Celebrations 2023

University of Mississippi Writing Project

University of Mississippi. Office of Pre-College Programs

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Since 2009, in coordination with the UM Office of Pre-College Programs, the University of Mississippi Writing Project has hosted an annual Celebration of Writing competition with a different theme each year. Many talented young writers and artists from across the region and the state have shared their work with us, and we have had the pleasure to see them go on to accomplish great things as writers and professionals. We are excited to share a selection of their work with a broader audience through our third annual edition of the literary magazine, Celebrations.

The magazine features our first, second, and third place winners from the 2023 Celebration of Possibilities Writing Competition. Inside, you’ll find a mix of essays, poems, and short stories from middle and high school students along with original student artwork. We hope that you will read this collection of literary works through the eyes of these writers as they discover where their imagination and talent takes them. We couldn’t be more proud of their creativity and vision. Enjoy!
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You are sitting on a public shuttle, in a city you've lived next to your whole life and never really seen. The metal bar, meant to be held by the hands of people who seem to have better things to do tonight, it’s clanging loudly against the shoddy tin roof of the vehicle. The driver spends his night pretending he does not hear.

You arrive at your destination, late, and walk underneath the city’s makeshift New Year’s ball with a measly two hours to spare for this dying year. You make your way through bodies packed like atoms, never quite touching, flowing like water—a bookstore your destination, warm lights and warmer coffee and a man with eyes full of secrets just behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses that don’t quite fit his face.

You grab a drink, the only nonalcoholic beverage on the street from the sound of things, and make your way out into the celebratory Red Sea again, parting it as if your bottled water was a staff—a jazz band set up right in the middle of the one-way Main Street playing brass tunes at a volume that could trumpet the second coming, all underwoven with rhythm from a drummer who gives you a look you can’t quite interpret.

Here, right next to the stage you somehow found your way to the forefront of, is a couple dancing steps guided with years worth of polished rhythm and hair grayed by the years full of smiles like the ones they are wearing now as they twirl next to you to the beat of a song doesn’t match their dance in the slightest. You realize that they don’t dance to the music, the music plays to their dance and you think about how beautiful that is.

You are standing in a packed crowd, counting down the last minute of another year full of your life and waiting for the ball to drop, literally and metaphorically because right next to you is a man, all brown hair and soft smiles and crinkled eyes, trying his best to match a song that no one knows and looking at you as if he wouldn’t mind breaking in the new year with you.

You think to yourself, counting out loud under your breath, maybe this year will not be so bad.
I grew up in Connecticut, so, my memories are filled with my favorite snow days. The days started with waking up in the morning to see a foot or maybe even more of snow on the ground. I would run to wake up my sister, and then drag her down the stairs. A soon as my mom told me school was cancelled (sometimes even a foot was not enough to convince the superintendents), I vibrated in excitement. I would eat breakfast as fast as I could, so I could play in the snow. My sister and I would to the hallway closet and to grab all our snow gear. Because of how cold it could get, we had plenty of snow gear. I had gloves, a scarf, pink snowpants, a puffy jacket that swallowed me whole, and a wool beanie. After we accomplished dressing like Michelin Men, we waddled to the garage to get our sleds. For hours, we raced down the snow-covered driveway, built snow ramps, and threw snowballs at each other, and rolled down the white-coated hills. After our toes got too cold and our cheeks turned too red, we came inside to drink hot chocolate and laugh about the day’s adventures or cry from catching a snowball to the face.

Almost two years ago, however, I moved to Alabama. Nowadays, on one special day a year if we are lucky, I look outside my window, to see a quarter of an inch of the Connecticut confetti lying on the ground. Throughout the day I see children on my street attempt to gather up enough snow a snowball fight. They can only manage to make about two or three balls of ice, and everyone ends up muddy and/or in tears. The youngest of the group is always awarded with a forehead bruise (but that is an unchangeable law of nature).

When my New England friends post pictures of their snow-covered backyards, I start to wonder what would happen if it snowed that much here. What if we not only stopped global warming, but reverse its
impact enough for it to snow a whole three inches in Alabama? I could teach my friends the tactics of building a snow ramp, how to get the most speed when you sled (hint: aerodynamics are crucial), and the particulars of building the perfect snowman. The kids that live on my street could have a snowball fight rather than an ice ball fight.

MANY MIGHT ARGUE that it will never snow very much in Alabama, even if we were to heal the environment. In fact, the most amount of snowfall in Alabama was reported to be 19.2 inches in Florence, on January 1st, 1964. So, although arguably and not likely, a really big snowfall is possible. Global warming was introduced to the world in 1898, but not declared to be an issue of concern until 90 years later. There are many reasons to address global warming and heal our earth, but on a personal level I would love the chance to show my friends what a true New England style snowstorm is and how to make the most of a snow day.

“It’s November 8th, Destiny Day, and in honor of today, we will be going over its history since most of you received your destiny over the summer and in August,” the teacher said to the class. To everyone except Frankie. She was looking down at her desk trying to ignore the stares from around the room.

“A long, long time ago, a man and a woman came together and asked themselves, ‘What is the meaning of life?’” the teacher continued. “They had both previously been feeling lost and reached out to one another in hopes to be understood. Both knew exactly how the other felt and they set out to find purpose in life.” She lowered her voice ominously. “But one night, amongst their research they found something. It was a spell to summon a higher being, and desperate for the answers to life, they cast this spell.”

The class went very quiet during this part of the story, just as they had when they were all told it together years ago as five-year-olds.

“The ritual was done they waited. They almost lost hope until an unearthly figure appeared and spoke, ‘What is it that you desire?’ The man and woman stared in disbelief and the woman responded, ‘We seek fulfillment in life, a purpose.’ The being’s tone changed as it began to recite, ‘Greetings Sam and Jane, your destiny is to create a society of pre-determined destinies.’ Confusion filled their faces, and the being was gone, leaving a pile of gold powder behind. A gust of wind despite Sam and Jane being inside took the powder out the window before they could get to it, and from that day forward, everyone began receiving their life’s purpose, and everyone
was happy.”
The teacher closed her textbook. “Any questions?”

“What happens if someone doesn’t get a destiny?” a student asked while others snickered. Frankie’s face heated and she sunk lower in her seat.

The teacher couldn’t stop herself from glancing over at her. “Well, that just doesn’t happen, Cameron.”

Kids immediately began to whisper about Mr. Winslow, the old man rumored to have never received a destiny. There were other rumors, of course—less reliable ones—that he had three heads or that he was somehow the being that had first come to Sam and Jane. Frankie hoped since she only had one head her outcome of having a destiny was better.

The rest of her classes went by and soon enough she was on her way home. It was a long walk but she preferred it over being treated like a lost puppy on the school bus. Frankie was lost in her thoughts about the usual, her destiny, when she looked up and realized she was passing Mr. Winslow’s house. Would she really live her whole life without a destiny?

She opened her eyes to focus on something besides her inner turmoil. She noticed a crow coming to land on a branch beside her. It tilted its head at her and she smiled.

“Greetings Frankie, your dest-“ the bird was suddenly struck by a large pine cone and collapsed off the branch.

Frankie couldn’t breathe. What just happened? She pinched herself and replayed the scene again in her head, sure of what had just happened. She had finally gotten her destiny. She examined the bloody bird on the grass and felt herself tearing up. She began panicking as realization hit. She tried to rise to seek help, it was an emergency, but she stopped herself. The image of Mr. Winslow’s home far from everyone else and the things the other kids said in class came back to her. She couldn’t tell anyone.

She ran home that day and locked herself in her room where she began to conspire. She would create a fake destiny for herself, but what? She was always a little squeamish at the doctor’s office, so she crossed that out, and she was never good at explaining things, so she decided against teaching. She really liked her writing classes, so maybe she could be a journalist. She heard her mom call for dinner, so she quickly read over her script and went to the table. They ate dinner quietly until her mom asked about her day.

“It was good. Actually, it was great. I got my destiny today,” Frankie rushed out.

Her mom’s eyes widened. “Frankie that’s amazing! What is it?” Journalist, she thought.

“Biochemical engineer,” she said instead.

This time both their eyes widened. Why would she say that?

“Wow, that’s going to be very good for you,” her mom said.

Frankie only nodded. She tossed and turned in her room after dinner until she couldn’t stand it anymore and snuck out. She made her way to the library, trying not to think anymore about what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. Once she arrived, she immediately dove into books involving the history of Destiny Day. One after the other and she discovered nothing. She shut the last book with a loud sigh.

Frankie felt the dread already rise in her stomach. She expressed her thanks and finally ended up back in her bed staring at the ceiling where she remained until morning. She could barely pay attention through her classes all the next day and was the first one out the door when dismissed.

A librarian came up to her. “You need anything?”

“I’m afraid so,” the librarian nodded and left without a second glance at the books on the desk. Frankie began packing up when she heard a noise behind her.

“Psst.”

She turned around to see a man waving her over. She cautiously went closer.

“Have you tried the forbidden books?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t even known about the books at all. My destiny is to preserve history, and if you see a man named Mr. Winslow, he might let you read a few. He’s the keeper.”

Frankie couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe her destiny had just been revealed. She couldn’t believe she was a journalyst. She couldn’t believe she was about to do what she had always wanted to do.

“I’ll come with you,” the librarian said.

Frankie couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe she was about to do what she had always wanted to do. She couldn’t believe she was a journalist. She couldn’t believe she was about to do what she had always wanted to do.
Once she was outside she began to move a lot slower, her nerves catching up to her. She knew what she had to do to try and understand why that crow died and what it was going to say.

She took a deep breath as she approached the house and knocked. She waited until a tiny old man swung open the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked her. Frankie sighed noticing he only had one head. "I was told I could access books not accessible at the library here."

He opened the door wider and walked back into the house, motioning for her to enter. He pulled a chair out at the kitchen table for her and sat across from her. "Can I help you?" he asked her. Frankie sighed noticing he only had one head. "I was told I could access books not accessible at the library here."

"Just file your request over there when you're done," the man said, pointing to an overflowing box. "This is urgent if you don't mind. A historian of sorts told me you could help," Frankie desperately argued.

"What's so urgent?" he responded. Frankie considered telling him all she had been through. He himself had no destiny, so she doubted he would judge. She couldn't find her voice, however, and stayed silent.

"Suit yourself," he said, turning away.

"Wait—" she blurted out. She cleared her throat and awkwardly began to retell the events with the crow for the first time. When she was done, the man looked shocked before he collected himself.

He looked her up and down and his eyes seemed to widen. He stood from the table and gestured for her to follow him. Through a long hallway, they entered a large room with high ceilings covered in books. He led her down the aisles until they made it to the section in question, Destiny Day. He wished her good luck and disappeared. She began with the oldest-looking book she could find and sneezed as dust filled her nose. She began reading.

She finished the first book with few she didn't already know from details about the being who granted the wishes. She moved on to the next. It started off by discussing the rare destinies few people received, like dancing and painting, except referring to them in a word she had never heard before, "hobbies." Confused, she continued and discovered that these hobbies were things people did outside of their "careers," another new word. These were things people loved doing and were good at that they made money for, along with other passions they did outside of this.

Frankie was amazed. Nobody was subjected to a singular destiny, many even changed theirs a few times. There was no "true" life's purpose and everyone was still fairly happy. Maybe she didn't have just one destiny, maybe she had multiple. She thought about writing poetry after coming home from grooming puppies and making pottery after putting out fires. She continued on to the weeks after the first Destiny Day and the aftermath of this new meaning to life. Sam and Jane had placed putting out fires. She continued on to the weeks after the first Destiny Day and the aftermath of this new meaning to life. Sam and Jane had placed themselves in charge to make sure the process of transforming society went smoothly. Except, in contrast to the "and everyone was happy" that her teachers read to her, it didn't. Many were unhappy they would have to give up their passions and began to protest for free will. Sam and Jane had these people killed.

Frankie struggled to flip to the next shocking factor of Destiny Day. She continued on to the part she knew well, the wishing. As she read, she squinted and attempted to reread the next line of the being giving them their destiny. "Greetings Sam and Jane, your destiny is to create a society of pre-determined destinies but be warned, there will be someone, and undoing to this wish, that will come with their own destiny to destroy this society," the being said, and just like the regular story from class, he disappeared.

Frankie didn't know what this meant. She flipped the page. She read the description of an illustration hypothesizing the person to fulfill this prophecy of undoing created by a psychic. She looked below at the picture of a girl. On her shoulder was a crow.
A Skirmish Sonnet.

MS POEM | WILL SAWYER

Simple disputes turn into a fight. These continuous fights turn into war. Both sides fighting for what they think is right. So blinded by violence they want more. Leaders sending loyal people to death. Sad families can’t see a dear loved one. A simple bullet makes them stop their breath. Some men are told that they can never run. Citizens work to make weapons to kill. Chunks of metal made into fuel for murder. Soldiers run to their deaths with undying will. The entire human race can go further. Might it be possible that war can end? Can the whole outcome of arguments bend?
A Gift

HS ESSAY | ELLIE HOLST

“ONE SISTER FOR SALE. ONE SISTER FOR SALE. ONE CRYING AND SPYING YOUNG SISTER FOR SALE!” my seven year old self read from the book Where the Sidewalk Ends as I waved a picture of my older sister to the audience atFamily Literacy Night. When I looked up at the crowd of families listening to me, I caught eyes with mysister, Sarah. This whole poetry reading was very intimidating to me. My second grade self was in front of all of these adults, but by knowing that my sister was there watching eased my nerves. Despite my reading about “selling my sister,” our relationship has shaped my view on the world, myself, and provided me with the most literacy experiences.

The biggest literacy sponsor in my life is my sister, Sarah. From the time I was born I looked up at her in all she did, including reading. She made reading look so exciting and accomplishing. I wanted to share this interest with her. Since she is four years older than me, our reading levels were very different for a while. I was reading Junie B. Jones and she read the Harry Potter series. Despite not being able to relate to the books she was reading, I was able to set goals of starting and finishing a book. I have learned how to read and comprehend complex language through my experience as a Christian. The Bible has many translated versions making it difficult to understand the meaning behind the different stories. Growing up in church allowed me to pick up on decoding complex language and applying lessons to my own life. By looking up to Sarah and being a part of the Christian community, I simultaneously developed the habit and need to be a well rounded student. I truly think reading initiated this. Reading taught me to stay disciplined, imaginative, and creative.

I first learned to read the summer leading up to preschool at Bartlett Baptist. My parents wanted to make sure that I was able to process and comprehend information we learned in class. We started by reading a new story every night before bed; sometimes we even repeated stories because I loved them so much, especially any Amelia Bedelia or Biscuit book. It was a nightly ritual. My parents, my sister, and I would gather together in one of our beds and take turns reading from a children’s book. This was an experience that ignited my initial love for literacy. I looked forward to each story and the loving atmosphere it brought into our home. I took what I learned at home and brought it with me to the classroom and into life. Practicing reading and writing in a comfortable environment allowed me to dive deeper into discovering my literacy goals and experiences. This experience shaped me into who I am today by providing me with comfort and community. I was able to gain confidence in my public speaking and provide connection with others.

In kindergarten I read Green Eggs and Ham to my mom’s fourth grade class. I remember all the “big kids” staring at me. As I slowly read the pages and showed the illustrations, I felt inferior. This was the first time I really felt intimidated at a school setting. Why would the older kids care about my storytelling? They had most likely heard this story many times before anyways. I managed to make it through the end of the book. When I finished the fourth graders gave me a kind round of applause. I looked up at my mom and saw the biggest smile on her face. It was right then that I knew she was proud of me no matter how small I thought this accomplishment was.

As I got older, I began to read on my own. I fell in love with mystery books and romantic comedies. I started to keep reading privately to myself and never really read to my family anymore. Once I started 3rd grade, I could earn AR points by reading library books. I was on a reading marathon. I picked out two books a week and was tested on my comprehension for points. I began to read to earn my 75 points (this was rewarded with an exclusive movie party at the end of the year). Despite how fun this sounds, I honestly think the competition AR induced caused me to fall out of love for reading. Instead of choosing to read a book for
Reading and writing have taught me many life lessons. Being able to read and write should be seen as a gift. It wasn’t until junior year that I found a required novel to be very meaningful to me. As a summer reading assignment, I was assigned to read Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom. The message behind this book changed my view on literacy and my life. This book taught me that life isn’t guaranteed and that we can learn a lot of lessons from others and share those lessons with others as well. Not only was the novel a catalyst in my literacy experiences, but so was the assignment to go along with it. I had the opportunity to interview my grandmother about her childhood and her future. It was a very impactful moment in our relationship and showed me that composition and reading allows us to connect with one another.

From then on, I have found my preferred genres of literature. I lean towards romantic comedies, historical fiction, adventure, and psychology books. I enjoy reading when I find a peaceful time like car rides, vacations, and breaks from school. There is nothing like relaxing with a good book. Since I am so picky with books that I choose to read, I find so much pleasure when I can’t put a book down. Currently, my number one book is Atomic Habits. It is a psychological based book that guides me in reaching my fullest potential. I love books like this because they give me tangible facts and examples I can use in my own life.

Along with reading, I have also grown fairly fond of writing, to a certain extent. I like the idea of other people hearing my views, experiences, and opinions. Writing assignments can tend to intimidate me though. I find that I get stuck and procrastinate. I first learned to write essays when I was in 4th grade. My teacher went through the graphic organizer for all of our essays and walked us through each step so clearly. Writing in school has shaped me in being able to construct educated and cohesive ideas. I like writing in my personal life as well. Whether it be emails, texts, social media, letters, or schedules, writing is a big part of my daily life. My literacy has greatly improved from learning to read and write. I am able to hold conversations, send professional emails, and escape into new books. I gained these feelings for reading and writing from years of exposure in school and learning from different teachers, peers, and friends.

I now look back to that day in Mrs. King’s second grade classroom where my younger self changed my view on literacy forever. By taking a step out of my comfort zone and reading in front of an audience, I was able to hear my voice, share my voice, but most importantly, find my voice. Reading and writing have taught me many life lessons. Being able to read and write should be seen as a gift. From my first time listening to my mom read to every time I looked up to my older sister, I received the gift of knowledge and the gift of escape. Reading has allowed me to escape into a new world that belongs to the characters in a story and writing allows me to create my own story. Writing is a gift to feel safe in your own thoughts. Reading is a gift to escape into a new world inside of a book. Both are gifts that provide us with continuous curiosity and learning of new topics. Most importantly, reading and writing are gifts that take me back to that night in my room where my family first taught me to read. These gifts continue to remind me that I have community and escapism in my home and in any book.

Works cited

A small piece of metal crafted by us to kill,
Created as a lethal weapon to be fired at will
The piece it spits seeks distances for the human bone
If it arrives at its correct destination, you'll feel alone
Won't stop, I can guarantee it’s deadly
This'll cause a medley Red Sea
We created this to protect ourselves, to protect our family
Soldiers’ bodies covered in red to the sight, but to the touch, they are clammy
Those who were once here now are gone, like a chess game with a tragically lost pawn
Difference is, unlike the pawns, they have loved ones
We keep losing men and women, boys and girls to these damn cursed guns
They say it’s black versus blue, evil versus true
Why do we have to choose, abuse the side that we want to lose?
Why do we use these weapons on our allies?
We call each other bad guys, die with sad eyes
Knowing all we are doing is killing ourselves, launching bombshells,
throwing other humans into jail cells,
only to get out to continue creating our own hells
As the number of people on both sides gets lower,
We keep killing and gambling lives like we’re the Joker
This isn’t just some game of poker
Acting like one side is winning when both sides are still just mediocre
When will these God-forsaken wars be over?
Never?
Why not?
Because economic disputes will never stop?
Because countries will fight for more land and more crops?
Weapons will continue to be fired and the barrels will stay hot
Heated from the bullets being spit from them
The chance of human survival becomes more grim
Kids are being raised to hate and murder
Why are we attempting to hurt others further?
I honestly don’t know.
My mind won’t slow.
We will be the start of our own demise,
Let’s take the next step and ask ourselves why.

Why at times of peace do we not celebrate
Not enjoying our once painful weight
Which was lifted and now keeps us relaxed
Why don’t we celebrate the cease of firing, bombings, and attacks?
We as a country don’t thank and love the women and men from our military
We shouldn’t kneel or shed tears for, but celebrate the lives soldiers we bury
Because it was their backs that have kept this nation carried

**Nerium Oleander**
Earth breathes still.
Shrouded in ash and slowly faltering.
Her chest lifts, staggering like the ticks of an old geiger counter.
She branches out, but she can no longer reach the light dying out on her blemished surface.

Worship of the bomb. Obscured by fire and surely falling.
It makes new of us, trading old beginnings for sudden ends.
It overwhelms all, dimming the sky to nothing more than a dim atomic luster.
New life at dawn. Stretching upwards and spiraling out. A flower grows, unfamiliar with her fallen surroundings. She prospers yet, a gasp of life born into a world that cannot give birth.

Nerium oleander. Buoyant and fully breathing. She cries out, reaching deep down inside herself. Her life is the worship of hope, for what once was can bloom again.
In the beginning, the only roses in the greenhouse were white. There were spaces for other flowers, but the lush bushes full of alabaster blooms were the only plant to be found. They spanned the entirety of the entryway, covering it so that, if you didn’t tread too far inwards, the greenhouse seemed full. You could stand right there in the entryway, and bask in the heat and humidity and silence, tracing the petals of the blossom of your choice and listening to the calls of the birds above for eternity and never know that the rest of the greenhouse was empty.

That was what she did in the beginning. She stood there, a prim little girl in a white dress standing amongst bushes of prim white roses, and she admired them. She spent her days sitting amongst them, sharing the same air as the flowers and reveling in their divine scent. Sometimes, she brought a book with her. She would read, always out loud, her voice cascading over the leaves and petals as if reading to soothe a child smaller than even she. Sometimes, she would sing. Her clear soprano would ring out over the flowers, filling the greenhouse with beauty rivaled only by the birds that joined in her tune. She loved teaching the mockingbirds that would flit ever so erratically in and out of the greenhouse.

She loved her days in the greenhouse, in the beginning. It was her sanctuary, her salvation, her own Eden.

One day, when she had grown just to the height at which she was addressed as “young lady”, she arrived at the greenhouse to find she was not alone. Among the usual company of blossoms and birds, there was now a boy.

He was dressed as she was, in simple white attire. His hair was raven feather black, and just long enough to cover the tops of his ears. His eyes were a green identical to a rose’s stem, a deep emerald uncommon in the noisy world outside. They were as sharp as a thorn as they raked over her, assessing and analyzing. She felt herself bristle, the intruders treatment of her, as if she were the interloper, rubbing her the wrong way.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her soprano trembling.

“Admiring the roses,” he responded, his tenor firm. The sharpness in his eyes softened when he looked at the white blossoms. He extended his hand, almost absentmindedly, and traced the petals of one bloom near him. She watched him, observing the tenderness in his touch, and decided then and there to trust him.

And just like that, the tension in the tepid morning air faded away, and they were left basking in nothing but the warm scent of rose blossoms.

They talked the entire day away. They talked about their lives, about who they were when they weren’t in the greenhouse. They talked about who they wanted to be, who they hoped to grow into. They bonded over their love for the roses. She shared with him her songs, and he looked at her as if she were the sun and he a new bud. He shared with her his words, composed into poems just for the roses, and she looked at him as if he were water and she a wilting petal.

When the sun set, and the time came for them to leave the greenhouse to its nightly slumber, he offered her his hand as he looked towards the exit. She told him to go on, that she’d like one more moment with the roses. He waited until she was done and walked her to the door. They stood just outside the greenhouse, staring at each other through the cool night air. He looked almost angelic under the moonlight. His skin was made of silver, and the red in his lips glowed like muted candle flame. She looked at his eyes, leeching to blackness by the moon, and watched as he leaned closer in.

He kissed her there, in front of the greenhouse, under the sad, watchful eye of the moon. It was a quick, gentle thing. Innocent, as kisses go; a youthful expression of knowing no better. All she could think of was how his lips tasted sharper than his eyes had looked this morning, and how she didn’t know what to make of it.

The next time boy and girl met at the greenhouse, there were new roses in bloom. Behind the white blossoms, growing in an even bigger patch and infringing ever so slightly on the borders of the white roses were yellow roses. They were open, in full bloom, their petals the color of melted sunshine. When she first arrived, she knew something was different. She walked further in, treading past the white roses for the first time, and was met with the sight of yellow. She smiled, beaming like the sunlight that had fed them, and rushed forward, twirling in elated admiration amongst the new flowers.

When she came to a stop from her dance, he was there. One hand was absently caressing a now yellow bloom, and he was smiling at her. His teeth were blinding white, and his lips opened ever so slightly crooked. She told herself it was endearing.

“It’s nice to see you again,” he said, his tenor ever so slightly lower, a
When the moon made her appearance again, and their time together had come to an end, they made their way towards the exit. However, when they were just on the threshold, the boy stopped. She turned, looking at him with confusion arching her brow. He smiled, more crooked and mischievous than ever, and retreated quickly back into the darkness of the greenhouse. She waited.

He returned with a single yellow flower in his hand. He had plucked it, so there was just enough stem left to hold before the thorns appeared. He held it out to her, an offering much like the smile made of the day’s September sunlight on his face. She took the stem of the rose gingerly in timid hands, smiling a shaky smile in return. He left then, confidence in his step and a smile still on his face, and she lingered there outside the greenhouse door.

She had pricked her finger on the only thorn left on the stem, and the feeling matched what was blooming in her chest as she realized he had robbed the garden of one of its roses.

After that, it was quite some time before they met at the greenhouse again. In that time, the girl planted the yellow rose he had plucked back in the garden, in a separate plot on its own, some ways away from the rest of the yellow roses. She took great care of it, nurturing it until it grew into a bush of its own.

As the new yellow roses grew, so did the girl. Her hair grew longer as the petals bloomed. Her body lengthened like rose stems, and she adorned herself with makeup like thorns. She painted her eyelids and lips to show the color of a rose’s allure, and she perfumed herself with their aroma. The bushel of yellow roses was fully grown now, and she was a woman.

When she met him again, he was a man. He was waiting for her outside the greenhouse now, standing by the door. His hair was the shortest it had ever been, held firmly in place with a shimmery something that didn’t even yield to the wind. His eyes were sharp again, their green thorny, and his jawline matched. It was coated in a midnight black shadow of stubble. He smiled when he saw her, but the crookedness of youth was gone. His smile was straight, and too white. She told herself the feeling it gave her was a good one.

“You put the roses to shame,” he said, his tenor turned to bass. His tone was colored with what was meant to be humor.

“I could never outclass such beauty,” she responded, her soprano sincere.

“There’s something you should see,” he said, gesturing to the open greenhouse door. He took her hand, leading her through the flowers. White first, then yellow. On the outskirts of familiarity stood her bushel of yellow roses, still not quite close enough to infringe on the originals. Now, growing so thick they were smothering one side of her yellow blooms, were countless red roses.

She looked at them, an ocean of vermillion, and she felt a feeling not unlike the rouge before her blooming in her chest. It was a deep, smoldering feeling, something she didn’t have the words to describe. A red rose was opening itself in her chest. She wanted to look back at the special patch of yellow, but found herself unable to take her eyes off the ruby blossoms in front of her.

“Are’t they beautiful?” he asked, his hand making its way to the small of her back again. It was not as gentle, and she was not as happy.

“Yes, I suppose they are,” she responded, her voice as soft as the silence in the greenhouse. She turned to look up at him, hoping his reaction would tell her what to make of this. She was met with hunger in his eyes.

He kissed her then, and his lips were still just as sharp. She swore they drew blood as they moved against hers. She could not find the words to ask him to stop, and she couldn’t find her voice to say them even if she did. He kept kissing her, taking more and more and more.
At some point in the moment, she looked away and saw a single red rose as it bloomed. One small, new bud opening for the first time. It was already decaying inside, having died before it could live.

When it was done, he was still smiling. It was still a certain smile, and it still had none of the warmth it had when he gave her the rose. He told her that he had always enjoyed being around her, and he equated it to love. He plucked her a bouquet of the red roses, and she held it in clenched fingers. She panted on a practice smile. When he offered her his arm and gestured toward the open, moonlight filled door, she just slightly shook her head, smile still in place. She wanted to spend some more time amongst the new flowers, she said. He smiled, and turned and walked away on his own. She dropped the bouquet he had given her, kicking it away so it rolled amongst the roots of its siblings.

She walked, slowly and deliberately, over towards her own cluster of yellow roses. The bridge between the first yellow and the new red stared back at her, the blossoms having seen everything. The red roses were just encroaching on one of the borders of the patch. She knelt, on her knees at the base of the cluster of flowers, and grasped at the base of the stems. She tore each and every blossom out of the earth. She did not slow down when thorns dug hungrily into her flesh. She watched the blood flow from her hands and took pleasure when it mixed with the dirt.

She did not stop until each and every one of the flowers she had personally cared for were tornout. She saved the original, the one he had given her, for last. She screamed when it came free of the dirt.

When it was done, and she sat crying, bleeding, and dirt covered among a sea of discarded, uprooted flowers, another woman appeared. She was an old soul, the many folds in her weathered face showing wisdom most women could only dream of letting themselves have.

She approached slowly, her step soft. She never tread on a single discarded blossom.

When the old woman was standing over her, she looked up, tears running down her face. The old woman simply sat next to her and began cleaning her hands with a cloth. She scrubbed away the dirt, being gentle around the open wounds.

“Who are you?” The young woman asked.

“I’m the keeper of the roses,” the old woman responded. “I am the one who tends to this garden, and the one who has been where you are before.” There was silence for a moment, the young woman thinking and the old woman still cleaning her wounds.

“What will become of me,” the young woman asked.

“Your hands will heal,” the old woman responded. “In time, new skin will form, and there will be nothing left of the rose thorn’s marks on you. That is, unless you choose to keep handling them,” she finished.

“I can no longer bear to look at them,” the young woman whispered. Her voice cracked.

“They have no problems waiting,” the old woman said. “They did it for me.”

“They did?” she asked?

“They did,” she answered, setting aside the now dirty cloth. “Why do you think there were only white roses in this greenhouse when you found it?” she asked.

“I never contemplated why,” the young woman responded, “I was a little girl when I found it. They just were.”

“Exactly. The white roses just were. They still just are. As are the yellow, as are the red. Every color rose is simply that color rose. It is the meaning we give them that makes them anything more.”

The young woman looked into the soft, brown eyes of the old woman, and saw the tenderness of an aged gardener staring back at her with not a single expectation. She began to cry again. The old woman wrapped a single arm around her, and she waited. The young woman sobbed until the sun rose again.

When the sunlight streamed through the grass roof, the young woman was asleep on the old woman’s shoulder, and the old woman sat staring at a single black rose blossom blooming where the small patch of yellow had been.

The young woman avoided the greenhouse for a while. She could not stand the scent of roses for quite some time. But, when she did again grace herself with the presence of roses, she found them just as comforting as they had been before. She walked among them, day by day, until the white roses bloomed magnificently again, until yellow made her smile once more, and until red no longer reminded her of her own blood. When the old woman handed her a trowel and a pair of garden gloves, she smiled with honor. When the time came for her to again plant her own roses, she thought long and hard. Yes, she thought to herself, I think I’ll plant pink roses.
DUSK FALLS AGAIN

PAINTING "TUESDAY NIGHT" | DAKOTA WILLIAMS

HS ESSAY | AVA GRACE NOE
I remember running in the corn fields with my sister. The stalks were taller than our heads, like most things were at the time. We would look out our windows into the field and see the forest that had sprung up in our backyard overnight. Allie would drag me out into the field just as the sun was setting so we could wait in the shadows of the green with its top painted in the same pinks and yellows of the sky. There were these gaps in the corn field, barely the size of a cupboard, where the seeds just hadn’t sprouted. We would hide in these secret spots with our sunburnt faces. We had run out of the house in such a hurry to catch the last rays of dusk that we had left our shoes inside. Now our tiny toes squished in the red clay each of us with the confidence of gods that those same toes might not find a stray shard of glass.

Mama watched this movie one time where these kids would disappear into the corn fields and come back as zombies or something else just as scary. It became a game in that odd, sadistic way. In those Autumn nights Allie and I would creep into the corn from the far edge just so Mama wouldn’t see us, and Allie was burying her face into her hands trying her hardest to hold in a laugh. We would take flashlights in our hands with our pockets stuffed with muscadines and scuppernongs we had pulled off the vine earlier in the day. The stars would twinkle above us with the harvest moon waving hello in the distance. I can still see my mama on the porch yelling our names with Allie and I so deep into the field we couldn’t even hear her. We felt limitless in those nights, our laughter endlessly echoing into the night. So, in a way, I am from the corn and the sky with its hues of red and orange.

Or maybe I’m not. Maybe it’s just sentiment in a memory from days I can barely remember. The corn grew in the field again this past year. I sat in the backyard and stared into the endless depths of its green. It didn’t hold magic anymore. The past was gone. If I’m not from the corn, I must be from somewhere else.

Maybe I am from the treetops I never got to climb or the pond with its swirling snakes slithering away in the bottom. Or maybe I’m from something else altogether. Something not tangible. Maybe I’m from a feeling.

I remember riding down backroads where I could see the stars best. There’s a boy to my left driving; I don’t think I’m in love with him or if I even like him, but he offered to drive me out here. I’ve learned I’ll do almost anything to get out of my house nowadays. He interlaced his fingers in mine, rubbing his thumb across the heirloom on my middle finger. He may ask where it came from later. I won’t remember. My head is stuck out the window as I count the stars spinning above us. They’re brighter here than anywhere else, even with the dust kicked up by the old Chevy truck. Tires turn gravel out of its place, a coyote howls in the distance, he squeezes my hand a little tighter.

I couldn’t care less about the boy sitting to my left, this broken gravel road of my soul was leading us closer to the end of the night and I couldn’t stand that feeling. Could I not feel endless for ten more minutes, even if it was with someone I didn’t love? It didn’t matter who it was to my left. They came a dime a dozen. But these stars, they’re worth a million. So, in a different way, I’m from the stars and the gravel roads that spin under tires in the dead of night. I’m from the feeling of being endless.
4:55pm.

“Hurry up Sarah! We’re going to be late,” Mom said while carefully knocking on my bathroom door.
“Coming!” I yelled as I got off my knees and rinsed my mouth with whatever mouthwash was left on the counter.
“Don’t worry, you’re going to be a little late,” Mom said trying to comfort me as I ran down the stairs, but I could tell she was trying to convince herself more than me.

5:00 pm.

That’s it, it was 5:00 pm and I wasn’t doing those painful warm-up exercises at the bar. Instead, I was sitting in my mom’s old red car. I tried to calm myself down by doing my breathing exercises. Nothing was working.
I thought maybe if I looked down the windows the landscape would relax me, but as I tried to look outside my vision was blocked by those horrible stickers me and my brother stuck 6 years ago. Blocking my vision.
I could still smell that horrible lavender smell mom used to try and cover up that 3-year-old food laying under the seats that were only penetrating my head, giving me a headache.

5:10pm.

The clock was ticking and ticking; I didn’t want to be yelled at by my dance teacher again. Just yesterday we were practicing our routine when I completely froze and confused the next step with a pirouette. She then abruptly stopped the music and told me to sit down. My heart was beating fast, and everything was getting blurrier and blurrier.
I used to lay in my bed at night and relieve that exact moment over and over until my eyes were so dry, I had to fall asleep. Now all I remember was
getting berated by my teacher, being surrounded by all my “friends” while I stood on the floor like a dog getting grounded. But even then, I didn’t care. All I could think of were Ms. Fatima’s words. “What are you doing Sarah? You’ve been very unfocused lately; you can’t even memorize a 5-minute dance! Maybe if you’ve stopped eating and practiced more you wouldn’t be so fat, you should take some pointers from Olivia she’s lost 10 lbs. in two days…”

5:25pm.

I could now see the tall pink building that had a petrifying resemblance to a haunted palace. That was just drowned in pink paint to try and make it look more appealing so it could lure in hopeful dreamy little girls. I grabbed my bag and ran through the doors. As soon as I crossed the doors, I could smell the lavender again they had on the main lobby and dressing rooms to relax the ballerinas, mixed with dusty notes and an old theatre that only gave me the chills. I ran through the dressing rooms and threw my bag on the old purple carpet. I didn’t want to be late, but for some reason, I stopped. I just stopped at those bathroom doors.

5:27 pm.

“Do I really want to go? No, what am I thinking I’m going to be late.” I thought. I debated with myself for an eternity, but I ultimately decided it was best to go in at least until our break at 6:00 pm. I ran to my class, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door: “Ms. Fatima, is it okay if I come in late?” I tried to sound as calm as I could, but I could tell my voice was trembling. I heard that loud squeaking sound of the door as Ms. Fatima opened the door. And let me in with an abnormal smile. She seemed happy but I could not figure out why.

“Hi, welcome in. I’m excited to see what you can do.” Our director was there, and that’s when I realized why Ms. Fatima was being so nice to me. “We will talk about this after class,” she mumbled to me. Again, with a creepy and fake smile on her face. But at this point, I was not worried about it. I was used to her weird mood swings and her vendetta against me since day one. I got into position and tried to think of flying unicorns or red pandas. But instead, all I could think about was my sincere hate for those bright orange lights at the top of the theatre. I could feel the warmness of the light and the smell of burning Linoleum. The music started to play and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5 and 6...

I got lost in the music for a few seconds, I felt like a flower in the weeds dancing with the breeze, but an unexpected thunderstorm ruined my peace.

I went to the left and they all went to the right; I did a plie, and they did a pirouette. I stopped. I stood there paralyzed; I didn’t know what to do. The director seemed lost and confused for a few seconds until she finally stopped the music. I tried to look at my “friends” trying to find an answer but, all I received was a blank stare. I then looked at Ms. Fatima that had not moved a muscle and was still sitting in a corner with a grin on her face.

“What was that? Did you not practice the routine?” the director asked me, clearly annoyed.

“I mean—” I said still trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. “She has not been paying attention in class” Ms. Fatima innocently responded before giving me a chance to defend myself. I looked around the room still confused. I was sure I could do the routine with my eyes closed. Finally, I said:

“I don’t know what happened I know those were the right steps, I think Ms. Fatima changed the routine without telling me,” I timidly said.
5:45 pm.
Ms. Fatima and the director were arguing while I stood there still, I had not moved a muscle. But in the bright side, only 15 minutes more until the break. I stood there in silence as I felt a warm tear running down my cheek. I quickly looked at the unorganized DVD sections; another tear ran down my cheek.
I quickly looked at the stuffed animals on the chair; two tears ran down my cheek.
I quickly tried to tune myself out of the situation, but that was impossible. I started bawling my eyes out making the ugliest cry.

5:55pm.
I was sitting outside my studio waiting for mom to pick me up, I didn’t want to be there anymore.

6:05pm.
I saw the old red car approaching. I turned around and decided I was never coming back. I...
- “Great story Sarah but I was just asking for your insurance number. Doctor Mary will see you right away but right now just take a seat in our waiting area,” the secretary said to me as she pointed to a big green couch surrounded by yellow flowers and loving your body posters.

But my personal favorite was a big pink poster in the center that read “Bulimia can kill you.”

when i think about my come up, when i think about my foundation, i only see myself as every chess piece and every pencil ever met to a paper of mine. ‘cause i never been one for listening to how others feel i should carry about through the toss and turns of living. i’ve always ran with me. never knew november could neglect personal navigation i had been working towards since mid september. lost my own progress that seemed so promising to change me for the better in the beginning. though, i look at myself and see a wider smile and bigger eyes. ouch! how the old me would hate me now. ouch! how the old me would hate me, how i gave up on her. i used to settle for less because i couldn’t imagine a me greater than whatever broken bottle i was. i’d walk 2 trillion miles just to get her back and kiss her on the forehead, letting her know that there is a such thing as luster in
the heat of
helplessness,
there is a such thing as composure.

like soil in a hurricane,
i’d say i found a way to enrich all within me,
in the best ways.
don’t find writing a distraction any more.
coping’s all it is to keep me developing in my own way, on
my own time.
allowing me to scope cautiously with every encounter,
allowing me to rejoice privately at my own milestones.
and to think i endowed an endless amount of weight on my
shoulders,
among others intertwined in my issues.
worrying about pleasing everyone and everything else
other than she in
which i only continue to sprout for.
only playing the blame game when my lit flame’s been
blown and all the
off-love i loaned never amounted to the true colors shown
on those thin
layer days...
those were easier to cut through than others.
I apologize to those i lashed out on during my search to
find me again
after a year of giving pieces of me away to greedy,
ingenuine saviors.
ask me do i know any better in this gruesome Mississippi.
was it ever really safe to grow up soft here?
why did i ever lose me in my hometown that was only ever
used to
crying?

now that i’m out of a place of ache,
i find myself wishing i’d have more to feel.
shouldn’t be, but i’m wishing to feel more human.
you know, with the unsanded parts that make you seem
more real, more undone, more raw, more bruising.
or wishing i had someone like that around.
my father told me it’s better to keep someone who’s

walked through the
creation of the 118 elements naked because they
understand the ins and
outs of
the wounded world we made.”
empathetic me finds warmth in decoding what’s been
destroyed.
why’d they ever do you like that?
has the moon seen you in your jaggedness just as the sun
told you
“every little thing is gonna be alright”?
i’ve witnessed more contusions where love should’ve been.
but, i’m proud of those lesions i soothed goodbye.
song of me, this is supposed to be.
but i am of those songs that can really only be heard once
in a while.
more words in me than harmonious melodies typically
meant to put one
at ease.
unless you find safety in art like that.
unless you find interest in my inner art like that.
which hasn’t came to the perfection piece i wanted it to be
yet.
though i lay
and i think
and i review
and i conclude
i am not of perfection,
but of flawed outlined bubble letters spelling out
A L M O S T
i am not of perfection,
’cause i want to create more
and there’s frustration within that.
i want to try more
and there’s failure within that.
i want to love more
and there’s hating within that.
can the world ever manage with our sacrifices it holds no
proof of
because it only revolves with the results of us?
do you love me as your counterpart, universe?
i am the gears that move you.
i venture through the nanometers of matter in space
you’ve dealt
and figure i’m apart of what keeps you operating in a way.
do you see me as another filler of space?
loitering until my flesh’s end and the light’s a little brighter.
longing until my soul’s rebirth on it’s new attempt to remain
sustainable
for another good time.
i’d say the distance from all i thought could keep me stable
is what
rescued me from that sunken place i was fond of since 2017.
i’d agree with my father’s words,
‘we need conflict sometimes.’
i’d run back to the sorrow-filled me at the blink of the eye,
just to show her that we always had us.
all we needed was
a few verses,
a chorus,
a bridge,
and the self-taught ambition.

SONG
OF
MYSELF
Ice cream should only be sold in 50 different flavors, with international bans on those that are outright heinous. Ice cream is a widely popular treat across all continents and oceans alike. Ice cream can also be found in every country, ranging from Canada to New Zealand, Taiwan to Poland. Most would argue that it is one of the most admired desserts among every nation, if not the most. This is why it is so important to make sure ice cream can be enjoyed everywhere. By ensuring that at least 1 or 2 favorites can be found in every ice cream shop, this guarantees ultimate customer satisfaction.

I propose that we start by allowing each country to mark their favorite ice cream flavor, which will automatically be chosen as an allowed flavor. Assuming that the favorite flavors of all 195 recognized countries do not top 50 different, then we can move on to sudden death. There will be an international vote on the next, say, top 20 or top 5, if that is the amount left needed to be filled. It is bold to assume certain flavors will be in this vote, but some estimated to be seen could be moose tracks, cookie dough, birthday cake, and other flavors more commonly found in other cultures. These flavors are not favorites, more so the second choice when they run out of the one you want, or the flavor everyone says they’re going to try before going back to their normal order.
Everybody has a favorite ice cream flavor, and when you look behind the glass, into the tubs of delicious dessert, just to see that your favorite flavor is hidden in the emptiness of a hollow ice cream barrel, your mood immediately turns around. By limiting the amount of flavors that can be sold worldwide, it basically guarantees the ability to find your favorite always in stock. Another issue that can be avoided using this system, are the ‘exotic’ ice cream shops that only sell the sour tasting flavors that make you feel special, or different, but in reality, they’re just a publicity stunt. These types of shops give you a hate for ice cream, which is the opposite of what is desired. A real ice cream shop will carry a treat that everyone will, and can love. ‘Exotic’ shops blame their bad reviews on ‘untasteful’ and ‘boring’ people, when in reality they’re just afraid to admit that their flavors are for show, not enjoyment. While some people might consider this targeting towards their ice cream shops, I just see it as an opportunity for world ordinance. Some of the worst ice cream flavors include, but are certainly not limited to, lobster (with tiny chunks of lobster in it), garlic, cactus, shrimp, and avocado. Now, just listing these might make you sick, but imagine being the poor person who walks into an ice cream shop and has to order one of those obscure, and cruelly heinous flavors. You might say, well just don’t get anything at all! But have you ever craved something to the point of desperation? Or wanted to be ambitious? I will bet your answer is maybe. So, I propose to ban these disgusting flavors before any more poor citizens are tortured through the process of paying for a supposed delectable treat, taking one lick and wasting their money by throwing it away. Arguably, these flavors are made as a capitalist approach towards business. The so called ‘appeal’ towards these odd flavors, better known as curiosity, is met with high prices because they are ‘exotic’, and distaste (literally) to the actual ‘treat’. These malicious flavors bring down the ice cream community and are a disgrace to all desserts.

The need for acceptable and likable ice cream flavors is a must, which is why we should limit the amount allowed to be purchased and eaten. By reducing the acceptable flavors down to just 50, you are ensured the chance of finding at least one to your liking at all times. Selling such a limited amount will keep the entire world happy.
- I first saw light when I came into this world. The darkness of Mommy’s belly was so usual to me. I didn’t like how this new world burned my eyes. I can’t remember a lot of faces I saw. One of them has always haunts my vision. Mommy. She took me in her arms. A slight, exhausted smile on her face. For a while, I was warm, happy, content. I felt like nothing else mattered but the feeling of her embrace.

- I’m rolling! Mommy, do you see me? I babbled to get her attention. The glittery “1” on my shirt was rubbing off sparkles on the floor. Mickey was in her lap. She glanced at me. Yes! She’s seeing! Mickey looked at me and went into a fit. Immediately, her eyes turned to him. Her face turned. It looks so different from how she looks at me.

- I hold to her leg to keep myself upright. Her back is to me now. I’m standing! Mommy! Do you see me? Suddenly, my support left me. She started to walk with Mickey, like most times, in her arms. I crashed to the floor. I felt salty water cloud my vision. I made a squeak. She continued to walk away, not even turning to look at me.

- I painted a pretty picture of Mommy in school today. The teacher asked me what I wanted to do for my birthday. I chose art. Mommy will definitely like it. “Mommy, look here!” I ran into her room. Her belly is rounder today. She was stroking it. I tried getting on her mattress. She put her hand on her forehead and glared at me. “Quiet, I’m tired.” My vision became blurry. I turned and left her alone. Maybe next time.

- The girls in my class were getting walked home by their parents. Some even picked them up and held them close to their hearts. I imagined that feeling. I waited there. I asked her yesterday as my birthday wish. She nodded. I waited until the teacher asked me why I was still here. I asked myself that question. I had no answer. I went home by myself.
16 - The other kids talked about how their parents are starting to show them the ways of adulthood. There’s a new girl my age. She shares my birthday. People sang to her before she came to school. She showed off her new dress and ribbon set. All her friends wished her happy birthday. It’s my birthday too. Why’re our birthdays the same but so different?

24 - I called my mother. This, my one break from flying I get today. I’m going far; it’ll be a few hours. She didn’t pick up.

“Hey, Jane,” my associate, Helen, said. “It’s your birthday, no?”

My eyes widened in surprise. I nodded.

“Happy Birthday! I’ll take you out when we land.”

My heart palpitated. Is that normal?

Helen and I make it our tradition to always go out on my birthday. Helen couldn’t make it today. She had to meet her in-laws. I call Mother every time. She rarely picks up. Today was not different. I sat at our table alone and drank coffee for a while.

“Excuse me, miss?” someone said. It was a man in a chef’s outfit. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“Unfortunately, not,” I said. “Do you need me to move?”

He shook his head. “Mind if I sit?”

“Go ahead.”

He sat in front of me. “It’s your birthday, no?”

I nodded.

“Don’t worry. I assume because this is my restaurant, and you’d come this day and get cake every year,” he paused. “Mind sharing your day with me?”

Surprised, I agreed.

64 - Charlotte’s daughter was born yesterday. We’re just a day apart. As my birthday wish, I asked her to bring Anne to my house. Freddie’s parents haven’t met her yet. Hah!

The doorbell rang and my heart leaped out of my chest. Leo and I fought to get to the door. I won and opened it. Freddie and Charlotte were beaming. Charlotte had a little bundle in her hands.

Anne reminded me too much of Charlotte. I recalled the memory of having Charlotte in my hands. The feeling of a new life I created, with the help of Leo, of course.

Was this how Mother felt? Why am I now so nostalgic? I looked at Anne. I’ll make sure she’s always happy.
Charlotte is crying in Theo’s arms. Only Lorra and Sammy of Charlotte and Theo’s children understand fully what’s happening. I’d hate to explain. Helen’s having a hard time consoling me. She gets it. Raymond died seven years ago. All that time I was thinking: How would I live without Leo in my life? I know all life that begins must end. I know that, but why is it always so hard?

Some asked me why I chose to have the saddest day of my life on what’s supposed to be one of the most happy and eventful. When I was younger, for the most part, I hadn’t experienced much of the happiness and eventfulness of having a birthday as other people my age did. This, I thought, would be no different.

I was wrong. It’s more painful.

I’d rather have spent my birthday with Leo alive as I have all these years. I had the choice to spend my birthday with him this year. The only difference is he can’t bake me a cake. He can’t tell me “Happy birthday!” He can’t kiss me goodnight.

I looked at his resting face in the coffin. I leaned over it and kissed him goodbye.

I walk into my house. Like usual, I looked at the picture of Leo I have displayed at the front of the house. I set down my purse and take off my coat. I heave a heavy sigh before walking into the living area.

My heart stops.

There they are. Roy, Charlotte, Theo, Helen, our old coworkers, our neighbors, Leo’s family, Stanley; they’re all here. I spotted Charlotte holding her father’s signature lemon cake. “Happy Birthday!” they yelled.

“Oh. Oh!” I exclaimed.

“What is it?” Anne, the youngest of Charlotte’s children said as she came closer to me.

“Oh, I’m just so happy!” I exclaimed. I haven’t felt this joyous since I met and connected with Helen. “Thank you all so much!”

“Aw, Mom!” Theo gave me a big hug. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

I absorbed the sight of my family. I recalled my earlier years of being alone. These people are the ones who have showed me the comforts of having family. The joys of celebrating your life. These people show me that everyone has a special reason for being born. Maybe mine was making a large family that loves and appreciates each other. I looked back over to the picture of Leo. We together are responsible for what I have now.

The tears won’t stop. Charlotte set down the cake and everyone joins in a group hug.

I look towards the sky. Mom, are you seeing me now? I beamed.

Death -

Jane Love:

January 2, 1935 – January 3, 2023
MY FATHER

HS ESSAY | HOUSTON COBB

PAINTING "MAXIMALIST | DAKOTA WILLIAMS"
I was so excited to give my father his birthday card that I burnt my fingers making his coffee that early Saturday morning in September. Remembering every detail with crystal clarity, I am haunted by that day like it was yesterday. His loving face lit up when my brother and I catapulted ourselves into our parents’ bed, eager for him to open our cards. Later that morning, I turned down his invitation to jog with him, pleading fatigue, unaware this would be the last conversation we would ever have. As my mother and I helped each other prepare our chef salads for lunch, our telephone rang, bringing us the terrible news that my father had collapsed on the street, been found by a nurse, and was being loaded into an ambulance. At the hospital, the doctor’s crushing words that my seemingly healthy father had died from a massive heart attack annihilated my happiness, innocence, and faith. That was the last day of my childhood.

Life has never been the same without my father. I was angry at the world and God for allowing something so tragic to befall my family. I could not have imagined, though, that three weeks later tragedy would strike my family again. My uncle, my father’s brother, was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. Within a month, my grandparents had lost both of their only children. These were the darkest days of my life. Stuck in a state of despair, I was a living nomad. From my brain to my toes, I was entirely emotionally numb. In the five years since my father and uncle’s passing and my loved ones’ familiar faces began to pixelate and scramble in my memories, I have started to heal.

Overcoming tragedies and grieving loved ones are part of becoming an adult. Nonetheless, the challenges of growing up without a father are extraordinary. Luckily, I have had many great people try to assume my father’s role even though I consider him irreplaceable. Regaining the motivation to get out of my bed each consecutive morning became relentless. I built an emotional mask to conceal my insecurities, grief, and depression. However, I had to start moving on with the world, or I risked being ossified by my trauma. YouTubers taught me how to shave my face, operate a weed-eater, and tie that pesky necktie for formals. Countless bloody nicks and razor bumps later, I was entering high school and facing pressures to drink, try drugs, and have sex while simultaneously trying to become a respectable young man.

During high school, I started pulling my weight more around the house. Between helping my mom chauffeur my younger brother around town, mixing Roundup weed killer, and perfecting those medium rare filets on the grill, finding my balance while taking the most rigorous course loads my school could offer was no easy task. My ever more encumbered shoulders were weighed down further by extracurriculars, athletics, and a social life. Navigating burnout, the demanding tasks I faced daily motivated me to work harder. I felt my brain might atomize some days, but, for me, lying down meant resting in peace.

Like a red-hot freshly smelted bar of gold, anguish had refined and forged my heartache into something valuable. My soul was constantly being cleansed and purged. I caught people staring at me in admiration, wondering how I managed to carry on with my life. My will to smile or crack a joke that wasn’t that funny could inspire others. My empathy could be contagious, just like my father’s. His burning passion for helping others motivates me. His unconditional love fuels me to be the most loving and empathetic version of myself every day. His candor and sincerity remind me to be my true, genuine self. By recognizing and applying my father’s admirable characteristics to my own life, his silhouette no longer haunts my existence but instead revives my will to push on. I find that I want to fill in his silhouette with the vibrant details of my own life that remind me of who my father was.

Through honoring my father, I am able to find my niche in this dynamic world.
When I was 5, I remembered the small moments of happiness,
And when everything was simple and peaceful.
All of the laughter and love that was shown.
When I opened my eyes, I was 10.
It was like the world’s shell slowly fell into my hands,
And what I remembered changed from being happy and Delicate,
To harsh and cruel.
Now when I open them,
I see the blinding lights in the big cities, the traffic that never ends,
The billboards advertising new technology.
But what I wish I could still see—are the families walking across the street, hand in hand,
Laughing as they shared about each other’s day.
But,
Now that I am older, I understand the meaning behind Change.
All of the change.
And yet it’s hard to see, I know what it is.

I know that even if the change is me going from high school to college,
It won’t destroy me.
Even if I have to leave my parents.
Even if I have to say goodbye to my home.
Because I know I’ll make it through.
The storm is never over,
It just disappears after a while,
And once it comes back, I’ll be ready.
Ready for any of the hardships
Or the pain I will face losing a loved one,
I’ll be ready to conquer my fears.
And I know,
When I open my eyes, It’ll be different from how I saw the world when I was 5.
Or when I was 6,
Or when I was 10.
Because I am learning,
And that’s what I see when I close my eyes every night. I’ll be ready.

I’LL BE READY.
I’LL BE READY.
I’LL BE READY.
I’LL BE READY.
I’LL BE READY.
I yawn and stretch as I try to ward off the tiredness that has stuck itself to me.

I manage to force myself out of bed put my clothes on before I stumble over someone sleeping on the floor and into the hallway. I reach the bathroom and pound on the door, but someone is already in there. I sigh and lean on the wall, waiting my turn. Finally, the door opens and I feel the biting cold poke into my skin. I pull my coat tighter around me as I step out. I survey the buildings around me. Run down apartments and rubble are all that remain of what was surely once a very large, if maybe a little brutalist, neighborhood of apartments and houses.

It’s the 8th year of the war. Well, the 8th year plus a few months, days, hours, minutes... you get the point. It’s what some may call a “war of attrition”, both sides just hurling bombs, boys, and banter at each other. The three Bs. The bombs and boys kill, at least. I guess that serves more purpose than the third B, which does nothing but provide white noise on the TV or radio if you need to get to sleep.

Oh, of course, the media loves to emphasize that aspect of the war. When the conflict first broke out, everyone cared. International outrage, calls for regime change, and everything short of action. But after a while, all they cared about were the same repetitive talking points and the drama. Our lives became a 5-minute segment. No more at 6:00, just wait a few days and maybe we’ll hear more about it.

Despite the rest of the world’s best efforts to convince us otherwise, no progress has been made. I sigh inwardly as I trudge through the snow. For those of us who live in the shelter, this is how we live. For those who live elsewhere in the world, I wonder how they imagine our lives. Maybe they think we all live in 3 story homes or mansions. I doubt many think two hundred or so of us are crammed into one floor of an apartment. I myself share a room with 7 others. I doubt many think two hundred or so of us are crammed into one floor of an apartment. I myself share a room with 7 others. I myself share a room with 7 others. I myself share a room with 7 others.

I have the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest. I got the privilege of sleeping on the bed, since I’m the youngest.

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watered-down coffee.

I manage to grab a quick bite before I’m shoved out of the way. I don’t even bother to yell at whoever did it. I know that it won’t matter, and they’re likely already lost in the sea of faces and noise. I manage to squeeze through the crowd to the hall connecting the Moshpit to the door. I open it and feel the biting cold poke into my skin. I pull my coat tighter around me as I step out. I survey the buildings around me. Run down apartments and rubble are all that remain of what was surely once a very large, if maybe a little brutalist, neighborhood of apartments and houses.
I stop at the foot of a building and look up. It’s missing a roof, covered in rubble which caves into the rest of the structure. I wonder who was in this building before the war. It could’ve been an office building of some sort, from the looks of it. I wonder if anyone was in here when it was destroyed. I wonder how many more buildings will be destroyed.

I wonder how many more people will be inside.

Suddenly, I hear a screeching noise, building in intensity. I look up to see several jets flying overhead. I curse and hide within the rubble. I have no idea if they’re friendly, nor do I have any interest in finding out. I hear a whistling over the noise of the jet engines as they release bombs onto the already-ruined town. I wonder who was in this building before the war. It could’ve been an office building of some interest to kill. Maybe they’ve killed everything else that they can kill.

As loud explosions bloom over the town, I watch the jets fly away into the horizon. I wait for a little while before leaving the rubble, as I start the walk back to the shelter. I laugh grimly to myself. Maybe the war will end now that they’ve turned to bombing rocks and debris. I turn the corner of the crater-filled block and breathe in the crisp winter air, before noticing the smell of smoke close to me. I look up, seeing several craters surrounding the shelter. By some miracle, they missed the building itself. I grab the knob and open the door, walking in.

Several people glance at me, but none ask me where I’ve been. Although it may not be wise, there is no official rule that we can’t leave the shelter or anything like that. We can’t afford to worry if one person gets hurt or killed leaving, not when dozens of others still need to eat and sleep and live. I push back through the crowds and make my way back to the room. Two other people are still in there, Mare and Hobbes. Last names only here in our country. I guess, in my head, they were putting the war on hold. Maybe things could get better, maybe things could get better.

I nod, but silently start ignoring him. I disagree with the premise. He’s resorted to bombing dead men.

I hear laughing and turn to see Hobbes chuckling. “I told you—things can get better.”
9 months have passed

I take a deep breath, in and out, as I stand outside of the door. After another moment, I push the key into the lock and turn it, before swinging the door open. I walk inside and take a look around. Small, dark, and cramped. Just like home, I guess. And that isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

A set my bags down and sit on the floor, my head in my hands. After the announcement came out, everything happened so fast. Troops rushed into the country, with planes and tanks. There was plenty of combat, and the citizens were more often than not caught in the crossfire. The “liberators” had their share of crimes committed. But I had gotten out. I had lived. And now I’m here.

I get up and walk to the window, looking out. As similar as it may be, this is not home. This place is new. But I know that new things aren’t necessarily bad either.

Sometimes, they’re amazing.
Be hopeful about climate change because the future looks bright

The world is in a state of near environmental catastrophe. We are in this situation because of global warming. Fossil fuels are a massive problem right now, but even though it’s bad now, the world can and will improve because there are many people and movements working to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Yes, climate change is bad now, but people like Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti are reasons to be hopeful. Wathuti is a Kenyan environmental and climate activist who founded Green Generation Initiative. This project teaches young people to love nature and be environmentally conscious at a young age. Wathuti has now planted more than 30,000 trees in Kenya. There are thousands of activists like Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti out there. People like her are only one of the many reasons to be hopeful about climate change.

Another reason to be optimistic about climate change is the green technology being developed. Green tech is eco-friendly and right now there is more being made than ever before. AMP Robotics is one example. Their green tech is massively improving the world's recycling systems by making them more efficient. Better recycling means less greenhouse gas pollution. There are so many companies with the same mission as AMP Robotics: to save the world from pollution.

Another big reason to be optimistic is that many countries are already converting to clean energy sources. Countries like Sweden, Costa Rica, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Uruguay, Denmark, China, and many more have started using cleaner energy. All these countries are still thriving while using clean energy and are encouraging other countries to convert as well. Just in the past 10 years, huge amounts of progress have been made. Many of countries are making progress in using more clean energy. The world's carbon footprint will decrease soon as more and more countries use clean energy.

Many people say that major fossil fuel companies would end if we started using clean energy causing millions to lose their jobs, but fossil fuel companies are converting to making clean energy as you read this. Many of the large companies that currently produce clean energy used to be big fossil fuel companies. Converting to clean energy doesn’t harm people and can add jobs. More and more people are realizing that and converting to clean energy.

Every day more news comes out about climate change and as this news comes out, more people start to realize that climate change is real and start to do something about it. The news currently covers climate change more than it used to, and this increase has increased the numbers of activists and green technology scientists. So many people need to understand the effects of climate change and the news is helping show people what’s really going on with the world.

All in all, activists, engineers, governments, the news, and even fossil fuel companies, are all working to protect the world from climate change. So many people and organizations are helping the world, so there are so many reasons to be hopeful about climate change.

The future is bright for the world, so you can be hopeful.
I had a real knack for it. That day I left school and beelined to a cliff that overlooked a beautiful beach near our house. I took the pictures, and left. When I came back, my dad was furious. After that, he took my phone and broke it. He was a fine person. He just got angry sometimes. Usually, he would apologize after and replace whatever he broke. This time, he didn't get the chance. He died.

He and Mother were arguing about a grade I had gotten. Mom said it was a bad grade. He said the opposite. The argument ended up going somewhere else, and he slept in the guest room. That night, an awful storm struck our town. It knocked over a towering tree that took out the right side of the house. That was where the guest bedroom was. I remember jolting awake, the deafening sound of the impact filling my ears. Luckily my room was on the left side of the house.

So was Mom's, and Fred's cradle was in her room. The second I opened my door, I saw the damage. The door to the guest bedroom was wide open, revealing the forest in the thundering rain. I could see the tree and my father's body. I ran towards him. Now I wish I hadn't. His body was still twitching. I mistook this for life. With all the adrenaline coursing through my veins, I found the strength to pull the tree up, but just by a little bit. It was only for a split second, but I won't forget it. It was a horrible sight to see. His lips were missing, revealing a red mass of teeth. His entire face was coated with blood. It leaked from the empty holes that were once his eyes. His jaw looked broken. A mangled mess. In shock, I dropped the tree, crushing his face further. I ended up collapsing next to him. Hugging his lifeless body while the thundering rain poured down onto my
pajamas. Then my mother finally found the courage to check in on me. She saw me with him and called 911. They came quickly. Soon enough, they were cutting up the tree and removing the part that fell on my dad. When they removed the chunk of the tree, my mother finally got a good look at my father's body. It was even more mangled after I had dropped the tree on him again. It was caved in, almost unrecognizable from the father I had once known. The police described his face as "broken."

Life was never the same after that. My mom never got over his death. I can hear her sobbing to herself some nights. She always believed what the police said about his death. That the crush from the tree caused it. But I never did. The night our house broke was the first time I saw the shadow. He was just standing there. I don't think it was a coincidence, seeing him. The way my dad died was so unnatural. How could a tree have gouged his eyes out and torn his lip? I think the shadow had something to do with it. But it is just a hunch. I'm probably just insane. Mom never wants to talk about that night. It doesn't help that after the house broke, we packed our bags up and moved. That wasn't her fault, though. We couldn't afford to fix the house, so we decided to move. What was her fault was her breaking all the pictures we had of my dad. I remember coming home after school, and the first thing I heard was sobbing and glass breaking. I went to the kitchen, and found her breaking the photos with a hammer, and dumping them in the trash. I was screaming at her. She was screaming at me. We were both crying. After that, there was nothing left of dad. She deleted all the photos of him. She wiped him out of existence. I know that she was suffering a lot and wanted no reminders of him at all.

But I will forever resent her for getting rid of all those photos. I hardly remember his face anymore. When I think of him, all I can see is his broken face, with missing eyes and lips and a smashed jaw.

Suddenly, a knocking on my door breaks me out of my daydreams. "Lori?" the voice asks. It's my little brother, Fred. I take the knob and swing the door open. He's standing there, clutching his stuffie. I get down on one knee.

“What do you need, Fred?”

He looks at me with doe eyes. "Can you make me a sandwich?" he asks. "Mommy won't come out of the guest bedroom."

The sentence instantly brings back memories of that day. But something about it is wrong. “Mom never goes in the guest bedroom,” I mumble to myself. Fred's stomach grumbles. "Okay, I'll get to it. Wait on my bed, okay?" He nods his head. He runs up to me and hugs my waist. "I'll be right back," I say in a reassuring voice. I leave my room, closing the door behind me. The rain is so loud it nearly bursts my eardrums. The power is out, but there's still light outside so I didn't notice. I start walking to the kitchen, but I'm drawn away from it. The guest room door. Something about it is beckoning me. I slowly walk over to the door. What could she possibly be doing in the guest bedroom? I creak the door open.

She lays on the bed, sprawled out. Red leaks into the white sheets. On top of her is the shadow. The shadow who haunt- ed me all those years ago. The shadow who possibly killed my dad. I stand at the door, frozen in shock. He turns his head to look at me. He steps off the bed, and onto the hard, cold, floor. I get a good look at my mother. Her face is broken. I can hear the distinct sound of the shadow talking. It doesn't
sound human. Like a bunch of voice clips mixed together. “I’ll kill you,” I spit at the shadow. He remains still. I guess petty insults won’t work. I run into the kitchen and scramble to find the salt. I pick it up and throw the cap on the floor. The shadow has already reached me. I quickly chuck all the salt at him. It hits his face, melting him into a goop. He lets out a final unholy scream like the life is being sucked out of him. I stand back and watch him die. Soon, the only thing left is a pile of mud on the floor. Suddenly, cries fill the room, and they aren’t mine. I look at the guest bedroom. Fred kneels on the floor, crying into her stomach. I quickly race over to him. He lifts his head once I enter the room. “What happened?” he says, lip quivering.

“I killed the thing that did it,” I say, out of breath. “It’s dead. It can’t hurt you,” I say.

“Will it come back?” he asks.

“No. I promise.”

He lets go of our mom and hugs me. My shirt is wet with his tears. “We’re safe.”