "Sara! You are looking oh-so lovely today, aren't you?"

I can't answer. At the bottom of her newspaper bold letters read: "**Zoe Rodgers- Wanted in the State of Louisiana.**" Underneath, there is a picture of a

## Enola Girl 4

young girl and a short passage that says something about the girl's disappearance around the same time a crime occurred in a nearby neighborhood. The girl has stringy red hair that frames her pale, white face. She looks nothing like me. But her dark brown eyes burn straight to my core.

"What's wrong with you, girl?" Mrs. Daily crows. "You seen a ghost?"

"It's just that city kid personality," Mr. McGrath mumbles. "You know them kids from the city."

I instinctively shy away from them. Breathe. It's okay. But I close my eyes and remember the impact of skin on skin, the blood running over me, a scream filling the air. I'm safe.

I nearly jump out of my skin when Carson touches his hand to my shoulder. "Mrs. Daily, leave Sara alone. She's harmless."

He smiled at her and she smiled back. I smiled at both of them. "I'm harmless."

Carson leads me back to the truck. He frowns slightly as he looks at me. "You're quiet today, Enola Girl. *Have* you seen a ghost?"

I shrug him off. He's too easily distracted. "This is my first real summer, and I'll never get another like it. It's nice to be wanted and acknowledged. Being here makes me want to do something great. I don't ever want to forget this."

"*You* are something great. My life was set for me. I'd graduate, get married to one of the girls from school, and live on my dad's chicken farm for the rest of my life." We fly down Matthews' road past endless fields. "I don't know anymore."

## Enola Girl 5

He pulls over and we hop the fence, racing across the field to the lake like they do in movies. We talk and we laugh. He hugs me and kisses me, just like a movie. Had anyone ever loved me like this? Had I ever been touched out of kindness? Hell, no one will find me. I'm safe! I let myself lean into Carson and enjoy the summer sun.

The day slipped away like days do in Enola. Sadie made us lunch. Rick told us about his latest plan to catch the pesky raccoon in the shed. Through it all, I felt the warmth that was now mine. They love me and I love them. I am Sara. I accept Carson's kisses and blush when our friends make fun of us. I help Sadie carry in the groceries as Rick rewires the fence. I am Enola Girl.

The night is clear and Carson is driving me home. He talks endlessly: "Wasn't it so funny when John spilled his food on his pants? What's Mark's problem? He should just ask out Alison because they obviously like each other. Did you like the bracelet I got you?"

I smile at him. It was beautiful, real silver. I am still looking at it when he asks me the next question. "Do you think you'll marry me?"

He sees me startle. "I mean... We'll be eighteen this year! We have to start our lives. If you don't want to go to college I can get a good job to provide for us and you can work at the Diner, or something. Or maybe I won't even take my dad's farm. We can move somewhere new and have our own farm! Or maybe you'll get Rick's farm, and I'll have mine. Then we're set. Couldn't we do that?"

"Carson," I sigh. It was inside of me: The impact of the blow and the haunting scream. The rush of blood. I'm still trapped with that memory.

## Enola Girl 6

He smiles so sweetly. "Enola Girl, I won't let your pa or Wes find you. You're safe! Don't you want to be with me forever? You love me."

We get out of the truck and I say, "I do want that. Trust me, it's more than I deserve". I was deep into this conversation and I walked into the house blindly.

As if written in the sky, we both knew something was wrong. Sadie was crying. Rick grabbed my hand and pulled me behind him. "You don't understand!" he shouts. "We can get lawyers."

I turn for Carson... and then I see the officer. Has he told them? My heart stops, yet still manages to race somehow...

I can see it in front of me: The impact of my fist on Pa's face shook my entire body. Pa's thick fingers closed around my throat, and I couldn't breathe. Eventually, either Pa or Wes would kill me. I couldn't think. It wasn't really me that had grabbed the knife and driven it into Pa's stomach. His warm blood had rushed over my hand and he just managed to shout out before he collapsed. The impact and the scream and all that blood were right there in front of me, and I was finally free.

I feel the cold handcuffs snap closed over my wrists behind my back. Just around Carson's bracelet. For the first time, he isn't smiling. He gapes at me.

Sadie keeps crying.

Rick keeps begging.

And Carson doesn't seem to hear what I am yelling at him. His face is masked with a horribly broken and painful expression.

Was I still his Enola Girl?

## Enola Girl 7

“Zoe Rodgers, you are under arrest for the murder of Jackson and Wesley  
Rodgers.”

The Family Reunion  
Victoria Durand

Grade 12

Leesburg, VA

## The Family Reunion 1

Florence found her eyelids dropping, her head falling back onto the cushions of the dingy sofa. She was waiting. This was a room for waiting. Maybe the sign outside read "motel," but everyone who passed through this place was simply drifting to another. Looking at the tiny bed in the middle of the room, it was impossible to imagine actually sleeping in it.

So she continued to languish on the couch, a cigarette dangling lazily between her fingers. Only occasionally did she move to take a drag from it. Mostly she just let it burn to the filter as the smoke drifted up to the already stained yellow ceiling. The wireless was playing a song that was dimly familiar, but it was so quiet that the melody disappeared into the smoky air, slipping away before she could grab hold of it.

For a moment these sounds seemed like the only things she'd ever hear. At least until a loud pounding on her door snapped her out of her reverie.

As she approached to the door, the person behind it continued their steady knocking. "God Roy, give it a rest," she muttered under her breath. He wasn't even in the room and she was already a little annoyed with him. Roy tended to have that effect on people: you either loved or hated him, and even if you loved him, you still hated him a little.

When she opened the door, Roy was there, leaning on the doorframe. He'd cleaned up somewhat since she last saw him, or at least tried to. The tonic he'd applied to his hair just made it cling greasily to his head and his suit was ill fitting, but he'd made an effort, for once.

## The Family Reunion 2

"So Flor, long time, no see. You gonna let me in or just stare," Roy said in that stupid accent he's started affecting in the summer of '23.

"Just stare," she deadpanned, swinging the door open just the same.

Roy glanced at the clock, valiantly ticking its way through the twilight. "Is it time?"

Florence didn't reply, following Roy's gaze toward the clock. She began to consider the intricacies of the plan. Last minute doubts were the domain of cowards, she was simply considering.

...

She thought of Daniel, how he'd always been just a little brighter than them. When they were kids, they weren't really jealous. The resentment didn't start until later, and it was only after their mother's death that it began to fester in them.

She remembered when their mother first died, five years ago now. Roy hadn't even waited until she was in the ground before he asked about the inheritance. She recalled the image of him leaning over as the pallbearers threw the last few shovels of dirt over the casket, the brim of his hat pulled way down over his eyes asking "So what do you think they're gonna do with all that silver?"

"Roy!" She said it drawn out to two syllables, her voice rising haughtily on the second. At the moment she felt like she should be appalled, if she were any sort of decent person at all.



### The Family Reunion 3

By the time the finances went bad later that year, she was sure she was no such thing. They'd found out what happened to the silver by then: every piece of it went to Daniel. Also the jewelry, the antique heirlooms and the big old house out in Nassau.. Later that year, when he was living in that house with his disgustingly beautiful wife and kids and she was rotting alone in that cold water flat, her resentment blossomed into full on hatred.

Her and Roy hadn't talked for years, but mom's death pushed them together. They spoke more, rekindled the sibling relationship that had grown so strained. She couldn't say she precisely liked him, even now, just that she felt irrevocably connected to him.

Turns out, little forges as strong a connection as planning a murder with someone.

Florence didn't particularly like referring to it as that; she preferred thinking of it in results based terms- "getting their money" or "eliminating their competition." But when she thought about it, truly thought about it, she could hold the idea in her palm, run her fingers over it and feel its weight like a smooth stone plucked from a river: she was going to kill her brother. She was becoming accustomed to it.

...

She had better be accustomed to it, because it was happening tonight. Actually, it was happening in about fifteen minutes. A quick glance at Roy confirmed that he was ready. As he arose, he took a quick swig from his hip flask, grimacing at the taste. What a damn liar, she thought. She knew for a fact there was nothing but water in that flask.

## The Family Reunion 4

On the way out the door she stopped, letting Roy walk ahead. Quickly, she walked over to the little end table to grab the tiny vial out of the drawer. That was her secret weapon. For weeks she had been questioning Roy's involvement in the plan. It was clear she could have carried out all this herself, so why should he be paid to sit around, smoking cheap cigars and making bad jokes? She was already killing one brother, it didn't seem like a terribly big deal to take care of the other as well. Her method would be cleaner, quicker and more precise than the one they would use on Daniel. She bided her time.

"So, has our little meeting been postponed?" Roy called from the hallway.

Hastily, she shoved the vial into a pocket of her dress. "No, just putting on my face!"

She had to scoff at the concept. For the past few years her "face" had been some dime-store lipstick that kept bleeding into the tiny lines around her mouth. There didn't seem to be any point to it, when no makeup could hide the growing bags under her eyes.

When she scurried out into the hallway, Roy was there, waiting impatiently, tapping a foot on the worn rug. That rug made the hallway appear to go on forever, an endless landscape of fake Persian carpeting. "Let's go," Roy said, his voice lowering now.

"Yes, it'll all be over soon," she replied in a voice that was almost soothing.

They drove to Daniel's house in Roy's barely functioning old Model T. They were silent, partially because speech was impossible over the growl of the engine. Florence half felt like she was headed to her *own* funeral.

## The Family Reunion 5

The car stopped in front of Daniel's house with a stomach churning lurch. Every time Florence looked at that house she was a little awed. It was beautiful, with its towering architecture and fine landscaping. Daniel must have spent a fortune on that. The thought filled her with acrid jealousy.

Looking over at Roy, she could see he felt it too; It was evident by how tight his fist clenched on the gearshift, tight enough his knuckles shown white. Suddenly, he turned to her grinning (she was briefly reminded of chimpanzees baring their teeth in anger).

"Are you ready for our... lovely family dinner?"

She played along, a true smile dancing on the edges of her lips. "I certainly am, dearest brother."

"Then we go." He reached into the glove box, grabbed the sharp screwdriver they'd stowed there earlier and slid it into his vest, all in one smooth motion. They walked up the winding path to the house, Roy with a sort of bravado. It was clear how pleased he was at getting what he always thought he'd deserved. Again, she had to chuckle.

The doorbell sounded with a deep chime, one Florence could feel vibrating through her bones. This was it. The idea filled her with both terrible dread and giddy excitement.

Mostly the latter- after all, she was finally standing up to take what she wanted, rather than silently pining for it. Though tomorrow she may look same, with her shapeless dresses and mousy brown hair, she would no longer be plain old Florence Gerst.

## The Family Reunion 6

Daniel came to the door with a smile so genuine that it repulsed her. "It's so nice to see you," he said, opening the door and gesturing at the vast interior of the house "forgive me, Ellie and the boys are out of town. Some little family gathering on her side." They'd known that of course. Not even Roy was stupid enough to murder a man whose wife and kids were in the house.

He led them into the house, into an old fashioned parlor. Ellie must have spent ages furnishing this place, Florence thought bitterly. "I'll go fetch us some coffee," Daniel said, slipping through the doorway to the kitchen. That left her and Roy alone, sitting stiffly on an embroidered love seat that it was impossible to ever get truly comfortable on.

Despite how long they'd been considering it, the plan grew rather murky from here. The gist of it had always been "Plan to see your dear brother while you're in town, then sneakily murder him." There had been no consideration of exactly *when* they'd do the murdering. Knowing Roy, he'd probably want to wait until after dinner.

All at once the idea of sitting down to eat dinner together, pretending that nothing was going to happen, of bearing an hour of fake laughter and wooden conversation, seemed unbearable. She got the desire to turn around and run back out of the house, before steeling her resolve. Perhaps it was insanity or perhaps it was simply taking the initiative, but she leaned closer to Roy and reached out toward his vest pocket, the one with the screwdriver.

"Give that here" she hissed, glancing up to make sure Daniel was still out of sight.

"We're doing this now!"

## The Family Reunion 7

"Wait, uh, no we're not, uh," Roy sputtered, even as he reached into his vest to hand her the screwdriver. "How?"

"Without your help, that's how," she snapped, already grasping the screwdriver for when Daniel walked back into the room. Perhaps this was a little hasty, but she knew this had to be done now.

When Daniel came into the room, he was carrying a little tray, so delicate and feminine it had to be Ellie's, laden with coffee. "I got us..." he trailed off as he noticed Florence approaching him.

He appeared to be frozen, tray still in hand, as she got closer. She paused, panicking for a moment when she realized she hadn't prepared any clever line for the occasion. Instead of fumbling to come up with one, she chose to wordlessly and instantly jab the screwdriver into his neck.

She expected it to be quick, but it dragged out terribly. The tender looking skin of his throat was surprisingly resistant. It took long enough for Daniel to choke out a desperate gasp "Please," before the screwdriver broke through the skin with a sickly popping noise.

The spray of blood that resulted was impressive. It flew toward Roy, who pressed himself tightly against the loveseat, as if he could hide from it. It spilt over the cream colored rug, decorating it with crimson rosettes. Some of it even flew backwards, splashing across her lips, redder than her lipstick. The taste of it made her gag.

## The Family Reunion 8

It took more than one try. She had to wrench the screwdriver from the wound, prompting a new spurt of blood. She wildly jabbed in an attempt to find a place that would stop that wretched gasping sound he was making. Over and over again, it plunged into his neck, leaving it pockmarked with wounds. It was only when she noticed the dead weight of him on her shoulder that she knew he had finally, mercifully died.

"It's over. It's over," she repeated breathlessly. Roy was still on the couch, hiding his eyes with shaking hands.

"Oh it is," he said, seemingly unable to come up with any more substantial comment. At that point she noticed how slick her hands were with blood. She attempted to wipe them on her dress, but they came away as soaked as they had started.

...

It took hours and a gallon of bleach to get the place cleaned up. Some of the stuff they had to burn, like the loveseat, practically dyed red. Roy even had to cut up swatches of carpet with his switchblade. A quick note in Daniel's forged handwriting and his car rolled off a cliff into the sea would answer any questions his wife might have. Some men, after all, are simply not cut out for family life.

Florence knew for a fact that he hadn't bothered to write his wife into his will yet. Why would you, after all, when you're a young man who still has a long healthy life ahead of him? By Monday, they'd have those documents in their hands and that silver in their

## The Family Reunion 9

pockets. Well, she would anyway. Roy wouldn't be sticking around for that long.

Florence felt younger already.

...

"Let's unwind over a couple of drinks," she said, back at the hotel room. The wireless was playing again, louder than before, a tune that made her want to start dancing right there. "I'll fix yours up Roy." With her back turned, it was easy to empty the contents of the little vial into a glass of wine. Roy would be none the wiser.

She turned back to Roy, sitting at the table with their food and smiled so wide that it hurt her face a little bit. Eyes on the prize, she reminded herself, thinking especially of that lovely silver tea set Daniel had left behind. Handing Roy his glass, she pulled out a chair gracefully (more gracefully than she ever had before).

With his first sips, she knew it was happening. His breathing was louder by halfway through the glass, each inhalation raspy with congestion. By the time the wine was just red sediment in his glass he was clutching his chest, fingers twisted into grotesque claws.

Satisfaction swelled through her chest. That is, until she realized that wasn't the only thing swelling in her chest. Before she even had time to panic, to scream, to do something, her breathing took on that same congestive quality as Roy's, their gasps forming a kind of symphony. Just as it became too much to hold her head up and her breaths became shallower, she looked up at her brother.

## The Family Reunion 10

He could barely choke out, slightly snarling even through his heavy breathing "This is my last, dear sister." She barely had time to hear it, before her head fell. Her face landed directly in the plate, splashing cheap hotel food all over the already dingy table cloth. She didn't have time to care.

Between them, a candle flickered once and extinguished.



The Gargoyle  
by Geoffrey Payne

Grade: 12

Leesburg, VA

## The Gargoyle 1

Perhaps Robert Frost was right. When it comes to the end of the world, I would prefer fire, but for destruction, ice seems to do the job just as well.

I sat underneath the bushes in Caleb's garden in the midst of the forthcoming storm. The thundering of mighty Zeus does not disorient me, nor do his preceding shards of flickering light. As the sky slowly resembles a griseous sea of misty ash, a maelstrom of terror and despair, it slowly sprinkles tears that dampen everything in sight and fills the air with a faint, salty tang. No doubt the scene is gloomy and somewhat ironic. The stage is set and the lights are ready, and here comes the actor, hastening to the center: a young man hiding in the garden of his best friend's house. He is half naked with only jeans to clothe him; no shirt, no shoes and no one there to service him in his time of need. Is he weeping? Or is that the rain producing the tears that cascade down his cheeks? Either way, his eyes are not red from anguish, nor does he howl in lament. He does, however, twitch and writhe in pain, his deep olive skin tormented and teased with a bloodthirsty leather belt. Which end of the belt had hit him was a mystery yet mostly irrelevant this late in the play.

I bring my legs closer in and hug my knees as the rain begins to come down harder and harder, as if a billion of God's obedient angels each possessed a slingshot and an endless supply of liquid projectiles, aiming in a several mile radius all around me. They were subjecting me to further punishment, as if redemption from one father was not enough. The rain intensified the pain as it was literally and figuratively pouring salt in the wound, subjecting me to further torture, never mind the icy winds and rain that chilled my clothes-stripped body like daily produce.

## The Gargoyle 2

Was this how it felt to be truly rejected on all fronts, including by nature? Was my sin really that egregious, against all of humanity? Where was the love I was promised for being human? Why was there struggle and disapproval from everyone I needed? Was there anyone who could transcend all of this hate? When, if that was to happen? Will there ever be an answer to any of these questions? This is why I sit here waiting for Caleb, more impatient and demanding than I have ever been in my entire life.

I looked onward and was now strangling my legs to trap any bit of warmth I could with limited success. I could feel my body shivering, an innumerable array of bumps forming all over my skin in response to the falling temperature. My breaths become shallower and shallower over time as if I were asthmatic, thinner and thinner and harsher and harsher. But here, sitting next to me in this garden, mostly killed off by the chill of late autumn, was a stone statue of a deformed, draconic creature, something I knew to be considered by some as demonic and others as a tristful centerpiece to be placed in a garden or fountain as a means of feng shui. It was dismal, giving all those who looked upon it a cold shoulder. It was a grotesque, a statue of a creature ugly in all respects. Not quite a gargoyle, though, because it does not spout water from its mouth. Perhaps the rain makes up for this inability.

In a sense this statue and I share much in common. Downcast, unwanted and frozen in place. Nefarious. Mournful. Unmourned. Unwelcoming. Unwelcome. An invisible man, in Ralph Ellison's eyes. The sanctioning victim, according to Ayn Rand. The slave of his action, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Dripping wet. Unable to fly. Forgotten. I have nowhere left to turn. I guess that is another bond we share; an

### The Gargoyle 3

unknown destiny. A grotesque or gargoyle is petrified in place, unable to respond to the situation at hand. I too am a lawn ornament unable to do much in the freezing cold, which seems to go through me like a sword impaling my abdomen. I am shivering, yet another thing I do not have any control over. Shaking in silence was a form of torture that only made me bring my legs even closer to me, and in these soaking wet circumstances, a couple of millimeters made all of the difference.

Suddenly, I look up. I see lights coming towards me, but not the light others jokingly press not to go towards; these were headlights to a car parking in the nearby driveway. Even then, I did not move. That is, until a boy of similar build and height yet paler in color removed his jacket and took his sweater off to clothe me. I am surprised yet thankful. My tight grip was easily pulled apart as he lifted up my arms to force the shirt over my head, tugging at my arms again to bring them through the sleeves, but after all, Caleb was much stronger than I was especially given my air of frailness from being exposed to the cold for a while.

He neglects to put his jacket back on, as if his suffering was necessary. Perhaps this was in thought that his body heat would better permeate my skin this way, but now it was he that sat topless, and I, lo and behold, was guilty. But ultimately beyond all feelings, I was grateful. He had driven back to his house to save me. I had almost forgotten that my back was still hurting from my father's odious and resentful belt. And as if I was redeemed, after a while, the heavy downpour was beginning to lighten up.

"You're only seventeen, for Christ's sake," Caleb said, cursing under frosted breath. "They in their right minds could not possibly kick you out, Liam!"

## The Gargoyle 4

With the emphasis on "they," I knew that he assumed that both my father and mother had kicked me out. I had not yet thought about my mother. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that the real tragedy was not the act of hate itself but rather the silence of the onlookers.

And, speak of the devil, a second pair of headlights came towards me with a breakneck pace, quickly and sloppily parking by the curb, or rather with one wheel awkwardly parked on top of it, setting the car off balance. The lights did not turn off. They hurt my eyes, a blinding light of truth that I dared not move towards, either. A door opened and then slammed shut. Suddenly an eclipse of the light, and a more feminine figure darted towards me with the utmost urgency, almost slipping on high heels that she otherwise most gracefully transcended the lawn and the border of the garden with. She knelt to the ground and like Caleb also slipped off her heavy coat only to wrap it around me as he moved aside in respect. He knew that she was not there to hurt me.

And so I was now clothed, donning both the shirt of my best friend and the coat of my mother. Well, Martin Luther King Jr. also said that darkness cannot drive out darkness, a job reserved for light. Hate cannot drive out hate, a job reserved for love. And admittedly, my mother's arms were warmer than Caleb's. They were sincere and welcoming. Loving and accepting. It did not matter at this point the throbbing pain my back was subjected to. Pain cannot drive out pain, a job reserved also for love.

"I should have never stood to the side while he whipped you," she whimpered in between sobs, pulling tighter than I had pulled my legs a few minutes before. "It hurt

## The Gargoyle 5

me. He hurt me. Nothing you can do, nothing you can think... no one that you love will ever make me love you any less, Liam."

I looked to Caleb. Though he was cold and more so worried for me, even further than his worry was happiness manifesting on his face with a smart grin.

With this, the angels came to a ceasefire and retreated. The clouds retracted over what seemed to be a couple of minutes. The autumn sun was not quite visible, but it was much brighter than moments ago. In a short amount of time, the wretched statue and I rapidly began to gain in differences. Pretty soon he was giving me the cold shoulder as well.

And that's when a rainbow appeared, impaling the clouds and allowing the edges of my mouth to expand outwards. This was love. In the eyes of Ralph Ellison, freedom lied not in hating but in loving. According to Ayn Rand, love is the reverence, worship, glory and the upward glances that I was receiving. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, love does not look down but rather up, aspires and does not despair.

The gargoyle, my father and my wounds were now completely irrelevant to me. The day is nearly done, and I have done all I could. And as Caleb helped me into the passenger seat of my car, my mother told me we were going to stay at a hotel for a while, just to be safe. Once I was safely seated, the door closed and Caleb turned around to slip his jacket back on. Mom got in the driver's seat and told me that a few changes of clothing and some of my things were in the backseat, but I did not look back. I believed her, and glanced back over at Caleb. He turned to me with warm smile a few feet away from my door and winked as we drove off.

## The Gargoyle 6

It was then that I also agreed with Robert Frost on another point. We love the things that we love for what they are: a caring mother who will always love me, a valiant friend who will always fight for me, and a wise, silent gargoyle that still, as it so happens, resents me. I began to feel sorry for it, regardless of the fact that it was just an inanimate object. But then I recalled our second biggest difference: naked in the garden it will forever sit, unforgiven, without the clothes of its loved ones to warm it.

How Jessica Rose

Amy Alizabeth Camire

Grade 9

Leesburg, VA



## How Jessica Rose 1

What if everything that was supposed to protect you turned on you? What if it became the source of your pain instead of what was preventing it? School, parents, religion; what if all of it hurt you? When everything is wrong, and nothing is right, will you fall?

My bracelets have been getting heavier recently, even though I haven't noticed a change in size. I spun one slowly across my wrist as I sat, the long, honey-yellow grass brushing against my legs as the soft wind caressed my warm face. The silver caught a glint off of the sun and shone, the bright moment causing me to see a purple dot when I looked up, dancing across my vision and making me momentarily unable to see the person leaning against a tree in front of me. I squinted, forgetting about the heavy-yet-thin bracelets that lightly tinkled together on my wrist as the stranger crossed his arms and ankles, still facing me. A moment of excitement filled me, rising in my stomach like bubbles before settling like leaves. I hadn't seen him in a few weeks, and was wondering if he had been angry at me for some reason.

Without a word exchanged between the two of us, he walked towards me, one thumb hooking in his jean pocket and the other scratching his shoulder over the old, paint-stained black t-shirt that was his signature clothing item. I'd yet to see him without it, and I'd met him a year ago. I sat cross-legged as he knelt down in front of me, his black hair falling over the back of his neck as he tucked it back, nonchalant look in his dark green eyes. I liked them; there was something in them that I could relate to, if you

## How Jessica Rose 2

could relate to a body part. Most normal people couldn't, but I wasn't most normal people. He knew that, but I didn't think he cared. If he did, he hid it well.

I broke our silence by asking quietly,  
"Where did you go?" He shrugged and sat like I was, reaching a long finger over and running it over my bracelets. The second he touched them they didn't seem like they each weighed 10 pounds anymore, in fact they felt weightless, almost like they weren't there. We sat like this for a little while longer, and I decided to drop my question. Whenever I seemed to ask a question that he didn't want to answer, he would stay silent long enough to make me forget what I had asked in the first place.

He leaned in closer and moved my wrist so that the underside faced him, a feeling twisting in my guts as I looked away, a bit ashamed at the ugly, blue/grey bruises that dotted my wrist. Of course, they weren't my doing, but the mere fact that he was seeing them made me self-conscious, as if he was the only person whose opinion on them mattered.

"Her?" He asked smoothly, running a soft finger over the bruise, not one moment of pain from his soft touch. I nodded the name we used as code for my mother ringing in my mind as I had one flashback to this morning after her church meeting. I was surprised that those small bruises from her fingers were all that I got away with, especially since I had blatantly called Hope my girlfriend in front of the Pastor.

The memory of the horrible looks I had gotten from the people who overheard made me sick to my stomach, just thinking of how they whispered and pointed, not even trying to be discreet. I thought 'She' would have killed me right then and there, no doubt

### How Jessica Rose 3

the others around would have helped. But when we got home the shouts were enough to do the job. 'Demon', 'damnation', 'AIDS', 'Levictus 20:13', 'Blasphemy'. Each bit through me, and the more I tried to fight to get away the harder her hand clenched on my wrist.

This time, I hadn't even called for 'Him', knowing my father wouldn't do a thing but stand and try to speak, only to be shut down by 'Her', verbally assaulted like I was being, like I had been every day since I could remember. No matter what I did, there was something in the Bible that said it was wrong, and She wouldn't let me forget it until she felt I had properly received what 'God' would want me to know. When it wasn't her, it was the Pastor after most people had left, telling me in a quieter, more subtle way that I was going to Hell for my sins.

Religion had become more of a monster to me than a savior, taking over the woman who used to be my mother, who used to smile and laugh and make you laugh along with her. Her happiness had been contagious. Then, after Papi died, she turned to the Bible to try and ease her suffering. Hers might have gone away, but mine had just begun.

He moved his hand from my wrist, and the weight of the bracelets closest to my hand felt even heavier than before, almost cutting off my circulation as it pulled downwards.

"You had a bad day." He stated, instead of asking. He knew, he always seemed to know without me telling him. It was a gift he had, coupled with a neutral look that made

#### How Jessica Rose 4

you want to tell him everything, made you want to spill it all to him in hopes that he could somehow make it better. He didn't even have to speak, you did for him.

And, like always, it all came spilling out of me and towards him. I looked into his eyes that were almost the same shade as mine, telling him about how they had finally done it today. There had been rumors reaching me from Hope whenever we would see each other, usually after school or during lunch, but I had brushed them off. After all, if I worried then she would, and I couldn't have her do that. I loved her too much to see her worry about me and my stupid problems. She was the best thing to ever happen to me, the only good thing that I could remember. I wasn't about to ruin it because some cruel children wanted to beat me until I was 'straight'.

I'd seen the looks they had given me, heard the words spit at me so often that I was positive the teachers heard, as well. Yet, the professors and teachers turned a blind eye on the abuse, as if they agreed with the children, or just didn't want to get involved. Maybe they were like me, just hoping it would all go away one day. Well, where had that waiting and tolerating got me? It had gotten me locked in a janitor's closet, legs tied together with barbed wire from the closet I sat in, arms tied with zip-ties behind me as they laughed and spat on me, writing slurs and horrible words on my arms and face.

I could feel their laughter and spit as it all hit me, no one in the halls and no teachers caring enough to go and see what all the racket was about. My jeans were torn in places and my face was hot from crying, but not from yelling. No, this time I didn't yell, didn't fight back, didn't even try to defend myself or get help. I just sat there,

## How Jessica Rose 5

looking down and crying. I'd given up in that closet, not just hearing the words of the hateful kids, but of my mother and the Pastor, the painful silence of the teachers and my father, the worry in Hope's face. School, parents, religion, weren't all of these things supposed to lift me up and help me in life? Why were they doing the exact opposite?

He listened to my words as I spoke, and even listened to my silence as I finished and buried my face in one hand, the other far too heavy to lift.

"I can't keep doing this. I can't. Keep. Doing this." I whispered, feeling everything weighing down on me all at once, almost smothering me. The rejection of my teachers and father, hate from my mother, religion, and school. It was all bringing me down, and I just couldn't keep doing everything. When I was little I would go through all of this and think, 'yes, it will get better and I'll be able to handle things when I get older'. Well, I'm older, and I cannot.

I heard him stand up, and looked up at him. He took three steps backwards, face still calm and cool, as if he didn't have a care in the world. Panic set in and I moved to stand up, but felt myself fall flat on my face, wrist pinned to the ground. I looked over, yanking at my arm but to no avail. Panting and confused, I looked up at him as he stood there calmly, hands in his pockets.

"Help, I can't get up!" I said, voice cracking. He didn't even blink, just stared down at me, still feet away from me, the only thing that I could look forward to.

I felt a tear fall down my face, because now even HE was ignoring me! Even he was watching me struggle and refused to help me up! What had I done to deserve this, to have everyone hate me and abandon me and put me down and make me fall! Why

## How Jessica Rose 6

did I have to have all of this push me down? Why? Didn't they know that I couldn't keep doing this? Couldn't keep putting up with all of it?

"I can't do it!" I screamed up at him, looking into his pale face surrounded by contrasting black hair, eyes like mine. Now that I really looked, exactly like mine. So was his hair, the same length and shade. He shook his head and looked down at me seriously.

"You're not 'doing' anything. You're falling, you can't 'do' falling. You let 'falling' happen, you allow it to take over you and then you drop." He explained in a smooth tone. I turned my wet, warm face up to him in desperation. My wrist ached from the hold of the silver bracelets on it, the three of them now hundreds of pounds each.

"I don't want to fall..." I shook my head, thinking of Hope. No, if I fell then what would she do? If I fell then she would be all alone and she didn't deserve to be alone, she needed me as much as I needed her. I needed myself. I looked down and whipped the tears off of my face with my arm, the skin red from scrubbing off the words in the shower.

"Then do something, Jessica." He said. I looked up, but he wasn't there anymore, he disappeared. He was gone. Right? No, no I felt something. Inside of me, something deep in my chest, something warm and powerful. He was there, in me, becoming me, had been me since the beginning. He was everything I needed, everything I had searched for and had lost for a moment in time. He was lost when I lost myself, because he was I. Do something. I knew I had to do something, even if it meant going through all that I was going through now.

## How Jessica Rose 7

I had to talk to myself for a while to know that yes, I needed to do something. I couldn't fall, because falling is so much scarier than rising. Falling meant losing Hope. Falling meant losing myself. Falling meant darkness. Falling meant losing what I don't even know yet. Rising meant sliding my hand out of my bracelets, meant freeing myself from everything bringing me down. Rising meant going on. Rising meant that there would be a peak to reach. Rising meant that no matter what I was going through now, it was going to get better.

I pulled my hand hard, the skin almost breaking under the pressure, bones almost breaking from the strain. Yet it did not hurt, not nearly as much as it would hurt to leave it there. I had Hope, I had myself, and I had strength to pull myself from the silver chains. I rose.

Mortimer of Monkey Run

Timothy G. Rhein

Grade 12

Clarkston, Michigan



## Mortimer of Monkey Run 1

*Blink, blink, blink...* the cursor on the blank computer screen stood idle, relentlessly flashing as a reminder that the page remained empty. Microsoft Works, 1990. Sitting at the computer, biting his nails even closer, the author's face was pensive. To most people, such a situation might seem trivial, but for Mortimer Henschel, it was the direst of circumstances. In fact, it was hopeless. His "condition", for so he called it, wasn't necessarily medical, although it was most certainly a detriment to his health.

Mortimer had "hypergraphia", that is, a neurological phenomenon (usually associated with temporal lobe epilepsy, but for Mortimer, that wasn't likely) characterized by an uncontrollable urge to write. As a professional author, it would seem as though hypergraphia would be a blessing, rather than a curse; in earlier years, it seemed to be the key to his literary success.

Spending hours at his typewriter (what primitive days those were, just four years ago since his college graduation) he used to shine above his peers for his ability to produce a piece of quality literature in remarkable time. When a newspaper in town needed to compose a breaking story only hours before the publication of the headlines, Mortimer could be trusted to take on the job. Ever victorious, his fame as a literary "machine" spread from his hometown of Monkey Run, Missouri, until his name was hallowed in the publisher's offices and newspapers of the neighboring city of Hannibal.

Every day, he received at least a dozen emails from reporters around the area, asking him to compose an easily readable story based on their probably unintelligible or boring facts. But Mortimer knew he was made for more than journalism. The non-fiction

## Mortimer of Monkey Run 2

monotony of life in Monkey Run, Missouri paid his bills. But somewhere at his core, he was more than that; he was an author of fiction.

Hannibal, Missouri, in case you don't already know, was the birthplace of the famous American novelist, Mark Twain. In case you don't know who Mark Twain is, it's probably time for you to stop reading this and go look him up. Growing up in "Misery" (as he pronounced his home-state's name, not without cynicism), Mortimer had always needed to get away. As a young boy, he'd discovered that his writing could take him there. And if he'd been famous for his non-fiction reporting, he was a local celebrity for his prowess as a storyteller. With no written outline, after spending hours in the library reading, and hours more at his typewriter (it wasn't until mid 1990 that Mortimer got onboard with a brand new Microsoft computer...) he could tell a story faster and better than a Missouri farmer can milk a cow, which is pretty neat, if you've ever seen it done right. His career depended on his hypergraphia.

But... one day, it happened.

Coming out of the grocery store on Main Street, groceries haphazardly piled in a bag, his mind rushing through his latest plot concept, Mortimer's normal, commonplace, humdrum life came to a stop. And so did his literary genius.

No, he didn't die; although he'd always remember that it was a pretty close call. The gravity of this situation was even worse than that. As he crossed the street, his imagination already typing the keys waiting at home, somebody crossed from the opposite direction. Now, making eye-contact with a stranger, as we all know, is a well calculated and carefully executed operation. Too soon, and it will be awkward. Too late,

### Mortimer of Monkey Run 3

and it might seem antisocial. So approximately twelve feet from his target, Mortimer raised his eyes, his mind still hovering on the minutiae of his current novel.

She was about five-foot-five, had dark eyes, an endearing nose, rosy cheeks, and a cheerful smile that had left many a schoolboy stunned in the recent days of her education. And “stunned” is exactly what happened to Mortimer. He didn’t drop his groceries; he actually didn’t even stop walking. His mouth remained politely closed, but he wanted to speak. Twenty seven years of literary composition can really put some verbose felicitations on a guy’s tongue, and the elaborate pickup lines ran through his mind faster than the Mississippi river, a few miles away. But common sense ordered him to refrain from such a spectacle.

Blessedly, he managed to reach the other curb safely. Except for one thing; for the first time in his life, for a split second, he’d forgotten his next story! Now, Mortimer was no recluse, and hypergraphia certainly didn’t affect his corporeal inclinations either. He’d been around lots of girls before, some of them quite attractive. When he was a senior at Hannibal High School, he’d even been asked to prom by the most popular girl in school, Barbara Dahl... which is quite an achievement for any guy, let alone one whose name is Mortimer.

But this girl was different. He couldn’t tell why. And all the way home (just over three blocks), he couldn’t figure it out. Which means, all the way home, he wasn’t thinking about his story. That evening, when he sat down at his typewriter, he couldn’t bring himself to remember what came next. Panicking, he read through the previous chapter of the novel, something about an agnostic scientist and his hallucination-

#### Mortimer of Monkey Run 4

inducing guilt complex... Now where did that come from? And where was it going? Wasn't this supposed to be his greatest work ever? He hadn't the foggiest, and that's not a cliché exaggeration either.

It was really quite astounding, and the next sentence remained blank. Hours slipped by. The story remained elusive, but his memory of that girl crossing the street burned fresh in his mind. Why hadn't he talked to her? Had he even smiled? Where did she come from? In a town like Monkey Run, it wasn't every day you'd see a total stranger; especially not one like that.

And so it went. His mind wandered for hours. The next day, he even forgot to let his faithful dog Rusty outside, so Rusty left a nice reminder on his kitchen floor not to let it happen again. But it did. Several days in a row.

It isn't as though Mortimer did nothing but write, grocery shop, and let his dog out. He did sleep, eat, attend Service on Sundays at Riverview Nazarene Church in Hannibal, and a great many other things. He had family, a few friends, and a fairly busy social life. Top that with the constant journalism requests he received, and he truly did have little time for fiction writing anyway. But with hypergraphia, he'd find time somewhere. So life moved on at its ordinary frantic pace, but every time he'd go to finish his story, the world stopped again, and he couldn't put the words on the paper.

And so the days rolled along. He'd keep writing newspaper stories. Keep living his life. But even more than that, he'd keep crossing that street in front of the grocery store. One more chance was all he needed. Then he would talk to her, learn her name, and win her heart. For a guy like Mortimer, that was heavy stuff, and he fought the

## Mortimer of Monkey Run 5

inclination with every moment not spent dreaming it up. He'd been ready. He'd almost opened his mouth and spoken to her. He'd almost done it. But he'd chickened out...

Every time he'd go to write again, Mortimer would think about what he'd do "next time". He tried to distract himself; he bought a computer, transitioning all of his work into the digital age. He even retyped the entire remnant of the story about the scientist, in an attempt to jog his recollection. But nothing helped. "Next time" didn't come... and so here he was, the computer cursor blinking away, and once again, he was thinking about her.

He let out a deep sigh. Today he'd go grocery shopping again; he was all out of dog food, and he dreaded what might happen if he didn't FEED Rusty. He'd cross that same street, think that same thought, and come home, melancholy as ever, with no story to finish, and no woman to love.

And so he shut down the computer. Grabbed his coat, (because it was September, and the wind had picked up a bit lately) and headed for the door. Shopping was the same as ever. He grabbed a carton of eggs, a jug of orange juice, and of course, the dog food. Once again, the store clerk looked at his menu rather skeptically, but said nothing, and soon Mortimer was out on the sidewalk again.

Crossing the street, he was aware of another person coming towards him. It wasn't the first time since "that day" that he'd encountered someone here; it was a busy street, and he was used to it by now. As usual, his eyes remained uncommitted until an approximate twelve feet from the approaching pedestrian.

## Mortimer of Monkey Run 6

He raised his eyes, and bam. There she was again. Five-foot-five, dark eyes, endearing nose, cheeks a little rosier due to the cold, and the smile which had haunted Mortimer for the last three years.

*Crash!* The orange juice, eggs, and dog food hit the pavement. Mortimer stopped. So did she. He opened his mouth to speak, and all the carefully prepared verbiage of the last three years disappeared. “Hi,” he said, with a moment of hesitation. “I think I’ve seen you here before. I’m Mortimer Henschel.”

Her smile got a little bigger, and he thought he saw her cheeks get even a little rosier, if that were possible. “Hi. I’m Cary Dwyann. I think I remember you too, but why did you just drop your groceries all over the pavement?”

Mortimer’s face dropped, and so did he as he scrambled to collect the rubble of his mistake. A car waiting to go through the intersection honked. As he scrambled to pick up the last of the unbroken eggs, Cary Dwyann let out an entertained laugh. The car honked again as the two of them made their way to one side of the intersection. Collecting himself, Mortimer settled the grocery bag in one hand, and his eyes finally met hers again. She smiled, began a polite conversation, and the last three years of desperation fell off Mortimer like the leaves off the autumn trees around them.

Any hope of ever recovering the end of that story about the agnostic scientist, his hallucinations, and whatever other gibberish he’d been working on, was long gone by now. Hypergraphia had vanished. But that was okay, because for Mortimer Henschel of Monkey Run, Missouri, the best story he’d ever tell, had yet to be written.

*Paradise*

Gabrielle Wolfe

Grade 9

Purcellville, VA

## Paradise 1

The sun rises from the east and sets on my cheeks. Its radiant glow fills me with the warmth of a new year, a new summer. My cheeks slowly flush a pinkish tint. I rest the back of my hand lightly against them and feel the warmth spread quickly across my face.

The crisp summer breeze blows my soft brown hair in a flurry around my face. In one swift movement, I sweep it into a loose fitting bun and turn towards the soft crash of water.

The fresh blue ocean carries to me that hint of sea salt. It blends with the raw smell of fish and a strong perfume wafting down the beach. Seagulls screech loudly overhead as they dance endlessly their high flying acrobatics. The water appears so refreshing that I am drawn to it and take my first step onto the beach from the thick, brambly grass where I had been propped up against the creaky, old boardwalk. I don't dare to peel my eyes from the sight of the glistening, frothing ocean for fear that it's all a dream and in an instant, it might all disappear.

The sand is soft and cool beneath my feet. I wrinkle up my toes and let them relax again. The tan dust conforms around my small pale feet and seeps up between my toes. It tickles and I stamp my feet patiently against it's rolling dunes. The image of fresh green grass on the first day of spring comes to mind; such a soft, natural carpet laid out beneath my bare feet.

A young girl builds a small sand castle a little ways down the beach, her curls lightly scraping the top of the building as she ducks her head to grab at a gull feather as it blows through the wind. Grasping it between her fingers, she jabs it triumphantly into the ceiling of her castle; the perfect flag for her kingdom.

Focusing back on my path, I am overcome with the need to be in that endless blue wake. Forgetting any reputation I might have had to uphold to these complete strangers, I race down to the water's edge, kicking up sand behind me and mumbling quick apologies as it hits sun-baked beachgoers. At the water's edge, I stop and stare



## Paradise 2

down at the glistening water beneath me. It sparkles with each wave that rolls up over another, competing for the shoreline. I'm frozen right there: waiting and watching, wanting to keep this picture burned in my mind forever. Still afraid that at any second I could wake up and realize this was only a dream, I sigh quietly and close my eyes. I move slowly closer to the water's foamy wake, putting one foot carefully down in front of the other, guided only by its familiar recurring crash.

My feet get colder and I know I've come as far as the beach will take me. This new sand is smooth and gooey beneath my feet. It clings to the edge of my long skirt and sticks to my feet even as I move. I open my eyes to the breathtaking sight. The scenery is still there. Not a dream.

When I move, my feet leave small impressions in the sand, like memories imprinted in my mind, until the water crashes over it. The water erases it, letting it start anew. The sun rises higher in the sky and continues to glint off the pure blue water. It's so pure it becomes hard to look at. I begin to wish I had my sunglasses. Where did I put them? A strange thought tugs at the back of my mind: where did I put any of my stuff? I shake it quickly out of the way. I really don't care right now. I just want to remember this perfect moment.

The tide rises and falls at my ankles, catching the ends of my white washed dress and snapping me out of my short lived trance as the chill of the water sends shivers up my back. The salt stains the edges of my skirt a light gray and weighs it down to cling tightly to my ankles. I raise my head to the sky and breathe a deep sigh of relief. The wind blows my hair out of its loose bun and it cascades down my back and around my shoulders. My white ruffled shirt dances around my body, following the movement of my long hair. A small, pure white object catches my attention out of the corner of my eye.

I lean slowly over, holding back the side of my hair with one hand. With the other, I reach down to the object. My arm becomes immediately engulfed in the blowing ruffles of my skirt, but I push past it, determined to grab the object before the tide pulls it

### Paradise 3

back out to the endless rushing sea. I clasp my hand around a smooth, cylindrical piece and watch it emerge from the ruffles of my dress as I pull my arm slowly back up.

In my hand, now dripping up to my elbow in the salty water, I hold a large, perfect conch shell. Its dull spikes protrude between my fingers. Carefully, I raise the pure white shell to my ear and put my fingers to my pursed lips, signaling quiet to no one in particular. The wind has blown my wispy hair just behind my ear so that I can hear its resounding harmonies. That one seemingly insignificant shell seems to hold the vast, beautiful ocean in it: all its sound. The sound is so crisp, so clear, that I can no longer distinguish reality from this shell.

Suddenly, I am aware of light footsteps coming up behind me. It must be about midday because the sun is shining brighter as I look over my shoulder. Squinting, I lower my arms down to my sides and turn slowly around, careful not to let the strong current knock me over. I tuck the conch shell safely to my side, unwilling to let it go. Coming up next to me is the small girl I had noticed earlier building the grand sand castle on the beach. Her golden curls are pulled into a loose braid at the back of her neck. Her eyes sparkle the color of the sand. A pure white dress cascades down her small form and sweeps around her bare ankles, blowing slightly with the breeze. She trains her eyes on mine and I don't try to break the stare.

"Are you ready?" she asks. Her voice is barely above a whisper but carries a melodic tone that somehow overpowers the sound of the crashing waves.

I look around and across the beach, biting my lower lip nervously, curious as to who she's talking to. But, what was once a vast expanse of people has now become just us two. We are the only ones left on the endless beach. Everyone is gone; even the sun tanned beachgoers I accidentally kicked sand on. Out of habit, I tuck my unruly hair behind my ear and look down at the conch cradled in my hands. My mind feels clouded and I glance up anxiously from the conch at the little girl's anxious face, cocked patiently to the side in waiting. Then I realize: I'm in Paradise, and I remember.

## Paradise 4

When I look up again, I stand up a little straighter and peer into her vast eyes. Her face is calm, radiating a sweet confidence about the situation. To her, this must be just another day. I'm sure my face screams fear and confusion, the bliss of a few minutes ago seeping slowly out of me. To me, this is the end of my days.

Wrapping my fingers tighter around the conch, I nod. I am reluctant to let go. I have a family, I know I do, somewhere. My memories, my life, all seem too short. I don't know if I want to give them up. I can almost hear my loved ones whispering in the wind, tears clogging their voice, but assured love coming across.

A sudden feeling of calm and confidence washes over me, tingling from my head to my toes. I know what to do. This is right. A smile creeps across my face; a smile that shines as bright as the sun; a smile that shows deep gratitude and understanding; a smile that is ready to move on.

The girl moves so swiftly to my side, it seems like she isn't even touching the ground. She intertwines her fingers into mine and looks up at me. My smile continues to widen its sincere curl; I am happier than I have ever been. She nods a silent "let's go" and gives my hand a squeeze before turning out towards the water. A beautiful light begins to glow. The conch shell slips out of my hands and lands with a soft thud on the smooth sand, the water beginning to lap over it. Together, we make our way through the soft, tan sand and atop the rolling blue waves towards the bright, white light.

I am wrong; this is only just the beginning.

"Welcome home."