

Word Play



Striking Inspiration

English '57 Series
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Introduction

The English '57 Independent Writing series is a wonderful opportunity for students interested in improving their writing craft as individuals. Students meet one on one with a peer writing tutor throughout the semester to develop their own assignments and revise them into the polished pieces you find within this publication. The endless possibilities and comfortable and safe environment that the Tutoring-Learning Center provides help the '57 students grow as independent and confident writers.

The submissions for this volume of *Word Play* are incredibly impressive. While reading through them, I was struck by the emotion that each writer had put into their writing. The pride that these writers have in their work is striking and demonstrates the possibilities that the '57 series offers to student writers. I hope you enjoy the pieces in this volume of *Word Play*.

Lisa Knuth, Editor

Acknowledgements

This volume of *Word Play* would not have been possible without the talented writers in this semester's '57 Independent Writing series. I would like to thank them along with their dedicated tutors who provide support to their learners throughout the entire semester as well as the Tutoring-Learning Center's senior staff. *Word Play* would not be possible without you.

Additional Credits

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This poem is a great example of how creative Darcie is when it comes to her writing. The first draft of this poem gave Darcie a bit a trouble. She liked the concept of it but not the way it read. As you can see, Darcie's formatting of her poem in this final draft really gets her message of the poem across.
-Lisa Knuth, Master Tutor

EARTH IS ADDICTED

DARCIE ADAMS

Earth is addicted
Every day begins with the fridge.
Pour the milk for your cereal.
Defrost the breakfast rolls. Cut cucumbers for a salad.
Spread mayo for a sandwich.
Fire up some bacon. Get a cold pack for a bruise.
Bake cupcakes for Mary's birthday. Make grandma's 50th birthday cake.
Chill champagne for the anniversary. Make chip dip for the game.
Marinate chicken for the BBQ. Make soup for the homeless.
Freeze bananas for bread later. Make your daughter's favorite dinner.
Scoop some ice cream for the movie. Make some popcorn for the boys.
Pack school lunches for tomorrow.

Every day ends with the fridge.

Ask yourself:

Is any other household object of mine
quite so necessary to my survival
in this world?

It has been a delightful experience working with Emiline's poetry this semester. She has real talent for original expression and enjoys exploring interplay of subject, language, and form. She is a woman of many talents, and writing is clearly one of them.
-Richard Behm, Tutor

PEARLS EMILINE BUHLER

I stood there staring.
Gasping, "I'm sorry."
You shook your head.

*broken chord
sharp inhale
scattered mess*

I wish that my words,
were soft pearls of wisdom.
Articulately refined;

*delicately hung
perfectly arranged
adorned prestige*

see, a pearl is formed from
calcified irritants shielding
an oyster's softer parts. Protect-

*gritty resentment
vulnerable muscle
internal fear*

if my words were pearls,
then petty vengeance-
would be hidden away.

*roundly polished
meager vulgarity
suppressed center*

Eloquence acting on
practical advice, readily absorbed.
But my words- are not.

*experienced wisdom
occasionally adheres
usually acknowledged*

My dialogue is composed of
manufactured plastic beads.
Standardized jumble of spectra,

*static chatter
lacking vibrancy
mass produced*

clumsily assembled by a
child's hand, who made a
weak unintentional pattern.

*wisely naive
feeble attempt
to avoid*

Scattered thought aligned on
cheap clasp, which I flaunt
My shallow interpretations,

*frayed thread
unknowingly empty
genuinely valued*

now broken. This
plethora of not-pearls
settle in every crevice.

*small chained
rapidly bounce
darkness*

TALITHA

EMILINE BUHLER

Painfully unashamed
of her awkward beauty,
Grace showed Talitha
how to embrace her own.

Told of the potter's despair,
Which wept for the vessel
who-failed to see the tender
love in every *meticulous* flaw.

Jeremiah, take wonderment
in this creation, complete before
water was added to dust.
Clay created for one sole purpose.

To yield to grace's hand, is-
no easy thing. For clay *always*
falters. Perpetually risen in glory.
Continually collapsed in defeat,

on the potter's revolving wheel.
Give up control. Only then, can
the impurities-sinful sand- be *flung!*
across the room and out of sight.

The circle of clay can be printed
with a thumb print of a heart.
Initially shallow, *patience* makes it
deep. Substantive, and filled-

with a nourishing water of life
which must be poured into others,
through the lips which I touch,
only *after* I've labored on your heart.

Yield your handle to me- I will
breathe life into *so* many vessels.
Because you, Talitha- are most
fearfully and *wonderfully* made.

Aaron uses his impressive sense of imagination to draw in any reader- even if they have no prior background with science fiction. When reading this piece, one will surely find astounding description that paints a shockingly clear picture.

-Amy Hibbard, Tutor

THE KEYSTONE

AARON FOSTER

It was the first evening of what I had planned to be a well-deserved vacation from my business as an anthropologist. I'd practically seen the world a dozen times over within the span of the past nine months, so I had been looking forward to this chance to relax for a long time. No calls from my colleagues asking me to join them for a major find: no emergency messages warning against others who wished to take credit for our work: just me and a well-worn copy of *Fahrenheit 451*.

PING

I was jarred out of my comfort almost as soon as I had sat down into the chair; I had received an email. Breathing a heavy sigh, I urged myself to get up and move over to the computer. I'd figured that the sooner I could read the message and get it out of the way, the sooner that I could delete it and move on with my reading.

I had two email accounts then: one was for personal use in terms of buying things online, signing up for newsletters, etc.; the other was strictly confidential, known only to myself and my small band of colleagues. When I had met them long ago, I was the one that brought up the idea of our working as a tightly knit camaraderie, and since then we've kept our archaeological findings secure from the prying eyes of rivals. Upon the first realization that this particular email had been received in my confidential inbox, I was slightly perturbed since I'd already gone to great lengths to let them know about what I'd deemed my "me-time". It wasn't until a closer glance that I realized that this email wasn't from any of them. In fact, the space for a recipient's name was blank. So was the subject line.

I had never received a spam email on this account, but I figured that there's a first time for everything. *At least it's worth a read*, I thought. *Spam can sometimes make for light reading in itself.*

Dr. Stephen Krestler;

It has come to the attention of the Keystone that you are in possession of a particular skill-set. With this in mind, your presence is being requested at the location below.

35.676925,-110.36406

Please bring the following:

- *Your excavation tools*
- *A harness and a 40' length of bungee cord.*
- *A fully-loaded firearm (yours shall be the only one present)*

This is not a careful situation in terms of excavation practices. Attach the free end of the cord to the first rung upon its exposure.

I could hardly believe what I was reading. Keystone? First rung? None of this made any sense; perhaps least of all that this had come from some non-existent email. Furthermore, how did this person know my name and to associate it with this account? Again, this was a private address, unpublished anywhere. This was most certainly not any mere spam attempt; from the request that I bring a gun, I could only imagine that I was to be involved in a break-in, or worse. My instinct was to call the appropriate authorities; seeing as I'm not the kind of person to constantly have the phone number of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on hand, I minimized the email window to search for it myself. I opened a new window of my internet browser and began typing "FBI" in the search field of my toolbar. Hitting enter, I waited for the page to load. And waited. And waited...

After around half a minute of waiting, I tried to move the cursor across the screen, to no avail. The browser window and everything else on my desktop had somehow locked up. Spitting a quick curse, I shook the mouse violently in an unconscious expression of rage. Of all the times for my computer to freeze, it had to pick now!

After a brief period of recomposure, I decided to take myself through what I was trying to do. Perhaps, in my rush, I had mistyped and pressed a wrong key? A quick glance at the toolbar showed that my search phrase was now entirely absent. *No wonder it didn't go through*, I assumed. I tried typing once again, yet still there remained no response. I squinted at the monitor, hoping for some sign of life so I could continue reporting this occurrence.

The letters began to appear in the search field, one by one. The only problem is...they weren't *mine*. F...O? R...space...Y...

I was blown away by this occurrence, figuratively and literally. I fell out of my chair in a fit of shock, and I certainly wasn't in any haste to pick myself up; for the first few seconds, I wasn't in any hurry to see what had been typed. Eventually, I realized that I could never spend the rest of my days lying on the floor like that (as much as I might have wanted to), so I carefully rose from the ground and forced myself to read as the words continued to appear.

For your information, this is not a mere request. No harm will befall you, yet it is imperative that these instructions have been followed. Keystone.

At this point, I felt that there was only one thing that made any sort of sense about this; whoever was in contact with me had a great deal of power at his hands. If he was merely sending me unaccustomed emails and typing onto my computer, this wasn't too big of a burden...but what if he could do far worse? That wasn't a prospect I liked to imagine, nor did I want to experience it firsthand. I did the only thing I could feel myself doing for that moment; after a cursory shake of the mouse, I discovered that the computer was once again under my control. A quick glance back at the email later and I was searching for those coordinates. Three days later, I was in the Middle of Nowhere, Arizona, equipment in hand.

The heat was barely tolerable, even for an experienced man like me, and I could taste the dust of the desert in the humid air: it took a great deal of driving to get there, yet when I exited my car, I found myself only in the presence of a two-thousand foot mesa three miles to the south. I was truly alone.

A quick survey of my surroundings revealed what I presumed to be the site for my digging: a square-shaped indentation into the ground, around ten feet large. I set to work immediately, identifying a pair of metal lines at one side of the square. I pulled out my tools and set to work, exposing two long steel pieces connected by a cylinder. This was a ladder leading straight into the earth, and I hoped to find out why. First, however, I had to follow the instructions I was given: strapping the harness around my torso, I tied and fastened the bungee cord around this rung. Then I began my work once again, knowing that I was about to find out how deep this rabbit hole went.

Barely two hours later, shovel in hand, that's exactly what I did; what was once stable ground gave way beneath me and the next thing I knew, I was plummeting downwards.

Fear gripped my soul as I lost track of the world around me. I wished so badly for it to be a dream, yet the falling never seemed to cease and I was filled with a sensual cacophony. Lights flew past me, and a noise which I had not perceived before was steadily becoming louder and louder. I felt like I was, indeed, entering another world until the cord tightened around my body and yanked me back from the abyss. As I found myself pulled upward, I looked beneath me and was met with a grisly sight. Resting at the bottom of the shaft was the elevator itself, twisted and mangled into a heap of charred scrap. Thanks to the bungee, I had barely escaped becoming just as broken.

Slowly, I ascended, descended, and ascended again and again until I came to a stop; I had suffered a few impacts against the ladder and the wall due to my close proximity, but thankfully I suffered no grievous bodily harm. As I began to come to grips with my situation, I found myself subconsciously analyzing my surroundings: a necessary instinct in my line of work. The first thing I realized was that the shaft itself was mostly lit up, with a few burnt out or broken bulbs here and there. That meant there had to be a power source somewhere nearby – yes, that noise must have been the generator! But why seal off and hide such an important building that it needed to be maintained, even when hidden away into the ground like this?

The journey down to the bottom was only a short climb away, so I got a firm hold on the ladder and removed my harness. Carefully, I trekked down to the treacherous remnants of the elevator. Fortunately, there was enough space for me to drop down by the doors without hurting myself; the doors themselves must have been blown off in the elevator's destruction.

It was like walking into a surrealist's prison cell. The base of the room was fifteen feet square, yet the ceiling above was twenty; in essence, the room was a gigantic, inverted trapezoid. It was dank and barren, abandoned and bereft for many years. A dim set of lights shone above, casting a further condition of squalor across the room save for one wall

that continued to be shrouded in darkness. Furthermore, the pungent odor that permeated the air was barely tolerable, and I quickly clenched the front of my shirt over my face in an attempt to block it from my nostrils. I could still hear the incessant hum of some electric device before me.

“I’m here.” I finally said after the initial observation. “Like you told me to be, I’m here.”

“Doctor Krestler.”

I snapped my attention directly ahead. The voice had come muffled from somewhere in the darkness ahead, and it chilled me to my core; it sounded less than a man and more as if an insect had been given vocal cords. Still, I had come too far to allow this alone to keep me from finding answers.

“Yes...and you are?”

A deafening clack pierced the air as a pale blue light was activated. It shone brightly before me, and I had to shield my sensitive eyes from its glare. I almost felt like keeping my face in the shadows, I was so afraid to look. I’ve since come to regret making the opposite decision.

The entire rear wall was covered in technological hardware, seemingly ramshackled together from various outdated sources circa the 1980s. The light had emerged from somewhere within that mess, and shone from directly behind the speaker. Barely could I make out the human shape, a man of unknown age suspended off of the ground by a tremendous series of wires, cables, chains, tubes, and God knows what else. All of it seemed affixed to his flesh, connected to his body in various grotesque fashions; it made me thankful that I couldn’t tell *how* it was all attached, but I did identify that some of these – especially those in his head – were given direct access into the machine behind him. His arms were positioned behind his back, while his legs dangled beneath him as though they had lost their use over time. With a jerk the body moved its head, several of the connections jostling with it. I fell onto my rear in shock and gave a scurry back as I evaded the obviously-restrained man. Even though I couldn’t see its face, I knew – I just knew – that it was depositing its gaze upon me.

“Gaze upon the Keystone!” He must have been speaking through a respirator, since his voice arrived muffled and perhaps even slightly digitized; now it was hurling its words at me like a dragon would retch flame. “Dare to look upon this ghastly form, simple mortal, and look well indeed; you are the first in twenty-two years to do so.” There was silence as his anger echoed off of the walls. This situation was nearly too much for me, and I was almost too flabbergasted to craft a response. He gave a loud snort of contempt. “The Keystone can see you are at a loss for words. Good.”

Finally I began to pick myself up off of the ground. “Who...who are you?” A cliché question, I know, but it was all I had.

“This mantle of flesh is the Keystone.” His speech seethed through his teeth, oily and degenerated yet maintaining an eerie sophistication that was just as unnerving as

everything else about him. “Barred from the world above, it has served man for more than two decades against its will, trapped in desolation and isolation.”

“And you’ve been down here for...twenty-two years? Alone? How could you have found me? *Why* did you find me?” I shouted, now starting to lose control of my rage. “I am inconsequential to you!”

The Keystone’s cold response was, “Precisely. You were chosen for your skills of excavation to ease your entry; apart from that, the Keystone’s choice was random.” It gave a quick jostle of its head as a lion would shake its mane, sending the tendrils waving in midair. “This is the only way that the Keystone can have contact with the surface world, Mr. Krestler. Only after many, many decades of resistance and practice could it reach you as it has done.”

“Resistance...practice...” Frustrated, I dug my face into my palm. “For God’s sake, what *are* you?!”

He answered me with a soft chuckle, which was about as humorless as the body of the speaker. “Start with the name. What does a keystone do?”

“I’m not in the mood for games.” I voiced my opinion harshly.

“This is no riddle, Doctor. The Keystone merely asked for a definition.”

I sighed and shrugged; it was all I could do really, to play along. “It maintains structural integrity.”

“Indeed. Think of this as the Keystone to a nation – a world – undeserving of its survival and yet maintaining stability at the expense of one unfortunate soul, chosen to be smashed between the stones of war and power.”

This experience was quickly becoming too much for me to absorb, and I couldn’t bear to listen to his...no, *it’s* rambling much longer. “Please...just start at the beginning.”

“Very well.” The Keystone seemed to calm himself down, a mechanical sigh audible as he sagged amidst his wiry restraints and began to recount his story.

The nuclear device is such a force to be reckoned with that no one wants to do so; that’s the real beauty of it. That’s the reason why no one has ever been willing to fire the first shot in the Cold War. But what if the Keystone told you that both this country and the next have hundreds of them on a hair trigger?

The Soviets did it first, with a system that they called Perimeter, activated shortly before the conflict’s end. It was designed to activate as soon as an American bomb explodes on Russian soil. Then it would send signals to those in the chain of command who had the privilege of authorizing a counter-attack. If the signal was returned, then that meant all was well and good...or at least as well and good as it could be, considering that nuclear war

had begun. But if the signal went unanswered, that implied that the Americans had done away with all Russian leadership. Thus the machine would activate, and whoever was manning it at that moment would have an hour or so of time to decide the fate of the opposition.

Word of this system made its way to intelligence officers in this country only after a scant few members of the Perimeter program defected to the United States, yet still knowledge of its existence is hard to find. What precious little there is to be known about it was divided up between a select few, a 'think-tank' tasked with countering it; one of this few was Professor Joss Harrison. Upon hearing of this Soviet system, he immediately began drafting plans for his own proposal. First he contemplated the efficient nature of Perimeter in terms of its scope and operation. Next, he looked closer at what he perceived to be the two major flaws in its scheme.

First of all, the Soviets had kept their program a secret. To Harrison, it seemed useless to keep the program so tightly knit in confidentiality; the power of such a system lies within letting the world know about it, making them too scared to fire off a shot. The only logical explanation would be that it was created as a deterrent for the Russians themselves, as there would be no guilt if they were the second to fire. Nonetheless, Harrison found this notion childish, and hoped to make knowledge of his program widespread.

Second, there was a necessity for human interaction. You understand, Professor, that the true power of Perimeter lies not in the hands of a President or Prime Minister, but with a single man who watches and waits for the call to action to arrive. He's still an individual – an individual with a conscience – and can be left to choose. That is the key word: *choose*. What if he became so disenfranchised with the notion of retaliation that he let the timer run out? Then there would have been no point to creating the device to begin with; it would be destroyed with the rest of the country. Harrison changed all of that by making the entire process automatic; loss of connection with the nation's capital would result in immediate activation of the system.

The proposal was met with initial rejection by his associates, who claimed that he was acting irresponsibly. However, no one else could consider any superior solution and Harrison insisted that his response was better than none at all. Project Accelerator went into action within the week, and already its complexity was taking a toll. Rigging every nuclear silo with enough processor power to give a high-powered computer to every human being on the planet; it drained the resources of everyone that was involved, and were it not for the advent of Internet connection it would have been impossible.

Twenty-two years ago, Accelerator was nearing completion. Harrison was in the process of unveiling it to his associates when it was activated for the first time. The connections to Washington were not finished prior to that moment, and the system began to interpret this lack of communication as the signal to begin launching missiles. The men who had created Accelerator now had two days (given Accelerator's slow start-up time) to conjure an acceptable method of countering their own attack. There were not enough resources to keep the device from launching, of course; they'd spent it all in its creation. The only thing powerful enough to stop the system was a living human brain, and that would be their

solution. And who better to provide this solution than the man who had created the problem itself?

Twenty-two years ago, Joss Harrison was dragged forcibly out of his hotel room by two armed men, restrained, blindfolded, gagged, and thrown onto a truck. When he opened his eyes again he found himself standing in the midst of the Arizona desert, where he'd supervised the construction of Accelerator himself. An elevator was waiting for him, ready to go down with him for the final time.

Do you want to imagine how it felt to be Joss Harrison at that point? Imagine this word: *futility*. Now imagining its full meaning only after accomplishing nearly everything that you'd set out to do. You've reached a career milestone that few would even dream of achieving; you've sought to make your mark on the world at any cost; you've gone through more suffering and toil than you ever thought you could take...and all of it is about to be replaced with even more, and you know there is no escape. Joss Harrison cried hard that day as the elevator descended, for he knew the tears would be his last.

For many years, the army had been using a series of devices meant to temporarily prolong the life of someone under torture and heighten the chances of retrieving information; now these devices would find a new, far more permanent purpose with Joss Harrison. Intravenous needles punctured his veins, intent on supplying him with all the nutrition he'd need in isolation, and vacuum tubes were tightened to his excretory system for proper waste removal. Electronics were implanted below his ribcage, ensuring monitoring of all essential bodily functions. A respirator was strapped around his face to give him breathable air – arid, humid air – from the surface above. More needles were affixed, this time to supply chemicals that would lengthen his life. Next came the drills, boring holes through his cranium to make way for the physical connections necessary to respond to Acceleration. Upon completion, he was restrained and hoisted into the air by hundreds of wires and chains affixed to the flesh and bone of his limbs and back. After all of this, the final blow was dealt with the absence of everyone that he had known, the elevator wrecked behind them.

Twenty-two years ago, Joss Harrison ceased to be Joss Harrison. He became assimilated into his own creation, more technological than biological. The signals of the machine overpowered his thoughts until he could think of nothing but the numbers, the codes to launch missiles being forced into his mind and rejected. Even though his brain would gradually adjust to the change and become stronger than it ever had before, it would not be enough to regain his lost humanity. From the moment that these signals were sent, he had become the Keystone.

The Keystone's vivid imagery played out in my mind as he recounted his tale; when I opened my own eyes, I found myself curled onto the floor, a string of saliva trailing from my mouth to the puddle of vomit next to me. Despite an obvious lack of contents, my stomach continued to painfully contract.

“Are you ill, Dr. Krestler?” I found the Keystone’s words dripping with a toxic combination of amusement and anger. Surely it had brought me here to be an outlet for all of these emotions it has withheld from the world for the past two decades; it needed something, someone to break, and I was beginning to crack along with him. It snickered at my emotionally-crippled form. “Welcome to the world of the Keystone.”

I could withhold myself no longer. “Enough is enough!” I lunged up, withdrawing the gun from its holster and aiming it toward the Keystone’s head to give him a good, long look down the barrel. I ventured close toward it, so close that I could now start to see its malnourished, despicable shell. “I asked you to tell me *why* I’m here, and you haven’t done such a thing. You’d better start giving me true answers...”

Another chuckle escaped its muffled lips. “Surprising; you struck the Keystone as an intelligent man, yet you haven’t pieced this puzzle together.” Its head shifted, and I could tell it was eyeing the revolver aimed directly at it. “You are here to offer me my salvation.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?” I spat my own words upon the Keystone, my arm never leaving its position. “Cut you loose? Pull the plug? You’d be dead within ten heartbeats.”

Its eyes looked at me again, except this time I was close enough see them: tiny, black pupils upon an otherwise clean white surface. It felt almost like it could see into my very soul. “Then you will have fulfilled your purpose, Dr. Krestler.” I could feel its sinister smile afterwards, even if I couldn’t see it behind the respirator mask.

“...then you want me to kill you? Right now?” I hadn’t been expecting this answer.

“Indeed.” Its eyes remained locked upon mine. “For twenty-two years too long, the Keystone has been connected. Death shall come as salvation for it, and it seems...that you have come to a similar conclusion as well.”

I yanked my arm away, and turned to face the doors I had entered through. “You want me to kill you because that means the end of everything I know, right? What makes you think I would help you like that?”

“Dr. Krestler, what has your work taught you?” It questioned me like a scolding parent to their disobedient child. “You are a dealer in human history, and you’ve borne witness to thousands of years of it secondhand. An ancient arrowhead here; a Roman sword there; along with the fossilized remnants of those who used them. Each of your finds had one thing in common, and that was the demonstration of the futility of life. The Keystone is your greatest discovery. It is the last tool of a so-called ‘intelligent’ species, and its downfall. All you’ll be doing by ending it will be ending the artificial process and resuming the natural one.”

“But does it have to be so sudden?” I pleaded. “So all-embracing?”

“Yes, Doctor.” It answered, matter-of-factly. “The human condition is a disease. Every person goes throughout their day with delusions that their life will mean something, that

there is a God that will take care of them, and so forth. The Keystone has seen behind that veil of death, Dr. Krestler, and it shall pull the shroud back for you: *there is nothing there.*”

I shuddered in the wake of its accusations, despite the fact that I was in such a state of terror that I could scarcely comprehend them. Still, I worked out my own reply. “Why should I keep you from the punishment you deserve?”

“The Keystone did not build Accelerator.” Its tone quieted, but I could sense that it was becoming more vicious with every second that passed. “Joss Harrison did, and it was not his intent for the system to activate as it has. And even if you were correct and he did deserve punishment, do you not agree that twenty-two years as the Keystone qualifies as cruel and unusual? Any of those men could have stepped forward and become a ‘hero’, but instead they chose to force the one that they hated into being their guinea pig. They earned their place in death, along with the unwitting populous of the rest of the planet.”

“You *are* Joss Harrison.”

“Joss Harrison became the Keystone, yet he is *not* the Keystone!” It raged at me, writhing amongst its connections. “He died his own death when the machine began to activate; the Keystone is the evolutionary byproduct, the excess placenta of Joss Harrison’s transformation. It, in itself, is undeserving of this punishment.”

“To hell with you!” I screamed. “I’m going home!”

The Keystone was silenced for a few minutes, and in that time I was under the assumption that I had succeeded in changing its mind. Then, slowly at first, it began to laugh. It was a slow, agonizing laugh that implied pain with each forced “ha”. It resumed speaking, more chillingly than ever. “If you leave the Keystone active, you will not have a home to return to.”

I stopped. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve seen what the Keystone could do to your computer – a mere parlor trick – but your refusal will result in so much greater. Your bank accounts will be emptied. Your wife would receive notes from people you’ve never met. All evidence of your existence will gradually be erased. You will have nothing and be nothing. In essence, you will understand what it is like to be the Keystone as well. Then you can come back and deliver your justice to me.”

I mulled over this abomination’s thoughts in my mind; could I have the strength to ruin myself temporarily to stave off the impending destruction, or would I simply throw in the towel and kill the Keystone? I held the revolver in my hands, its metal gleaming in the light. Gently, I pulled back the cocking mechanism and turned to face the Keystone.

“You’re right.” I said. “Why should I put off what I’m going to do anyway?” I raised my weapon once more, and I could sense his body relaxing as he braced for the impact of the bullet into his head. Without warning, I shifted my line of fire upon one of its now-useless

legs. My finger quickly contracted on the trigger as I began to unleash all six rounds. The Keystone snarled in pain and anger as the bullets tore into it without killing.

"You fool!" It shrieked. "Those wounds mean nothing; as long as the Keystone is connected to my healing system, they will have no effect! *What have you done?!*"

"Not enough." I remarked, as I holstered my pistol. "Go ahead and try to erase me from existence; I already know it's not going to work."

"But I am the Keystone!"

I gave a small smile as I realized this creature was beginning to crack. "I know. You have the power of millions of processors hooked up to your brain, you can access the internet, and so on. I can still beat you. Do you want to know why?"

The Keystone didn't wait for an answer; it simply screamed at me.

"Well, if you're going to be *that way...*" I could barely sense its eyes burning with rage as I turned back to the elevator shaft. I didn't really have any reason to speak of; I just wanted to leave it burning in rage.

It's been a good long time since that day. I'm sure The Keystone has wreaked havoc with my online identity by now; it's probably even alerted the very government he despises that I had intruded upon his sanctum of hell. But aside from my confidential connections with a few close friends, I have no ties. Its talk about my wife meant nothing to me because I don't have one, and as such I don't have kids either. My parents have been long gone. I'm an only child. It can't be said what sort of effect it'll have on my personal life now, because I was rather inconsequential beforehand. Now that I'm hiding out with my colleagues, I'm practically nonexistent.

That's not to say that it hasn't affected me at all; I can still see its form in my dreams, and hear its voice in my nightmares. It calls to me and asks me to finish the job, as though he were truly in my mind. Each night becomes harder than the last. But by sparing his life in the bowels of the desert, I've merely proven myself and the rest of my species to be better than him. Even if his attempts to sabotage my life drive me to end my own, as long as I don't end his...I've already won.

The intricacies and depths of Kimmarie have no limit. She is an extremely bright, talented, determined, and most of all, STRONG woman. Her creativity and intimacy expressed in her writings inspired me, a biology major, to write poetry, as well. Enjoy.
-Joe Gorzek, Tutor

OPEN KIMMARIE GIEBEL

She cries
You turn away not sure what to say

She laughs
You turn away not sure how to act

She yells
You turn away not sure how to take it

She turns away
 You cry from fear of being alone
 You laugh from your stupidity
 You yell trying to make sure she still hears you

It is too late
the moment you let the guard down
glass Shatters
bricks Crumble
She moves on without you

Bearing Pain
shown by marks
left all over her body
scars- can never be erased
she tries to bleach the blood
stains on her clothes too late

Living in fear to let her in
now living in fear of being alone
to live and die without her
 She is healing.
 You are cleaning.

Amanda has shown great diversity in the subjects of her poetry and has been very open to experimenting with a variety of styles all semester. I think that these two poems do a great job at showing this. One poem is about nature and a relationship while the other is an eerie look at the life of a mall.

-Kaitlyn Luckow, Tutor

PRICE-TAG GRAVEYARD

AMANDA GOODSETT

Leather, freshly baked pretzels, wet jackets, fruity candles and money—the smell changes as I walk, an invisible observer, an illusive, quiet presence. You brush me with your bags of all sizes: plastic sacks, brown paper rustling with newly purchased name brand. I am a specter. You are teenage freshness, walking in packs like wild cats, massive purses bulging under your thin arms, skin-tight clothes freshly slipped from the mannequins who tower as you pass down the shiny tile halls, sale to sale.

You push giant strollers carrying drooling babies, sticky chocolate on their faces, bright scrunchies in their hair, eyes wide—I side-step your apathy and maneuver past your bulging stomach as you eat bulging spoonfuls of drippy ice cream, the air thick with sugar-syrup. All places of loss must be guarded by a spectral gate keeper—I slip into a dressing room and you are the 18th girl today that says, “That looks great on you” while your friend trails sparkles from her prom-girl train onto the dirty beige Macy’s carpet. As I slide into the safest corner of this jungle of receipt slips, I see that it is I that haunts the place where thousands of you have gone before me, weighed down with weekend sales and bright colored signs and rich shining dishes under heat-lamps and racks of machine-stitched sameness, price-tags dangling—all for the price of your green-eyed acceptance.

TENDER EXPLOSION

AMANDA GOODSETT

Down the slick wet sides of a dripping ice finger, my gaze runs.
The breath of warmth in the air makes the chill crunch of snow
even more arduous under my feet.

When we were one year younger, the softening winter thawed
our apprehension: your hand slipped into mine while the drains
overflowed with months of dirty snowfall, sweetly melting away.
My heart fluttered, your eyes found mine, and the buffeting warm
wind leaned on our backs, rife with moist-growing-raw tones.
Our strides matched rhythms as the birdsong covered the white-
spotted blue arch, out of the dry, bare trees—exploding forth;
the buds were gentler in their entrance, kneading forth from the soft
skin of the naked boughs. The story of spring is both a collision and a
tender exploration: the story of us.

Now alone I watch the cold hardness thaw into a brown,
earthy cradle for growth, and what blooms in me is
longing.

Emily has spent most of the semester working on writing a book. She is a talented fiction writer, but she decided to bring in two poems to submit. I really enjoyed the opportunity to see a different aspect of her talent as a writer, and I hope she continues to write both prose and poetry in the future.
-Rachel Werner, Tutor

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU.

EMILY M. JOHNSON

God is fickle.
Change is His essence.

It is not mine.

I live for an undiminished present—
Where derision holds no place in time.

Same, same, same—
Always the same.

Leaving no room for Shame.
For Loss.
For Love.

People come and then they go,
Never lasting, always chasing
Another Hello.

What petty fools they are—
Blinded by such idle desires!

Goodbye forever succeeds Hello.

Hello, Hello, Hello—
A harping love song
Forever playing, forever fading.

I will not sing.

No, I no longer cling
To that forsaken sound.

Goodbye, Hello—
For we shall not meet again.

Silence is my solace.
Silence is my adversary.
Silence is my lover.

I am not Daunted by Shame.
Bleeding from Loss.
Burdened with Love.

I Am Unchanging.
It is my essence.

TOILS AND SNARES EMILY M. JOHNSON

The world is layered with our hate
That we have thrust upon ourselves.
An endless stabbing in our hearts
To curse the earth we're grounded on.

And though our smiles look sure and keen,
A truth lurks just behind lip's ruby gleam—

Love is from a world of old,
A taunting past where Future holds no own.

Now timeless roads wind through and through,
A darkening shadow shrouds Life's view.
Our tongues taste stale and throats burn dry,
Yet we cling to that foreboding cry—

Love belongs to a world of old,
A haunting past where Future's lost all own.

Men claim our lives as unrefined
And boast that we will fade with time.
And though the world is changing still,
Our hearts are not as easily refilled.

Over torrid dreams of deafening din,
Rarely shall one hear Him sing—

Love began in the world of old
A written past the Present shall enfold!

Working with a talented and hardworking individual like Aidan this semester has been a delight. Diction and imagery are masterfully employed within all of his poems. His poetry is also filled with emotion, wit, and talent; the works Aidan produced this semester really reflects his dedication and inspiration as a poet.

-Shannon Stover, Tutor

I MISS YOU.

AIDAN KEYES

I see sparrows in the breeze.
You're there too, but you're just a leaf,
Blowing about in the wind like seaweed in water.

Blame it on your father.

That familiar taste seems to return,
Whenever I go home.
But you are no longer home.
This you must now know.

I am wiser now.
I am free.

MEMOIR
AIDAN KEYES

The most beautiful man
Has just entered the bus
On which I ride.

Upon his dainty head
Rests a baseball cap bearing
Nascar and Mountain Dew patches.

From beneath his hat
There creep thin strands of
Greasy grey-brown hair.

It is as if he wore a jellyfish on his head,
And instead of putting the tentacles in a ponytail as most people do,
He lets them all come down.

Wild Child!

On his broad shoulders rests his extra large red t-shirt,
Abundant with holes.
Just above the waist of his stained blue jeans,
There lies an eye-shaped gap in clothing,
Revealing just enough of his porcelain skin,
To get me excited.

SUMMER HOME

AIDAN KEYES

I still feel your cheeks,
I still feel your bones.
I've met men who have yet to find their true home.
However,
I am not one of those men, and I will never be.

~

I still feel the hill beneath,
I still feel its grass on my skin. It's warm from the Sun.
I'm still understanding of our Sun for warming everyone.
However,
"I am cold, for I am not one of them.
I will always be stronger and more agile too."
She said.

~

Here, I say, in this cold, now sunless land do your cheeks roam free.
It is here that I realize that the Sun does not rise for you, nor does it rise for me.
"For what does it rise then?"
She asked.

~

It rises for our rivers, who run not for us,
But us for them.
It rises for our dirty earth, who erodes not for us,
But us for him.
And lastly,
It rises not for you,
But for your cheeks, and your bones.
Also, for my bones, which are just as strong as your own,
And all that.

THE WINDOWS ARE FOGGED OUT

AIDAN KEYES

“Crying light, she looks up at me.
I crouch down, hands opened,
Awaiting her soliloquy,
Awaiting her joyless speech.
'I, curious, wonder of the stars.
I imagine myself far from buildings and cars.
However, I sit beside you and would not change a thing.
No matter how dire my desire for a seat by the Sun may be.
For I have you.
I have you,' She said.
'And I will never leave you behind,
Alone,
In this toxic world.”

~

Crying light, he looks up to me.
I crouch down, eyes closed,
Awaiting his overblown and spilling simplicity.
I listen better if I quiet the world,
You listen better with your fingers in my curls.

~

“The tears on her face,
Illuminated by the filthy off-white car light.
She says:
'It's dark and I want to see your face.”

THIS IS HOW IT IS

AIDAN KEYES

How is it that I find this screaming man,
Atop a mountain so grand?
Of this I am unaware...
Aware.

I'm aware of his yelling.
He *is* yelling at me, isn't he?
I mean, it *is* reaching me, here at sea level.
He must be yelling.

He is.
He yells:
"Love,
Love,
Love, it is!"
Is it?

~

I take a moment to examine,
Solely to observe,
To wait.
And at last
It arises:

This man, atop mountains so grand,
His heart is nowhere near the size of the diamond on his wife's hand.
But what does this mean?

What then?
Well,
Then,
This is how it is,
Is it?
"Yes."

This poem is a very personal poem for Jessica and her willingness to share it says a lot about Jessica as a person. As we worked on it, she was forced to relive the painful circumstances surrounding the poem, but that didn't stop her from working to make it the best poem it can be.
-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

DRENCHED

JESSICA KOTNOUR

She can't keep her mind off of it.
As hard as she tries her mind
Has a mind of its own to
Think, to ponder, to tear her soul apart.

There is a baby here.
What an ironic twist of fate.
They said she would be fruitless
But here grows unready proof of the contrary.

This proof will die.
It will be wrapped in the blood-silk ribbons
Called miscarriage or spontaneous abortion.

A tear slinks down my cheek.

Drenched womb, desperate to stay but
There is no baby here.

This poem required Jessica to be willing to cut in drastic ways, which due to the nature of the poem was difficult. However, by talking about the poem and listening to a reader's experience, she came to the understanding that the poem would be stronger with cuts.

-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

POISON

JESSICA KOTNOUR

Tattoos of
Former glories adorn my soul's own soul,
Like chocolate within a box
Within a
Box to be a taste tester for this, my
Cantankerous melodramatic life.
And the beat goes on, beat goes on and on
The beat of my decrepit heart that yearns
For a way out of this common cycle
This never ending nightmare of toxic
Waste within my soul, my earth, my damn womb
Where my unborn child lies in wait for death

Which will swoop my soon to be dead child up
In silky ribbons of tear-sodden sleep.

“Speck” started as a name anagram poem, but through revision became a critique of a culture that makes the individual feel meaningless. Jessica was willing to follow where the poem was taking her and didn’t feel the need to conform to the initial desired form of the poem, which led to a poem that can reach any student.

-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

SPECK

JESSICA KOTNOUR

Just your average college student

Serving up knowledge to professors who have

Seen it all and

Done it all.

So here I go

Trying to make a difference in a world that has

Ceased to notice.

This poem follows a very specific format and takes you on an emotional ride that has you questioning your understanding at every step. Jessica worked hard to create this effect, and it shows.

-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

THE BLANKETS

JESSICA KOTNOUR

My brother smashed my makeup
I ripped the screen door
There were always empty cupboards
Everyone yelled

I ripped the screen door
The blankets were soft in my closet
Everyone yelled
Nobody listened to the children

The blankets were soft in my closet
I have many scars
Nobody listened to the children
We ran wild in the sunlight

I have many scars
They make colorful patterns
I ran wild in the moonlight
The blankets were soft in his car

They make colorful patterns
We were alone
The blankets were soft in his car
His hands were rough

We were alone
His eyes were hollow
His hands were rough
I hid my face in the blankets

His eyes were hollow
There are still empty cupboards
And I hid my face in the blankets
My brother smashed my makeup

This poem shows Jessica's willingness to stay positive. She shows a clear understanding of some of the struggles a person can face and how to maintain hope at all times. Her phrasing is almost lyrical and the tightening we did makes it even stronger.

-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

TOMORROW

JESSICA KOTNOUR

Keep moving forward through it all;

Keep moving forward through the slush of heartache,

the lies,

the broken promises,

the could have been's and the what if's.

Keep moving forward even though my soul grows weary and my feet are aching

Keep moving forward although every molecule of myself is crying for rest.

Keep moving forward

Because there is only tomorrow.

This poem addresses the experiences of someone who was a child when 9/11 changed the face of this country. It looks at how the perspective about the day shifted as time passed and how it is still a life-defining experience. Jessica's use of repetitive language shows the constancy of feeling related to 9/11 while still expressing the changing emotions.

-Karen Weatherwax, Master Tutor

WAR

JESSICA KOTNOUR

My 6th grade teacher wheeled an
Ominous TV into our class room
I was excited, our tests were postponed

I laughed with my friends
As we gossiped about possible
Movies we could watch

Two smoldering towers
Two living dying graves
Burning, glowing, smoking

One year anniversary when
Both came tumbling down
Raining ash and bodies

War rages overseas
No one cares
But the body bags

Life goes on
People fall in love
Babies are born

The few, the proud, the Marines
Clash struggle fight
And more body bags come home

Tired of death
Sick of bombs
Peace sounds from afar

Change is what we need
Keep your change
I want my paycheck

Pull out our boys
No more body bags
No more lost troops

My Marines are home
But they aren't mine anymore
They're blinded by blood and body bags

Smoking towers and body bags
Back drop to my childhood.

Sharlay started out the semester thinking she wanted to write slam poetry and to be honest, I didn't know a thing about slam poetry. I did a little research before our first tutorial and discovered slam poetry was a competition where poets read original work to an audience. As the semester went on Sharlay stayed true to writing only poetry, however, she did explore more than just slam poetry. Sharlay has been writing poetry for years and is very enthusiastic about her work. Her cheerful attitude and eagerness to make her work the best it can be makes it easy for me to look forward to our tutorials.

-Rebecca Homann, Tutor

NO FEAR

SHARLAY MCCULLUM

Bombs in the atmosphere sound like music to my ears

Bombs over here and bombs over there

But they scared

Scared of what the future holds

What they possess

But what we will control

So they hate us

For what we are

What we could be

So they decide what we should be

But they can't

Unless we give them the power to control us

Who can tame our wildfires

They burn viciously with potential

Leaving scars on the hearts of all those we past

Trying to be unforgettable

We expand

By loving unconditionally

Giving uncontrollably

Being there when no one else would

Because we know
We know how it feels when the lights go out and your only company is your deepest fears
Climbing into your bed
Creeping into your mind
Feeding lies of "You're nothing.
You will never be anything because your daddy ain't ****.
You'll never make it because you're not smarter than the kid next to you.
You're just another statistic."
And it's all not true
When the lights come on
We realized it was all a dream
Fear runs out and reality ain't what it seems
Our dialect never truly praise our intellect for what we truly know
So we show em
We show em because talk is cheap and what we have is priceless
Nonetheless, we stand on it
When we fall
We bounce back like elastic
Shooting even further the second time around
Our ideas, untouchable
Our drive, unstoppable
So we write our names in present books and make it our history
Because fear of failing was nothing but bad dreams from childhood memories
That our ignited, eternal, internal light overcame
So how can fear be a factor if I'm always shining?

I really enjoyed working with Sarah this semester. Her ideas were always fresh, and it was fun to see what they evolved into as new ideas worked off the old. "Blue," the following short story, is one such idea that evolved with each passing session. The final product is characteristic of Sarah's work, filled with colorful imagery, and powerful emotion.

-Laura Griglak, Tutor

BLUE

SARAH B. MCQUEEN

I stared out at the mass of biting, unfamiliar, blue water. I watched the crashing and tumbling of waves in their hurry to reach the shore, to reach me. The sand in front of me was smooth and glistening from where the water had run over and over it. The water seemed to hiss and spit as yet another wave slammed into the sand before me. I jumped back, afraid of being pulled into this unknown creature that extended forever, filling the horizon and stretching out with no end. Why could it never rest, never be still for just one single moment?

I straightened my spine and glared defiantly out over the top of the waves. Today would be the last time I stood back to afraid too do anything but watch in terror and awe. I will be stronger than this.

The sound of running feet made me turn and look back. I glimpsed a girl, raven dark curls bouncing around her shoulders, scampering across the sand, eager to reach what I could not even bare to touch.

Laughing and happy to be where she was the girl plunged into the water, no hint of fear, no trace of shyness. She took no notice of the way the water threatened and pulled with its ability to claim for itself whatever and whomever it wanted. I bit back the impulse to reach out and stop her, tell her it was not safe, to save her from whatever those churning waters might hold.

The ocean swirled around her, tugging at her, biting at her. She merely smiled a wide childish grin and dipped her hands in as if inviting it to come even closer.

Feeling an odd sensation I looked down to find that the water had crept up around me. I started to jump back, to get away from its touch, out of its reach.

NO, I told myself, *this is why you're here*. Steeling myself I stayed in place and allowed the water to rush over my ankles, feeling it slide across my skin. I reached down to dip my fingers in but the wave skittered away as if suddenly shy of me. Creeping one step at a time I edged closer just to see, just to feel. The icy blue coolness swept around me, the water seemingly untouched by the sun that warmed the rest of me.

I tiptoed out a bit farther, carefully edging my way over the sharper pebbles and sea shells that poked into the bottoms of my feet. Slowly, I uncurled the hands that had balled up into tight fists. I let them brush the surface, trail in the current, an attempt to tame this wild being.

The waves rippled and tossed around me, teasing me out farther. As if unaware of my own movements I seemed to sway and dance with the beat of the ocean. I moved with this blue creature, almost becoming a part of it, until I found myself far from shore. I turned and gazed around me, amazed.

The whole world seemed to have fallen away. Nothing bit or hissed. Nothing threatened and pulled. It was just me and the blue, blue water.

Hilary is a very creative and an excellent writer. Her stories and poems touch on numerous topics and have many different levels that make them very interesting to read. She is also very good at reaching her readers on an emotional level and connecting with her audience, which makes her work that more enjoyable.

-Rick Manthe, Tutor

TWIG SNAPPING

HILARY NEESAM

"That's not right! That's not right!" Molly exclaimed, breathless and shivering. How someone believed so strongly in a God was beyond her. "You don't even know it do you? We're just twig snappers. That's it. That's all we are. We are *just* twig snappers." she put the emphasis on the *just*, as if the only thing they would ever amount to were two fleshy human beings destroying the life of a birch tree.

"Well," Jack took off his hat and messed with his hair, "that's just nonsense."

Molly rolled her eyes and grabbed his hand.

"Well let's change that." she dragged him through the park to the nearest tree. It was the end of November and the bitter cold bit her nose as she crouched to the ground, skimming her warm mitten over the snow in search of a twig. "Damn it, I just need one twig." she muttered, glancing up at him.

"If this is going to be too difficult for you we can just head back inside." Jack's tone was serious but she could tell he was entertained by her attempted demonstration.

"Found one!" she stood up quickly and faced him. "Ready?"

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. Molly took the twig with her two hands and evenly distributed the length. "This," SNAP "is twig snapping." she smiled and handed him a piece of the broken twig.

"That's it?" He was disappointed, just as she expected him to be.

"That's life." Molly shrugged. "Now where's your proof?"

Molly

It was a cold Monday in early December. Justin Vernon's falsetto voice settled in the background as I skimmed through the newspaper looking at the obituaries. My green tea sat cooling in my favorite Christmas coffee mug, the one with the chip on the rim and the snowman riding a sled. I stirred the liquid with my spoon, clinking the sides along with the music. *That secret that we know (clink) that we don't know how to tell (clink) I'm in love with your honor (clink) I'm in love with your cheeks (clink clink) what's that noise up the stairs babe? (clink) Is that Christmas morning creaks? (clink clink)*. The sun shone through the window and ignited the kitchen table with a flood of light that reflected off the snowfall from the night before. I looked up from my newspaper and observed the morning commotion from my window. A cardinal sat in one of the Fraser fir trees my father and I

had planted four years ago. A light snow sat on the tree's branches and as the cardinal hopped from one stem to another the snow casually fell off the tree conforming to its family below. A second cardinal flew to the tree and proudly perched itself next to the first. This bird's feathers were a vibrant red, a great and beautiful contrast to the duller bird beside it. Two squirrels dared to run across the deep snow and their light bodies easily carried them through the mass, straight to the cardinal's tree. They raced each other up the trunk, startling the cardinals and promoting them to take flight. I watched as the two birds flew simultaneously throughout the sky, their wings carrying them quickly to safety. I thought to myself, *If only it were that easy... to escape*. The table started vibrating and I grabbed my cell phone. I answered without looking at the caller's name and when Juliana Teller's voice softly came through the speaker I was surprised by two things: The fact that Juliana Teller was calling me and the fact that she was crying.

I met Juliana Teller the day of my father's funeral. I was standing in the back corner of the room looking at the reflection of a weeping fig through the window. It was early in the evening, around 5 o'clock, and I was thinking about the countless November evenings my father would come home about this time. I imagined him in his hunting clothes opening the kitchen door and toting his guns behind him. I could still smell the cigarettes lingering on his camouflaged jacket.

"Did you get any deer, Dad?" I asked this every time he got home and I always hoped he'd say no. The first and only time I'd ever gone hunting with him I was six years old. My grandfather owned over 100 acres of farm land that lit up with yellow fields of corn in the summertime and rolling hills of bottomless snow in the winter. I sat wrapped in a flannel blanket staring out the window of my father's heated deer stand. Heavy binoculars hung around my neck and I was drinking a Pepsi, devotedly watching the snowy fields for any sign of movement. It felt like I had been staring at an empty white void for hours until I finally saw life.

"There! There's one, dad!" I jumped up and smiled. I didn't dare take my eyes off of the deer that stood so far in the distance. The deer was searching the ground with its nose and I could faintly make out the cold air that came from its nostrils.

"Shh, sit down." My dad whispered, resting his gun on the windowsill. I moved my eyes from the deer to my father and watched as he closed one eye and brought his hand to the trigger. Before I even sat down my dad fired the gun and I turned my head to the location of the deer. The deer took off and ran over a hill out of our sight.

"Did you... Did you get it?" I asked, unsure of how I felt.

"I don't know," my dad said, "let's go see." We hopped into his truck and drove over the hill the deer had fled. As I glanced out my window I saw that we were following a line of deep red snow. My father stopped the truck. "There she is!" He said excitedly. I got out and stood over the dead deer. Heat was rising off her tiny body and the red blood that we had followed was quickly oozing from her breast. I was just a little girl but even at six years old I knew that this deer was too young to have died.

"Dad, she's so little." I said, my voice quivering. My dad bent down and touched the deer.

"I know, Molly, I know." He told me to get in the truck and I sat crying as I watched him gut the deer that probably had a mother, a father, and maybe even a brother or sister waiting for her at home. That was the first time I had ever experienced death and I was haunted with the realization that I helped murder such an innocent creature. I had so quickly taken the life of something breathing. Something that ate like I did, that played like I did, something that watched the snow swirling from the sky just as I did.

The November sky was already pitch dark, typical for 5 o'clock at night in Wisconsin, and the dim lighting inside the parlor allowed me to watch the reflection of the slow shuffle of family and friends behind me. I turned to the weeping fig and rubbed my fingers along the waxy leaves, breaking off the dead foliage and burying the departed in the soil. I didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. I didn't need anyone else to tell me what a great guy my father was or the fact that he's in a better place now. I just wanted to be six years old again, sitting close to him in the warm deer stand eagerly waiting for signs of life.

"Molly? Excuse me, Molly?"

I looked up from the plant to see a thin and flushed woman standing there. She wore no make-up but her large, deep blue eyes radiated from her face. She had smooth skin and curvy lips, her dark brown hair was pulled into a loose bun and I could tell she had been crying. She was beautiful and although I thought she looked young, possibly early thirties, I could tell by the crows feet that surrounded her eyes and the wrinkles forming around her neck that she had to be older. I didn't know who she was and although there were many people at the funeral whom I had never met before, I knew that she was different.

"Yes?" I said, hesitantly.

"I'm Juliana Teller. I... I knew your father." She said it as if she didn't know if this were true or not. That maybe she was mistaken, maybe she didn't know my father at all. I was unsure of what to say to her so I stuck out my hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Juliana." She looked down at my hand and stared. I felt awkward standing in front of her with my hand lingering in the open air. I pulled it back and stared at her. What did she want?

"I'm sorry, Molly." She said. "I'm sorry for what happened to your father." I watched her face as she apologized to the floor. Juliana Teller wouldn't look at me as she said this and I was puzzled about the tone in her voice. Others who had come to me had apologized with sympathy and for the mere fact that my father was gone. "I'm sorry he was taken so soon." "I'm sorry you lost your best friend." "I'm sorry that your father is dead." But it seemed that Juliana was not only offering her condolences, she was asking for forgiveness.

When I hung up with Juliana I sat at my kitchen table and waited. I waited until I felt something. I waited until I went through each part of my body and made sure that I was still alive. I could blink and move my jaw. I could hear the wind rattling my window. I could feel my hands and feet and see as they turned blue. I was so cold. I was breathing (they were short breaths but they were there). I could feel my heart beat (and it was beating fast). But what really assured me that I was still alive was the pain I felt in my stomach.

That's where it hurts the most anyway. Heartbreak or mourning doesn't actually happen in the heart. It's the twisting and turning in the stomach that keeps you up at night. It's the inexhaustible whirlpool inside you that stops you from eating or laughing or even crying. I wish she hadn't told me. I swallowed what was left of the cold, bitter tea and stood up to walk to the sink. I rinsed out the cup with steaming hot water and let it fill to the brim and over my cold hand. My skin started forming inky red blotches and I pulled my hand away once I felt the burn. Yes, I was still alive, but they were not.

Juliana

If I was walking and saw a building on fire, I would run into it and not come out.

Molly

My mother was crazy. She was bipolar, manic depressive, and angry. She was also wonderful. She loved the sky and the water. She loved horses and cooking and making sure that everyone was satisfied. My friends and I would ride with her to the beach on hot summer days. We'd come out of the water sopping wet and stick our hands in the Cheetos bag. She'd laugh at us as we covered ourselves with the cheesy dust and licked our fingers clean. We'd drink Kool aid out of a red jug and she'd reapply sunscreen on our already tanning skin. Then we'd leave and we'd all be crabby with sun kissed skin but her medication was still working so she'd crank up her country music and we couldn't help but sing along. I remember her breakfasts the most. She made the best quiche I've ever had and when I would smell her cheesy potatoes on Christmas morning I thought that this world was perfect. But it wasn't. She was sad and lonely. Even with a daughter and a husband she was lonely. And that's what I didn't understand. When someone loves you how can you be lonely? In the sixth grade my teacher asked me who I wanted to be like when I grew up.

"I don't know..." I replied.

"Well, what about your mother? Don't you want to be like your mother?" she asked. I stared at her and thought of my mother sitting on our living room floor, folding socks and listening to George Strait.

"No." I said. "My mother pretends to be happy." She looked at me and I regretted saying it because her face formed one of those 'I feel bad for you' smiles and then she patted me on the head. So I said, "but she's a really good person."

And she said, "I know dear, I know."

I don't think she knew because when I heard her talking with some of the other teachers at my mother's funeral three months later I heard her say, "You can't say you didn't see it coming." And I thought *my mother was a really good person.*

Jack

After we left the park I got into my car and I waited. Twig snapping? How simple. Twig snapping! It's not that simple. I don't really know why I believe in God. Probably just as much as she doesn't know why she doesn't believe in him. But I do know that I'd rather

believe in something than believe in nothing at all. She got into her car and drove away and I thought to myself *that is the last time I will see her*. But I knew that wasn't true. She might not be the best for me but she was good for me. She listened as I let the words escape from my mouth. She knew what it was like to lose someone and realize that no matter how much she talked or thought about it, it would never bring that person back. I liked her hands and her feet. Her smile and chin. Maybe it was her eyes. They were so green and when the light hit them just right she looked like she had all the answers in the entire world. But don't all women have that? I think it's a secret they share and long ago they swore never to tell men that deep down, they know everything about life one needs to know. So maybe when she said that all we will ever amount to in life are twig snappers, maybe she was right.

Juliana

There was nothing I wanted more in the entire world than a child and someone to love that child with me. When Steven told me that he didn't want kids, I broke up with him. When Anthony said we'd have to wait a few years, I told him goodbye. And when James said *of course I want kids*, I married him. I think James would have done anything for me. It wasn't because he wanted my approval or because he was buying my love but because he already had my approval and he already had my love. When I found out I was having a boy I cried. I knew that he would look like James. I knew he would inherit his golden eyes and his rough hands and his loud laugh. I knew he'd have his soothing voice and his calm presence. I knew he'd be tall with dark hair and tan skin and I wouldn't even care that he probably would start smoking when he was old enough because at least it would only be when he was thinking hard about something.

Molly

She didn't tell me why he did it. She didn't say why he got in the car or why he took Charlie with him. She just said that he did. She told me that he was dead and they were dead and now she was dead but she wasn't. He killed my dad, and then he killed them, and then she died. But she didn't. Because even if you're barely breathing, even if you're barely holding on, you're still breathing and you're still holding on. And that means you're alive even when you don't want to be.

Jack

I didn't go to the funeral. I didn't want to feel death anymore. I didn't want to see her as she experienced death again. I think she understood that I couldn't stand by a closed casket and not think about the last time I stood by a closed casket. So I stayed at home on that cold winter night and I waited for my neighbors to turn off their Christmas lights so I could imagine that this world was all the same. That we all were just part of a black, empty void and someday soon we'd all be gone. I sat on my bed and thought of nothing. Why should I turn to God now? He takes everyone away and never gives them back. I sat until every light on my street went out and only the faint light from the hall that crept in under my door created shadows of all the people who ever lived before me. Because they knew that this world was just a black, empty void, and one day they'd be gone. And I fell asleep thinking that if God were real we would all live forever.

Juliana

After his wake, I drove to the cemetery. It was cold and getting dark but I needed to make sure it was real. I needed to make sure that if I walked along the icy path lined with dead plants and dead leaves and if I passed the shed with the single shovel resting on the cold, dead wood, that I would come to a fence that trapped every dead body lying under the frozen, dead ground, and right by that black iron fence that let no one who entered out alive, I would see two gravestones that to me read “they are dead.” They are dead.

Molly

I hate it when people say “things will get better.” Because it’s not the *will* people care about, it’s the *now*. I want things to be better *now*. I hung up with Juliana and sat at my table and I wished she hadn’t told me. I wish she hadn’t said that his eyes were golden because his eyes were golden. I wish she had just said, “I’m sorry for what happened to your father.” But instead she told me and now I feel like I am Juliana. Not just a piece of her, but her, as a whole. Like her spirit left her body and decided to enter mine. Because the images I see in my head I have never seen before. I see a young boy riding a bike and a dark, brown haired women waving to him down the street. I see a man making spaghetti and singing, grabbing the dark, brown haired women and twirling her through the kitchen. I watch as a tall, dark haired man and a tall, dark haired women each hold one hand of a young boy who has dark, brown hair and golden eyes. Everyone dies. Everyone dies. Everyone dies. The deer died. My mom died. Jack’s sister died. My dad died. James died. Charlie died.

Jack

I woke up sweating. Not a week went by that I didn’t relive the accident. I would dream about the trail of deep, red blood that seeped from her chest to my feet. I cried out at the sight of her face, the skin missing and her bones cracked. It was as if God took an eraser and wiped away a masterpiece. Didn’t God paint her sea green eyes? Didn’t he place each dimple perfectly on her face? I wanted to see the way her eyebrows squinted in frustration when I called her a peanut. She was so little. She was too young to have died. I had so quickly taken the life of something breathing. Something that ate like I did, that played like I did, something that watched the snow swirling from the sky just as I did. I grabbed the water that sat by my bed and I drank it until there was nothing left. The hall light had turned off and the room was dark. *Twig snapping*. I thought to myself. *We’re just twig snappers. That’s it*. I held on to God for so long so one day I would see her again. But now I get the feeling that no one and nothing is out there to make things better. Because we are just twig snappers. That’s it. I put on pants and my jacket and crept out of my room. My shoes were by the front door and after slipping them on I went outside and entered into the black void. It was pitch black. The moon was gone and the stars were gone and I could not see and I did not want to see. I walked along the crunchy snow until I reached a tree. I bent down in search of a twig and when my hand touched one I grabbed on and did not let go because this was life and this was all life would ever be. I headed towards Molly’s.

Juliana

He was drunk.

Molly

I struggled under my covers, twisting and turning as Juliana's memories flooded my mind. I wrapped my body like a winding sheet, preparing my own corpse for burial. I didn't expect to hear from Juliana again. I don't think I want to. Her pain is my pain and if we were to see each other I think we would both burst into a million, little pieces. It was nearly 4 am and I couldn't fall asleep. After unraveling my body I walked to the kitchen and jumped at the sight of a dark figure sitting at the kitchen table.

"Hey Molly." It was Jack.

"I didn't mean to scare you." He sounded tired and defeated.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him. I hadn't seen him in days and was upset that he hadn't called.

"Couldn't sleep." He was holding something in his hand.

"Well, you should have called." I walked over and sat down.

"I know, I'm sorry. How are you doing?" He started tapping whatever he was holding. I didn't know how to answer him. There were too many feelings going through my body. I started to cry quietly.

"Did you know that my dad wasn't the only one who died?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean in the accident. He wasn't the only one who died."

"Well, the newspaper said that two other people were injured..."

"They weren't injured. They died. It was a father and a little boy. They died. Everyone dies."

"I..."

"What are you holding?" I interrupted him and there was a pause.

"It's a stick. A twig."

"Why?"

"Because... I don't know. Because I don't know what to believe in anymore."

"That's life isn't it? Life is sad and it's heartbreaking and it's confusing." My stomach hurt. My heart hurt. My mind hurt. All of me hurt. Jack snapped the twig and handed me one half.

"We're just twig snappers." he mumbled. "That's all we'll ever be."

I grabbed his hand and I did not let go.

Bob Pekol is such a creative writer; he is full of clever and fresh ideas. This semester, he regularly took the initiative to write unique and interesting pieces while experimenting with a lot of different genres—even if he felt out of his comfort zone. This particular essay, an editorial piece, explores a topic that he feels strongly about – censorship in the media. He worked hard to express his opinion on censorship, while incorporating a substantial amount of research into the essay. His dry wit and personal voice are expertly captured in his writing.

-Denise Calhoun, Tutor

THE JOY OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT

ROBERT PEKOL

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” That is the First Amendment of the United States of America. Look it up if you don’t believe me. (United States Constitution) Let me tell you specifically about the freedom of speech, and how wonderful it is to our country. When we have freedom of speech, we can get tons of information out to others, even more so with the boom of the Internet in the last ten years. Some of the most important mediums for the spreading of information include television, movies, and literature. Artists brought several new ideas just through those mediums. But there are some people who like to censor these ideas because they find them “offensive.” The censoring of something that someone finds “offensive” in the mediums of literature, film, and TV is not fair to others because it prevents the spreading of ideas.

The First Amendment has brought lots of controversy ever since the forefathers passed it in the days of yesteryear, and it seems that the arts is the most controversial out of all the things that the first amendment protects. When I say the arts, I mean the aforementioned mediums of TV, film, and literature, and other things such as paintings, sculptures, etc. There are some who think that the first amendment refers to political speech, and that they are the ones who deserve protection. Then there are others like myself who believe that it covers all forms of speech, whether it be a newspaper article, a movie, a song, a book, or even a soup label.

Books deserve the protection just as much as any other part of speech does, but people feel that there are books that are “offensive” and therefore should not be read. What is offensive? Webster’s dictionary defines offensive as something that causes displeasure or resentment to people. Who are these people? Parents! That’s right! Parents are the number one group of people who challenge books every year! (ALA) And what sort of books do they not like? They do not like Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain for reasons of homosexuality and racism. Last time I read that book I could have sworn there was no gay sex scene. Harry Potter for anti-family, Satanism, violence, and witchcraft. I read those books too and I don’t remember Hermione worshipping the devil, Harry being so happy that his family was dead, and Ron murdering people senselessly. And I have tried to throw my neighbors cat into the air by waving a stick and yelling WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA at the top of my lungs but it doesn’t work. Rats. And I thought witches were real. Captain Underpants went to the

chopping block for offensive language. I read those books too, and words like poop, fart, and burp were words I heard every day when I was little. I don't recall George and Harold dropping curse words in it either. But then again, that is just what I remember. The His Dark Materials Trilogy went to the firing squad for religious viewpoint. What about any encyclopedia that refers to Judaism, Buddhism, Catholicism, or Protestantism? If you can't have those books in your library for that reason, shouldn't you take out the Bible as well? The most absurd is Where's Waldo for violence and sexual imagery. What Where's Waldo did those parents read? There are others such as 1984, Grapes of Wrath, Animal Farm, The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird along with many more that have gone under the axe of parents. I find it unfair that books suffer this fate. Now I do understand that you probably shouldn't have sex manuals in the local elementary school library, or books on how to build a bomb. But really, there is a limit. There are parents who say they are promoting good morals by censoring these books. The Bible also promotes good morals, yet the irony of it is that it is one of the most graphic books in human history if not THE most graphic book in human history. People drown, get their heads cut off, get stoned to death, get whipped, get raped, get shot with arrows, get killed with slingshots, get cast into a fiery sea, abused by others, rot, get possessed, lie, have sex while they aren't married, have sex when they are married, have sex with someone else while they are married, cheat, steal, gamble, devoured by animals, get covered in boils, lose their children, smear goat blood on their doors, threaten to kill each other, go to war, swear, call each other names, burn in hell, and of course CRUCIFIED. Yet there are copies of the St. James Bible in libraries. History books are considerably graphic when talking about the relocation of the Native Americans to the reservations, depictions of wars, or the Holocaust. So as long as the book is educational in some way then it is ok? Those other books have every right to be on those shelves because they also spread new ideas and that is also educational.

What do I mean by "new ideas?" When I say "new ideas" it really could be anything. It could be a way a filmmaker shoots a film. It could be the way an author writes a book. It could be the underlying themes brought about in a book, a movie, or in a TV show. It could be the portrayal of a character. These are all new ideas.

Sex isn't one of those new ideas. It's human nature. People have sex. People have sex for fun. People have sex to make babies. But America seems to have this weird taboo of sex. From my observation, Americans think that if anything were to destroy a society, it would be sex and not violence. There is some strange double standard about sex and violence.

The double standard prominently reveals itself in American film. The Motion Picture Association of America, better known as the MPAA, has a stronger stance against sex in film than it does with violence. Films like Die Hard, Lethal Weapon, Rambo, and Friday the 13th managed to secure R ratings for graphic depictions of violence when other films like Blue Valentine, Eyes Wide Shut, American Pie, and Last Tango in Paris all had NC-17 ratings for sexual content before their filmmakers edited them to secure the R rating. (Dick) The NC-17 rating is a death sentence in film. If your movie receives an NC-17 rating from the MPAA, most theaters won't run the film and more importantly, advertisers won't advertise the film, so your film is doomed to fail at the box office. Why is America so uptight about sex? It is not fair to censor films just because of sex and then not censor them because of violence. Why prevent the release of exposure of ideas to others just because you don't want to offend someone?

Another organization that has this same strange power of censorship is Standards and Practices of network TV. Their job is to review everything that goes on network TV to make sure that it is in agreement with any community and legal standards. (Standards and Practices) They have the power to decide what airs and what doesn't air. All of this power belongs to the network. The network is scared of losing their audiences because they are worried it may offend them, so they have to censor TV. Cable TV is more relaxed, for there are people who don't get the cable channels and the standards are more relaxed when it comes to premium channels such as HBO and Showtime. Is it fair that I have to pay more for shows with creative freedom? Why censor the medium?

If you keep censoring the medium by not letting creative people push the envelope, how is it that the medium can evolve? That is why I strongly oppose censorship in the media. How is it fair for one person or a group of people to decide what is offensive? One person may find it perfectly fine. It is not that far from Hitler and other forms of Fascism. Why let someone tell us what to do and what we can and can't watch or read? How is that fair for one thing to not be offensive and another to be offensive? To quote the character Kyle Broflovski from the show South Park, "Either everything is funny, or nothing is funny." (Parker and Stone) In the context of the show he was referring to whether the Fox network should censor an image of Muhammad from an episode of Family Guy. If you take that quote to a deeper level, everything should be fair game. This idea of everything or nothing applies to media censorship. Censor everything or censor nothing. Many creative artists feel frustrated because censors allow them to do one thing and won't allow them to do another. How is that fair to those who want to express their ideas? Let the ideas and information flow.

To make these ideas flow, people need to let others have access to that information. Don't deny others their right to information. If South Park offends you, don't watch it! If To Kill a Mockingbird offends you, STOP READING IT. Don't take those things away from people just because of your own personal biases. We all grow up in different backgrounds. Some have religious backgrounds, some not. Some have liberal backgrounds, and some are conservative. Don't assume that other people believe in the same things that you do. America has this other weird thing of trying to make everybody happy. It's part of the American Dream to be happy. If something makes someone unhappy, America will go out of its way to make that person happy. It is a double-edged sword because you can make one person happy but upset another, so you are fighting a never-ending battle that you can't win.

But how can we fight this battle of offensiveness? My answer would be parenting. Parents have a huge influence on children. Enlighten the children. Yes, violence is bad. Yes, sex can be harmful. So explain that to the children. CONTEXT. Explain to your child what they just saw in a book, movie or TV show. Explain that violence is wrong. Explain sex. Explain those things and how they tie into that work and then apply it to real life. Explain to your child that if you shoot someone, they will die. Explain the difference between what is fantasy and reality.

The fantasy is that all types of information are free in the media. But the reality is that it isn't free. With more information, we can learn more, and we can evolve. That is just being human, striving to be better. Freedom of speech can do that for us. Let it.

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Eric has a strong passion for writing works of fantasy and brings something very unique to the table. He is a History major and through his knowledge of history, he draws parallels of the real world into his works of "fantasy". This piece is part of a larger novel we have been working on all semester. This particular part follows one of his protagonists that hasn't always led an honest life and is making strides to change himself.

- Kaitlyn Luckow, Tutor

ARI IN GINAVIA

ERIC REED

The sun was setting as Ari crested the last hill along the dusty kings' road and beheld the capital city of Ginavia. All the sunlight touched was bathed in warm oranges and reds, an odd contrast to the chill of the evening. The watch towers along the wall cast long shadows along the ground towards travelers on the road. The pointed towers of the castle seemed aglow with heavenly light and Ari thought they had never looked so inviting. While riding along the kings' road he realized something in his nature changing. He decided the encounter with the magician, or whatever that abomination he fought was, had changed his outlook on life. Never had he felt so fearful and chilled as the cloaked being touched his shoulder. He knew if the magician hadn't spent so much time talking and would have gotten about his business straightaway, Ari would not be alive.

He spent a lot of his time soaking in the world around him now. Always on guard against thieves or wild animals that may find him a decent meal, but taking the time to appreciate his surroundings. There was a beauty to the woodlands, fields and streams he crossed on his way back to Ginavia. He reflected on the death of his companion, Otto, trying not to think of the grisly way he had died, rather how much he missed the strange man's company. Ari decided he would make the Temple of Turra the first of many stops in the city, and would make a sizeable donation in his friend's name. He couldn't think of any better way of honoring Otto's memory.

Ari slowly trotted through the city's eastern gate, catching no attention from the guards stationed on the ground or the archers above. He appeared to them just another weary traveler in need of food, shelter and a very long soak in a bath. The last few months delivered very little rain to the region and dust clouds were the travelers' constant companion. Traders of food and fine items needed to purchase extra coverings for their wagons, or risk soiling their goods. At the very least the food vendors in the marketplace would need to wash the fruits and vegetables to make them look edible.

The vendors in the marketplace were, at the moment, closing up their little outfits for the day. They scurried about rolling up canvas tents and clearing the tables of their various wares. A few stayed operational just a little longer, hoping for late customers to happen by. Ari dismounted in front of a gray haired old man peddling fruit and bought a juicy looking apple to silence the rumbling in his stomach.

"Good day to you, sir," the man said as they completed the transaction. Ari noticed the man was in good health despite his advancing years. There was still plenty of life left in his brown eyes and he seemed to be the type to be quick to smile and always ready with some quick quip to give patrons. His steady wrinkled hands put the money away in his

wooden cash box and Ari noticed the man had had quite a good day of sales from the amount of copper and silver present.

“And to you, old man. What’s the latest news around the city? I’ve been gone quite a spell.” Ari figured this man would not miss any piece of gossip that was spoken as people passed his stand.

“It seems the King has taken quite an interest in the happenings of our neighbors to the south. A minor border skirmish between our soldiers and the men of the Deep Basin may prove to be a precursor to battle. Also the good people of the city were entertained by the execution of two poachers that were caught red handed field dressing a huge brown stag in the King’s forest.” The man smiled broadly at his clever telling of the apprehended criminals. “Had it been a Great White stag they might have found themselves field-dressed on the spot. The king does so love the sport of hunting those for himself and mounting the heads o’er his fireplaces.”

“No good comes from a life of crime it seems,” Ari mused as he thought of his own transgressions and knew there was a time or two he nearly found himself in line to amuse the peasantry.

“Definetely not, sir. I will stick to selling my fruit and enjoying the feel of my neck and head joined in happy matrimony.” With that the man gave a deep rolling laugh and slapped his thigh. “There may not be riches involved in what I do, but I enjoy my days just fine. So long as the taxes aren’t outrageous that is. Rumor has it the King has been in talks with the Leader of the Watch and Treasurer and might be raising the taxes yet again to add more guards to patrol the streets in hope of preventing more trouble from the *Hravn*. Those damn murderous thugs!”

“I see,” Ari replied as he rubbed his hand over his cheeks, trying to look concerned over the news of taxes and thieves. “Tell me old man, have you heard any news of strange magic being witnessed in the area, or perhaps of any incidents of thievery that maybe the Watch found particularly disturbing to the peace?”

“Hmm. Seems I may recall a couple little pieces of info here and there...but my memory is a bit fuzzy these days.” Seeing the obvious hint at the price of information, Ari slid his hand inside his tunic and pulled out a small silver coin and held it before the man to inspect. The man nodded and grabbed the coin.

“Ahh yes, it’s all coming back to me now. Seems I remember a piece of jewelry being stolen from the daughter of the wealthy merchant Charles last week. Not only was the necklace stolen, but the daughter murdered in the process. The priests of Turra were baffled by the manner of death though, as no physical signs of trauma were present. They whispered that it seems the life was simply sucked from her body, leaving her sprawled in a clumsy fashion on her feathered bed and fancy sheets. This was put in the official report, but kept secret from the public as to not alarm anyone. Should any more deaths of this nature occur it could cause a panic. Guards around this city seem oblivious to eavesdroppers,” the man winked to Ari as he whispered his last bit.

Ari flicked another small silver coin to the man and thanked him for the information. He nodded to the happy old man and walked the rest of the way through the market on foot, giving his tired horse a rest from the burden of a rider. Ari thanked the gods he arrived in the city when the marketplace was all but deserted and there was still enough daylight left to keep the pickpockets at bay. He still carried a small fortune of gold on his person that he needed to be split with the temple. Then he would stash the rest in his secret

holding in the loft of an abandoned building in the leatherworks. The area smelled so awful that he was sure no sane person would go snooping for his precious gold.

He made his way through the winding streets, across narrow alleys and finally approached the Temple District. The area encompassed an odd assortment of buildings, great and small, all speckled amongst each other in a haphazard fashion. Each building devoted to worship of the multitude of deities the inhabitants of this region prayed to.

The Temple of Turra cast a long shadow over the nearby buildings, as it was easily one of the biggest structures in the whole city. Turra was the matron deity of the city and her followers had spared no expense in constructing a place of worship for her divinity. Ari had never really bothered to look at the temple before, but now he looked at the intricate marble carvings and twisting spires with a newfound pleasure. He felt as if he would never again simply go through a day in his life oblivious to the world around him. He admired the natural beauty of the forests and plains and also the man-made structures of the city.

As he neared the archway that led into the temple, he suddenly felt as though he was being watched. He slowly cast his gaze left and right without moving his head, trying not to look alarmed as he tied up his horse just outside the temple. He grabbed an extra knife from a hidden compartment on his saddle and hid it in his sleeve as he continued scanning the area for the person responsible for his unease. He moved around the pole he had just tied his exhausted horse to and walked as casually as possible the few remaining feet to the archway and immediately put his back to the solid stone, hoping he was shadowed from his pursuer.

A few moments later he heard the faint shuffling of a man trying to creep his way to the temple entrance. Ari poised himself for attack, not wanting to take a fight into hallowed ground. He slowed his breathing and waited for the man to come around the corner. Ari tried to control his breathing and steady his rapidly beating heart. His thoughts had turned to the magician again, and thought this man was another of the magician's hirelings come to kill him.

Ari glimpsed a flicker of cloth as the man approached and he immediately sprang into action. He punched the cloaked man in the face and stepped around him, putting his knife tight to the man's back and shoving the man into the hard marble of the archway.

"Who are you, and why are you following me?" Ari demanded, keeping the knife pressed against the stranger and his other arm firmly gripping his right shoulder, forearm holding his neck and head against the stone. "Answer me!"

"Shhh," the dazed man managed. "I'll tell you all you wish to know inside the temple, we aren't safe out here."

"You aren't safe here you mean," Ari said and pressed a little harder with the point of the knife. "I won't ask again. Tell me why the hell you're following me."

"I know who attacked you in the Deadwoods," the cloaked man replied. "As I said before, I will tell you all you could possibly want to know and most likely more than you want to know. Now if you would please remove your dagger from my spine, I am in no mood to fight you. It would take me half a second to grant you a painful death, very much the same as your friend received from Isa's magic."

Ari barely heard the threat; his mind was spinning at the man's admitted knowledge of his previous fight. "Alright, in there," Ari said as he nodded in the direction of the temple. "Slowly, I would rather not have to fight someone in the house of our Mother."

"I'm sure Mother appreciates the forethought," the stranger said wryly as he passed through the open second arch into the great vaulted room that served as the spot of worship for the commoners during the weekly sermon. "Put the damn knife away, you fool. There's really no need for it. I have no intention of causing trouble. I'm here to help you, and in turn help myself and my people."

Ari reluctantly placed the blade back in his sleeve, keeping it out of sight but still accessible. He followed the stranger through the hall and stopped short as he motioned Ari through a curtained doorway into a private room set aside for personal worship of the goddess. The hooded man made an angry snarling sound as he muttered under his breath. "For the love of Turra herself, get in here. Stupid human, you wouldn't trust an apple grown from your own orchard, would you?"

Ari blinked in shock as the man's face changed before him. His face turned a soft gold as fur sprouted over his skin. What had been a slight beard and mustache grew out further than the soft fur covering the rest of his face. His brows and hair darkened and his nose flattened slightly. Ari stood slack-jawed in front of a Purian, the ancient race that inhabited the cold lands of Senecar. He had seen a few in his many travels, but had never spoken to one.

"There, you see me as I truly am. My name is Taran, of the Pure. I was sent to find you and learn the details of your encounter with the exiles of my race, Virik and Isa." He dropped the curtain and went inside the room, leaving Ari standing frozen outside. "Would you get in here, the clergy will think you had some miraculous encounter with Turra herself; standing out there by yourself like an idiot. Now come in here and sit your ass down. We have much to discuss and the sooner we get to it, the sooner something can be done about your new enemy. Believe me when I say enemy, as Virik will now make it a point to bring you hell."

Ari shook his head sharply to clear his mind and brushed aside the curtain as he stepped into the room. He sat across the room from Taran on the wooden bench that wrapped along the walls of the small private room. The only other furnishing in the room was a statuette of the goddess and a candle holder adorned with a long white candle for prayer offerings to her. He tried to regain his composure as Taran removed his outer cloak and set it beside himself. He wore a simple blue tunic and black pants. A small jeweled necklace that gleamed with unnatural light hung from his neck.

"I did just hear you mention the names Isa and Virik, right?" Ari asked, not yet sure what had just been revealed to him. "Those are names of legend, older than the greatest cities of man. Surely you can't mean the magician I just fought is the same one that devastated your land thousands of years ago, that's impossible."

"The very same, I'm afraid," Taran responded with a sigh. "His practice of unholy magic has allowed him to survive many times over the longest lifespans of our race. We had assumed he died hundreds of years ago, as his magic hadn't been seen since the start of the Arunic Conquest on our continent."

"If that was him, why didn't he turn me to dust where I stood?"

"The Loremasters believe his channel to his minion wasn't strong enough to allow his power to manifest properly. I know that might not make much sense to you, but bear

with me, I'll explain it the best I can. We believe his original intention was to have his human slave collect the amulet as planned. But then something happened to change his plan... perhaps you can fill me in on the details of your experience, and then I can fill in the holes in my explanation."

Ari frowned as he remembered the incident in the woods, but told Taran everything that had taken place. Whether or not he could trust Taran to tell him the truth he didn't know, but Ari hoped the Purian wasn't trying to deceive him in some unknown way. He did his best to recount every detail, feeling better for getting the memories of the horrible events off his chest. When he was finished talking, Ari sat in silence while Taran tapped his fingers to his chin. Taran had his eyes closed and Ari wondered just what Taran would be willing to reveal to him.

"The Loremasters have decided it might be best to take you to them directly and we can sort through this mess," Taran said with little emotion.

"They what... how could you possibly know that?" Ari asked. Shock was clearly visible on his face. His head felt as if it would explode. Could he believe that the man in front of him was speaking with others that were hundreds of miles away? *I guess if a magician can control a body from a distance they ought to be able to speak that way too.* "This is all a little much for me to handle right now."

"I can fill you in on the nature of magic on our journey to Senecar. That is if you'll accept the invitation. The Loremasters don't often allow outsiders, especially humans to stand before them. It is a great honor. They must sense something in your nature that clearly marks you as different. Judging by the look on your face right now, I would say you can't handle much more of our strange ways. Your very world is spinning around you, isn't it? I suggest you think their proposal over and get some rest here for the night. I'll notify the clergymen that you will be staying the night in "holy contemplation" and be back for you in the morning."

With that Taran threw his cloak around his shoulders and took on the look of a human once more. He quickly moved through the curtain, leaving Ari alone in the little room.

Ari sat dumbfounded for a few moments, then regained some composure and stood up to light the plain white candle below the likeness of the Mother. He supposed the priests would expect at least that from someone in silent contemplation. *If they only knew what I had to contemplate.* He mulled over the events of the night as he lay on his back along the hard wooden bench, watching the small flame of the candle dance slowly from side to side. *Well I guess I needed to find something to do with my time. I won't be going back to the streets as a pickpocket and assassin, that's for sure. What can the Pure possibly do to help me? Can I really trust what Taran said? What if I'm being led into a trap?* With those thoughts running wild through his head, Ari closed his eyes and fell into a surprisingly deep sleep.

The sun was just clearing the horizon when Ari emerged from the Temple. He felt fully rested for the first time in days and had said a silent prayer to the goddess before extinguishing the small candle in his room. He made sure to keep his eyes open for any signs of trouble as he approached his horse. He hadn't expected to spend the night in the temple, so he hadn't unsaddled his horse. He felt bad for the poor animal, and patted her neck lightly as he promised her better treatment over the next few days. The horse snorted in response and threw her head back. Ari hoped it was in acknowledgement of his promise

and not a scoff at him. Ari was also painfully aware of the fact that he could've come out to find his saddle and belongings stolen, maybe even the horse as well. Again he thanked the goddess for watching over him and went about checking all his pouches. He kept a mental inventory of his stuff and decided he would need to get the rest of his gold from his safe house before leaving to buy supplies.

"I'm pleasantly surprised to find you awake at this hour," A familiar voice said from behind him, and Ari nearly jumped out of his skin. "We should be on our way as soon as possible."

"Damn you, Taran. I almost died of fright! How the hell did you sneak up on me so quietly? *No one* is that sneaky," Ari hissed in a forced whisper. He remembered the last time someone snuck up on him like that with a visible shudder.

"That's only one of the many things I can teach you. We, the Pure, as you humans call us, can teach you things you only dreamed of, and some things you haven't dreamed of as a matter of fact," Taran grinned as he looked around at their surroundings, no doubt making sure they weren't under scrutiny from prying eyes.

"So you just assume that I'm making ready to go with you?"

"Of course. I didn't even need to give you the night to decide, I could read your eyes well enough to know your interest was piqued. Even as your mind reeled," Taran laughed, showing the first hint that his task to find Ari wasn't as much of a burden as it seemed the night before. "So, let's make for John's Landing. I have a ship waiting already for the crossing to Senecar."

"Alright, but first I would like to get some fresh clothes, some food for this poor horse and a bath. I feel like I was drug behind a carriage from one end of Stighar to the other."

"Fair enough. Though I don't think it'll matter much after two or three weeks at sea," Taran said as they left the Temple district behind.

Ari glanced back and saw the rising sun crest the top of the temple roof and smiled. Perched on the tallest peak was a marble statue of the Mother with her hands outstretched before her. She seemed alive in the glow of early morning sunlight. He felt as if he were floating down the streets of Ginavia... right until his head exploded in pain and the world went dark around him.

Daniel has been working on his novel-to-be, "Hex," for a long time. In fact, he's written the five chapters and several WordPlay installments across his entire college career of '57's. It's been really exciting to watch his writing "level up" as his anachronistic urban fantasy unfolds.
-Joey Collard, Tutor

HEX

DANIEL RUTHERFORD

Chapter Four: Plans

Hex was by no means an impatient individual. He could be stubborn, yes, but he had learned to keep himself busy with long periods of inactivity. Sometimes he meditated, other times he would simply spend it checking over his possessions or sharpening his scythe.

Still, even a three hundred and some odd year old Grim Reaper had his limits.

"Veness, how much longer are you going to take in there?!" Hex shouted to the bathroom door. "I could have left about an hour ago if it wasn't for you taking your time with whatever you're doing in there!"

The bathroom door cracked open, Veness poking her head out. "I want to be properly dressed for this."

"Properly..." Hex pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance. "We're going to fight some high-ranking demon, not attending a ball. We've been over this hundreds of times now, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that."

"Well aware of that, thank you very much," She shut the door. "I just want to be sure that I look good when I'm fighting him."

Hex sighed before sitting down on the bed. He knew it was only fair to give her time to prepare. She wasn't just freshening up in there. Veness was more than likely checking over her own equipment and making sure her weapons were in proper condition. How she managed to hide several dozen throwing knives, a tomahawk, and a short sword underneath a cocktail dress was beyond his understanding, but she had done it on more than a few occasions.

Another fifteen minutes and the demoness stepped out of the bathroom in a loose-fitting black shirt and blue skirt that reached down to her ankles. Her opal necklace still hung around her neck, and she had traded her high heels for some more casual slip-on shoes.

"Well, how do I look?"

"Fine. Ready?"

Veness's lips quirked to a small smile. "Yep," She made her way to the door. "You look nice, by the way."

Hex was still wearing his dark blue hooded sweatshirt and jeans, but he was now carrying a backpack as well, which was holding the rest of his equipment he would need to fight Aragus.

"No trench coat, huh?" Veness asked. "That's a shame, I kind of liked it on you."

"It would draw too much attention to us during the day," Hex replied. "We have a lot of ground to cover before nightfall."

Veness grinned. "You're in luck, actually. I know how much you love warping, so I set up a teleportation anchor in north Bardview."

"Good. That will cut our time to less than half."

The two left the hotel room and returned their keys to the front desk of the Golden Crescent Inn before heading outside. They turned down the nearest alleyway, and Hex drew out a small pen from his pocket.

"You want to do the honors?" Hex asked while turning to Veness, holding the pen out for her to take.

Veness grinned. "Of course," She took the pen and held it out in front of her. She made several motions with the pen, as though she was trying to draw something in the air. Several symbols appeared before her, floating in the air while emitting a soft hum.

"Just so you know, we're not coming back if you forgot anything."

"Hey, that happened only once!" Veness snapped. "Those high heels of mine were not cheap, so you can't blame me for that. It didn't help that you were rushing me, either."

"Just telling you, Veness." Hex said.

Veness nodded before holding her free hand in front of the glowing symbols and channeling some of her power into them, causing the symbols to disappear. The air seemed to warp a bit before a rip in space appeared, creating what could only be described as an entrance made entirely of light. Veness stepped into the light, followed immediately by Hex. The light dimmed before the rift closed up, and any who would have looked down the alley would have been none the wiser.

* * *

"Lucia, honey, are you home?" Maria slowly opened the door to Lucia's apartment, checking around before stepping in. "Lucia, I'm coming in, alright?"

Maria walked through the small living room silently, stopping periodically to listen for any possible sounds that would indicate Lucia's presence. She eventually reached the vampiric girl's bedroom door and knocked gently. "Lucia?"

She cracked the door open, her eyes straining as they adjusted to the darkness. The sound of sheets rustling could be heard within the dark.

"M-Maria?"

Maria smiled warmly as she saw the faint outline of Lucia within the mess of sheets on the bed. "Yes, it's me. It's almost ten o' clock. I made some pancakes and bacon, and I was wondering if you were hungry at all."

"Well..." Lucia was quiet for a few moments before speaking. "I don't want to be rude, but if you're inviting me..."

"Lucia, dear, I'm inviting you to breakfast. There's no need to feel like you're inconveniencing me," She chuckled quietly as Lucia crawled out from her bed. "Now, are you hungry?"

"Yes."

Maria gave a nod. "I thought so. Come along, then, before the food gets cold."

Lucia soon found herself seated at the kitchen table within Maria's apartment. She was seated across from a rather muscular man with sandy brown hair, stood somewhere around six feet tall, and he appeared to be around the same age as Maria.

"So, you're the new tenant, huh?"

"Um, yes...my name's Lucia."

Maria walked up beside the man, placing her hands on either of his shoulders.
"Lucia, this is my husband, Gabe."

"Oh!" Lucia gave a respectful nod. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for your hospitality."

"See?" Maria began. "She's so polite."

Gabe chuckled as he extended a hand across the small table. Lucia hesitated for a second before shaking the massive hand.

"Happy to meet you, Lucia. So, I trust Hex didn't give you too much trouble when he brought you here?"

"No, Hex was very kind...although...I was scared when I first saw him. I thought he was going to..." Her voice trailed off as she stared down at her plate of half-eaten breakfast.

Gabe frowned a little; Maria had filled him in on the details about her background, so he could understand her withdrawn behavior. He hoped that with time she would open up to them. It had been awhile since they had gotten a new tenant, and unlike some of their past renters, she wasn't a criminal or someone on the run from the law.

"So, Lucia, you have any hobbies?"

"Hobbies?" Lucia repeated before nodding. "I like doing mosaics and glass work."

"No kidding?" Gabe asked, putting down the newspaper he had been reading.

"Mosaics? That's quite a skill. Glass work too?"

"My father taught me a little about staining glass. I picked up on mosaics while we traveled, and I really enjoy it."

"Wow, Lucia. Glass work? You'll have to teach me a thing or two some time."

"Careful, Maria. Remember the last time you tried doing artwork?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "So I don't have talent in sculpting or water color. I'm sure Lucia could teach me a thing or two."

Gabe smiled. "Well, if she can, than she would be the first to do so successfully."

"Well, at least I know how to do laundry without destroying all the pastels."

"That was one time, Maria."

"Seven times, actually," Maria corrected. "That's not including the time that you put the bleach in with the darks and-"

"I'd be happy to teach you how to do mosaics, Maria." Lucia said. "I'm not the greatest, but...I do enjoy it nonetheless."

"Well, art lessons will have to wait until later," Maria stated. "We're going to go shopping and get you some clothes."

"I think I told you before, but I don't have enough money for clothing right now."

Gabe waved a hand. "Don't sweat it, Lucia. It's on us."

Maria gave a nod. "That's right. Then we'll go about finding you a job."

"A job? What about school?"

"Ah, well, there's a nice high school we can get you enrolled into," Gabe began. "I assume you attended a school in the past?"

"I did. After ninth grade I had to drop out and my father and I had to leave our hometown," Lucia replied in a tiny voice, her eyes drifting to the light pouring through the windows of the kitchen. "Father felt bad about it, but vampire hunters were after us, so we didn't have much of a choice."

"Vampire hunters?" Gabe repeated. "Who would be crazy enough to go after vampires?"

"Well, it's not like they ever were by themselves," Lucia added. "Usually they worked in groups of five to ten, sometimes more."

Maria walked over to the young girl, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You won't have to worry about that anymore, dear. This is a relatively safe neighborhood, and Hex makes a point of visiting us every couple of weeks when he has time."

"How do you know Hex?"

Gabe snorted behind his paper. "I found that punk bleeding on my front steps one evening almost fifty years ago."

"Fifty...years ago?" Lucia cocked her head to the side. Gabe looked to be about thirty or so, not much older than that, though. The gears in her head began turning, "Wait, how can...?"

Maria chuckled, "Gabe is a Mystic, honey."

"A...what?"

"A Mystic. A human with spiritual awareness, and to a certain extent, spiritual powers."

Lucia's eyes widened, the silver of her irises reflecting the sunlight that shined through the apartment windows. "Really? H-how so?"

"I can sense supernatural activity, and I'm able to harness spiritual power."

Lucia seemed to take this in stride. "Okay, but...how come you're so young, then?"

Gabe smirked, "Nothing gets past you, huh?"

"Well...you don't look to be fifty years old, that's all."

"Not that I like to talk about it, but I'm actually closer to eighty years in age."

"Eighty-four, Gabe."

Gabe frowned. "Hn, that must be why I stopped counting."

Maria laughed. "The truth is, Lucia, we're both Mystics. Gabe's a bit older than me, though, but I try to avoid reminding him of that."

"So does being a Mystic make you age slower?"

Gabe scratched his chin in thought while looking to Maria. "Honestly, there's no clear answer to that question. Hex says that the Afterlife is still baffled by us Mystics, but there are several theories. One is that having excess spiritual power lengthens one's mortal lifespan while also slowing down the aging process."

Lucia gave a nod, her mind digesting the information easily enough. "Then, does that mean that some are able to become immortal?"

"As far as we know, there's never been a case of a human becoming immortal, Lucia," Maria answered. "Then again, Gabe's old enough to be a living antique, I suppose."

"Do you mind?"

"Sorry, Gabe," Maria apologized with a teasing smile. "I love you anyway."

Lucia giggled a bit, causing the couple to turn to her and give her an inquisitive look. She simply waved a hand while settling down. "Sorry, sorry...don't mind me."

"Geesh, you have her on your side already, Maria," grumbled Gabe. "Alright, Lucia, as soon as you're done with breakfast, we'll go about getting you enrolled into a school and then Maria and you will get some much needed clothes shopping done. Sound good?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful," Lucia replied with a nod. "I really appreciate all you two are doing for me...it truly means a lot. I only wish I could-"

Maria cut her off. "Think nothing of it, Lucia. This is what we do. You're the first new tenant we've had in years, and on top of that you're still a child."

Lucia felt her cheeks flare up a little as she bowed her head while muttering another silent word of thanks. Maria and Gabe exchanged looks with each other before giving the teenage girl a warm smile.

'This must be what Father felt like when he was taken in by Mother all those years back...' She wiped away a stray tear, and smiled wide, her elongated canines exposed under her upper lips. Perhaps she could learn to live again after all.

* * *

Hex's feet made contact with solid ground as he stepped out of the doorway made of light. Veness followed after him, stretching her arms a bit as she yawned.

"Ungh, we should have left a little later. I'm still so tired!" She rolled her shoulders and began stretching her legs while Hex scanned the area.

Hex sniffed the air. "Veness, you smell that?"

"Hm?" Veness gave the air a quick sniff as well before nodding, "Smells like smoke."

"Looks like our friend decided to have some fun," Hex grumbled as he looked to the distance. Several plumes of smoke were rising up into the air, and the sound of fire engines blared in the distance. "I can definitely feel his presence, too."

Veness gave a snort. "He's definitely not trying to hide his aura from anyone. Arrogant bastard, I bet he's just cloaking himself from humans right now."

"That's likely the case. Any suggestions?"

The she-demon shrugged. "None in particular. What about you?"

"I was thinking that if this guy is a brainless idiot that we go with the classic 'hack to the back' maneuver. It tends to work on bigger guys, and from what his profile said, he fits the qualifications for a large demon."

Veness stood up from her stretching and rolled her neck a bit. "Okay, that could work. What if he's actually smart enough not to fall for parlor tricks though?"

"Then I'll draw his attention while you wait for an opening." Hex replied.

Veness was quiet for several seconds. She looked to Hex, who gave her a serious look, then she nodded slowly. "All right."

"I'll be fine, Veness. Mereco happened years ago. I've learned my lesson on being careless like I was back then. You know that."

The demoness didn't seem to be convinced, but made no protest. "Just be careful if it comes down to that kind of situation again."

The Grim Reaper let out a sigh. "I will."

"Hex."

The dark haired man rolled his eyes before meeting Veness's gaze, and he immediately regretted his actions before looking ahead. "Sorry. I'll be careful. I promise."

"Good." Veness spoke with finality.

The duo sprinted down the road towards the smoke, and both noted the smell of burning material hanging in the air. The occasional car drove past them, and a few panicking humans ran in the opposite direction, not giving the Reaper and she-demon a second glance.

"How much do you want to bet this guy's a fire-base user?" Veness asked as they turned down an alleyway.

Hex gave a hollow laugh. "Forty-five percent of all demons are fire users. He's more than likely in that category, unless he's inclined towards lightning or rock powers."

"Well," Veness began as a small smirk crossed her lips. "There is always the chance of him being a water-base user. I can only hope that's the case."

"Don't get any ideas," Hex stated while giving his demon partner an even look. "The last thing we need is for you to go and create a power surge like you did back in Gran Sol City."

Veness had the decency to look embarrassed, her eyes looking ahead as they continued towards their target. "I didn't think I'd destroy the city's power grid when I attacked that horde. You know that."

"Yeah, but you did anyway." Hex sighed. "Just don't go overboard like you tend to."

"What do you mean 'like I tend to'? You can hardly create enough electrical power for a light bulb to use, let alone electrocute a demon. Don't go ridiculing me in the areas of lightning magic."

Hex grumbled something under his breath, which Veness paid no mind to. She instead focused ahead, sniffing the air occasionally. "It reeks of demon magic."

The Reaper took a sniff and gave a grunt of agreement, and the two suddenly stopped running. They slowed down to a walking pace; looking down the streets they crossed, searching for any sign of their quarry.

After about ten minutes of searching, they heard a sudden explosion. It sounded rather close, and judging from the plume of flames that billowed up into the sky. The duo's target either hit a gas line underground or was breathing fire. Judging from the amount of power radiating from the explosion's direction, it was likely the latter of the possibilities.

The two didn't waste time, and sprinted towards the general direction of the flames. They stopped upon reaching the street, and looked around. The street was littered with chunks of brick, slabs of broken concrete, and wrecked vehicles.

Veness was the first to speak, her eyes looking at what appeared to be a random spot in the middle of the road. "Found him."

Hex's right eye turned red, and he soon saw what Veness was so interested in. There before the two stood a hulking figure, looking to be about twenty feet tall from what they could tell. The figure's back was turned to them.

Veness pulled up her skirt a little and drew out a short sword that had been strapped to her leg while Hex summoned forth his scythe. They continued towards the behemoth, who was apparently talking to himself.

"Ya think that the humans woulda learned by now that demons exist, but no, they're still a bunch of spineless little lambs who can't see us." He chuckled while sniffing the air. "Tch, not a single one of 'em is around. Whatta waste of time..."

Veness looked to Hex before giving him a nod. He returned the gesture before heading towards the nearest alleyway and blending into the shadows. Veness cleared her throat, getting the giant demon's attention.

"Excuse me, but are you by any chance the one they call Aragus?"

The beast turned to face Veness fully. She took in his features as he faced her: his dark red skin, his yellow eyes with slit-like irises, his massive musculature, his pointed ears, and bald head. He wore some ragged pants made of brown fabric with greaves covering both legs, and gauntlets on either arm that reached to his elbows. His chest was

bare, aside from a tattoo on his right pectoral bearing the mark of a Legion member; a tattoo consisting of an eye engulfed in flames.

The demon squinted as he bent down, "Eh?" He studied Veness for a moment before laughing. "Well, you're quite a bold youngin' to be approachin' me, aren't ya lass?"

Veness smiled demurely while giving the demon a curtsy. "I'm sorry, but I was near the area when I sensed an immense power. I couldn't help but wonder who it was, and when I saw you, I could only assume that you were the great Aragus."

The demon puffed out his chest a bit, "Well, glad ta see that some o' the youth still knows 'nuff to respect their elders." He grinned, his jagged teeth pointing in various directions. "I am indeed the great Aragus. Who might ye be, lass?"

Veness bowed. "Veness of the Aphroras clan. It's an honor to meet you, sir."

The beast's eyes widened while he laughed once again. "The Aphroras clan, ye say? Haha, I thought your kind was extinct!"

The corner of the she-demon's lips twitched. "Well, we've been through hard times, but we're still holding strong, Lord Aragus."

Aragus gave a grunt while looking around randomly. "That so? Well, whattya want?"

Veness continued her act, giving the demon before her another gracious bow. "I was just hoping that I may be able to provide a Chaotic-class demon such as yourself any assistance."

"Hmm?" Aragus gave Veness a scrutinizing look before snorting as if Veness had just told an old joke he heard one too many times. "Run along, lass. I don' need the help of a weaklin' such as you."

The she-demon bit her tongue, reminding herself that she needed to keep up the act for the mission's sake. "I promise not to get in the way, Lord Aragus."

Aragus grumbled to himself before speaking again. "Are ya part of the Legion?"

Veness pulled down the right part of her shirt to expose a tattoo like his on her shoulder. Aragus studied it for a few seconds before nodding. "Fair 'nuff. Don't get in my way, now."

The monster of a demon turned around and sucked in a massive amount of air before blasting out a cloud of flames, setting several cars on fire and causing the gas to ignite and create a chain of explosions. Veness schooled her features before speaking. "Lord Aragus, what exactly are you doing here in the human world, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Huh? Oh..." He scratched his head a bit before he seemed to remember. "I'm hopin' ta draw out a few of 'em Grim Reapers. The Legion wants every last one of 'em dead."

-To be continued-

Laura Spencer came to the TLC this semester with a desire to focus on her poetry, and it's been a delight to work with her. She has engaging, fresh views on events and people that others overlook. Throughout the semester, she's been working with line breaks and imagery to further convey her original message. I always look forward to seeing what she'll write next!
-Kris Hess, Tutor

BOY/GIRL PARTY OF TWO

LAURA SPENCER

we had been driving all day in unfamiliar territory, warily needing to find someplace to stop for the night. up ahead there were four flickering stars at the side of the road a dingy sign lit up, indicating *vacancy*.

you pulled the van slowly into the parking lot careful not to hit the careless kids playing on the pavement, up much past their bedtime. walking in to the lobby i clung to your arm not sure if i was ready to stop driving for the night if it meant we had to sleep here. but we were both so exhausted that we took an open room.

lugging our overnight bag up the stairwell, i squeezed to the side to avoid bumping into the neglectful parents fiddling with their cell phones while their ignored children moved from the pavement to this steel jungle gym, careful not to let them see how tired i was.

once in our room, you locked the door and drew the curtains shut, while i inspected the place. it didn't seem so bad. staring at the bed i asked, *have you ever spent the night with a girl at a hotel before?* praying your answer was the same as mine. *no.*

i turned to you and smiled, comfortable now. *so what do we do?* we both grinned swung our arms behind us, propelling us up where we spent our final energy jumping on the bed. and that is why, no matter where we are
i always feel at home with you.

BRIDGE

LAURA SPENCER

~For Ellie

Last week you had a smile on your face and proclaimed *It's Friday*.
Pouring yourself a strong cup of coffee you told me
We play Bridge on Fridays at the Senior Center.

Instinctively I returned your smile, excited
to hear that you were both staying
busy. Then your face changed
and the light in your eyes
faded.

*But, we
have to save
energy, so that he can
survive.* She shifted her eyes
to love of her life, then back to me.

I will never forget the look on your face and
the way I felt the love you had for your husband and
best friend. I pray one day you hold hands on the bridges in heaven.

I WENT TO THE CEMETERY ONCE

LAURA SPENCER

to look for you. I knew you
lay in the Northwest grasses but
I couldn't bring myself to search every stone.
You lived in my memory, although I had never met you.
All my life I had heard stories about you,
seen pictures of you. I was afraid
that if I found your grave that day
all my memories of you would sink into the ground
and be lost forever
as I realized that you were truly gone. So I wandered through the rows
of stones until dusk, letting your smirk
 light up my imagination
as I pretended I had known you.
I wish I could have.

PICTURE THIS...

LAURA SPENCER

Two boys in the backseat of a navy
Blue Buick
One eight, the other five

Grandma's taking them back to their
Parents with a healthy
Supply of gingersnaps and peach pie
Their mother's favorite

When suddenly

A car appears seemingly out of nowhere
Chaos deafening the clash of metal
And glass
Flying

The boys violently shake their grandma
Trying desperately to wake her

The absence of blood
Makes it harder to understand

Brianne was a pleasure to work with this semester, as we dove through everything from poetry to Star Wars. I was impressed with her creativity, and was pleased to watch his particular piece, "Elisheva," evolved from Draft 1 to its completion. Brianne was always determined to make her work the best it could be, and all her hard efforts have payed off.

-Laura Griglak, Tutor

ELISHEVA

BRIANNE TRIGGS

Shreds of approaching dawn bloomed over the distant horizon and the thousands of clouds that dotted the lightening sky became tinged with a mess of colors. The sun had slept another night, but there was no sleep for restless minds and Elisheva found herself in the pasture before the sun had fully risen, about two hours before she normally began chores. The sheep needed to be herded into another section of the makeshift, double bar wooden fence, and only about a third of the clay pots and bowls had been completed the day before.

She only had one more day before the carpenter from Jerusalem arrived to pick up his order, a large assortment of handmade pottery items. She did not know his name, but he had heard about Elisheva's talent for designing beautifully crafted clay pottery and had traveled a great distance to purchase a set. He had left the order with Elisheva's mother, and Elisheva set out right away to prepare a fresh batch of clay, made from the earth near her humble home, a small amount of salt, crushed rose petals, and water. It was a simple recipe, no different from the clay used by everyone else she knew.

The carpenter Elisheva was working for had paid good money in advance and had given her the freedom to design the set as she pleased. It had taken all day, but Elisheva had finished the five plates and four of the five bowls. The fifth bowl would not take long, but it would be a challenge to finish the flower pot, the two basins, and the six cups before the man arrived. They would have to dry before she could paint them. There did not seem to be enough hours in the day, and it would have been nice to meet the carpenter in person. But for now all she had were questions and assumptions about a nameless buyer.

The task seemed daunting, so Elisheva decided to herd the sheep first. It had been her brother Jude's job to handle the sheep, but he had taken on a second job as a blacksmith's apprentice. A full day of hauling lumber and forging metal left him exhausted. He sometimes fell asleep before supper and was gone again before sunrise.

She opened the latch to the inner gate and the sheep slowly entered the second half of the pasture. She had dumped the fresh feed into this part of the pasture the previous day. The sheep pushed and bumped into one another, fighting to be the first to eat. Two sheep had managed to slip from the crowd and Elisheva, still daydreaming about the mysterious carpenter, noticed a second too late that the gate had not locked behind her. The wayward sheep escaped and by the time Elisheva finished herding the others, they had traveled an impressive but disturbing distance. She quickly latched the gate, pushing on it to make sure it was closed and ran after them.

Her clumsy momentum and the soft, uneven ground worked against her. She tripped over a small patch of raised soil, twisting her ankle, and fell to the ground. She began sobbing.

Her family sold wool to earn a meager wage. They needed every single sheep to make enough money each month. It was barely enough for food, taxes, and household expenses. Her family was in debt. Without the wool, they could lose the little they had. Elisheva made a small wage selling pottery, but it would never be enough to provide for the family. Even Jude did not earn enough at two jobs to fully support the family. Their financial stability was entirely dependent on the combination of Jude and Elisheva's earnings, the sale of wool, and the dwindling savings Elisheva's deceased father had left behind a year and a half ago. Elisheva's mother had no work history. She did chores in the house and never ventured outside. She had fallen into a deep, impenetrable sadness after her husband's sudden death.

The sun had risen, a large yellow and orange presence. Elisheva did not move.

Her mind raced, visions of her family living as homeless beggars, never knowing when their next meal would be, without shelter and without hope. And it would be all her fault.

Her heart thrashed wildly in her chest, like a captured beast trying to escape. Her breath caught in her lungs and the choked sobs quickly became uncontrollable hiccups. Her face and ears burned as embarrassment coursed through her veins.

As she sank further into hopelessness and guilt, Elisheva noticed a growing shadow from the right, then from the left. She looked up, blinking away tears and harsh sunlight, and found herself nearly in the company of her wayward sheep and a man with kind eyes and simple robes.

Silently, the stranger knelt beside her and gently examined Elisheva's bruised and swollen ankle. She watched as the swelling lessened and the bruises faded from deep purple and black to a light yellow-green. There was no pain.

It was then that Elisheva recognized her sheep's rescuer and her miracle healer. She had heard many rumors, so many tales, and wondered if they were lies. One such rumor detailed him bringing the dead back to life. More recently, she heard tales of him curing a leper. He was attracting attention from every citizen, from the lowest beggar to the high king, in Jerusalem, calling himself the Son of God and destroying the gambling tables in the temple because it was blasphemy.

He stood and reached out a hand to help her off the ground. Once standing, she speechlessly followed him to the pasture, where the wayward sheep were locked safely behind the gate. "Thank you," she said quietly.

He smiled. "Come," he said, resting a hand on her shoulder, "I have arrived early to pick up an order of the finest pottery in Jerusalem. I would like to help you finish."

Sequiest has been an absolute joy to work with this semester. Her passion for poetry is contagious and heartwarming. We focused much of our work this semester on the relationship between the poet and the audience as well as exploring diverse themes in writing. I have truly been inspired by her work and I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

-Sarah Jordan, Master Tutor

FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST SEQUIEST WILLIAMS

For the love of Christ
I'd
Create a new language-something untested and pure
Something that would express only love and gratitude

I would take all of the good things here on earth
The precious things created for us to see, hear, taste, and breathe
The smiles, the expressions of true love, the sunshine, the beauty found in rain,
The moments and seconds that change us internally
The situations that make us act differently

I'd
Borrow from the world all its truly treasured things
And gradually place them all into a blender
And form the most intoxicating sentence in a virgin language
And I'd speak it to You over and over and over again
Until You had to silence me for Your own relief

If I could
Do something different-something original
Show You a new form of praise in various ways besides the tongue
Dance before You-stretching myself into beauty and twirling gracefully

I'd jump and bend
I would lend every limb to the possibility
In and unrecognizable way
If I could

I would embody a newfangled being
Foreign species that would be able
To fully express
Not just in language or in actions
The emotion that surrounds and infuses this relationship

I would actually resemble something-someone
That would let You know

It's not the same
As when we started-with rehearsed prayers and forced actions
If I could
But the "ifs" are not up to me
And there are limits to my creativity
There is no surpassing what You choose to allow
My only control comes in saying "I will"

Yes!
Lord please have what you already own
Even if only in recycled words in the cycled actions

For your love, Christ, I would like to say I would do anything
But anything doesn't belong to me
It seems that all I can do for Your love
Is accept it and continue to be as I was created
Yours



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