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Vol. XV

Literary Journal of Sigma Kappa Delta
The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges



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2017

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Alpha Zeta Chapter*

Literary Journal of Sigma Kappa Delta
The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges



Purpose of Sigma Kappa Delta

Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing. ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for

- Scholarships
- Awards
- Leadership
- Competition
- Publication
- Travel
- National Conferences
- Networking

Visit www.english2.org for complete eligibility requirements.



Hedera helix—the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ, symbolizes resilience and individual growth. In keeping with the Greek spelling, we use the lower case “h” for helix.

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Editor's Note



I would like to take the opportunity to thank the individuals who took time over the 2016 holidays to act as the judging panels for the writing and photography awards. The judges are volunteers and experts in the fields they are asked to judge, and they have an extremely difficult task.

This year's winners explore many contentious issues and expose many of society's woes in each of the literary categories presented. While the works in this issue challenge our memories and beliefs, they also inspire us to look at the world through different lenses and viewpoints. I think you will find each entry in this year's edition offers, as Jacqueline S. Farley points out in her essay, "Food for thought" (13).

As I give thought to the past school year, I realize the many changes that occurred within Sigma Kappa Delta. Some of these changes will hopefully remain transparent to you, but one change is readily apparent: the new face of www.English2.org, SKD's website. New features include an interactive calendar and sponsor forums. I hope you will find the time to peruse SKD's new website format, and let us know your thoughts and recommendations for improvement.

As a quick reminder, 2018 writing and photography submissions are due to the national office on November 15. You can find the instructions for submissions as well as the judging rubrics online at <https://www.english2.org/awards-scholarships>.

I hope your 2018 school year offers you plenty of food for thought,

Kat Padilla

SKD National Office



2017 ΣΚΔ Scholarship/Award Winners

Scholarships

Dr. William C. Johnson Transfer Scholarship

Tessa Ivey
Bevill State Community College
Phi Alpha Chapter

Dr. Don Perkins Service Scholarship

Tessa Ivey
Bevill State Community College
Phi Alpha Chapter

Dr. Susan LeJeune Service Scholarship

Simone Modlin
Plaza College
Chi Delta Chapter

Dr. Sheila H. Byrd Service Scholarship

S. "Charlie" Valvano
Plaza College
Chi Delta Chapter

Ms. Joan S. Reeves Service Scholarship

George Fielack
Plaza College
Chi Delta Chapter

Chapter Awards

Literary Magazine/Journal

Aurora
Epsilon Alpha Chapter
Northeast Alabama Community College

Chapter Activity

Salvage the Books
Epsilon Alpha Chapter
Northeast Alabama Community College



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First Place Essay

Arguable Dimensions in Time and Space

Chanel Samson

When scientists discovered the particle that is theoretically responsible for the existence of all mass in the universe, they gave it two names: The Higgs Boson and the God Particle. The uproar that followed came from the latter. Fundamentalists and theists saw this as a threat towards the creation theory as it further showed evidence for the origins of our world coming from the standard model of physics. This left no room nor reason for their omnipresent deities. The opposition was more than happy to accept this as God's defeat and in a slurry of clickbait headlines and half-baked arguments on social media, the war between science and religion was unearthed once more.

It would seem science and religion are two ends of the same stick – both used for the same purpose but always in opposition. It is a war etched throughout history into a modern era where the mention of God in a scientific discovery can dig up all the battles that came before it. Galileo's heliocentric discovery is one of the most notable accounts where the famous astronomer was subjected to heresy because his discoveries were not in line with the religious teachings at the time. Galileo himself was a man of faith, as are many of the major contributors to science, yet their pursuit for scientific knowledge was able to coexist with their religion. This then begs the question, what is being achieved in disproving either religion or science? As both are flawed in their respected approaches, there is always room for skepticism. But if one can afford to take both into consideration

and allow each to fill in the other's inconsistencies, the result is a fuller understanding of how and why we came to be – the objective of both science and religion. It may seem ironic then to suggest that Doctor Who, a science fiction television show, presents a perfect scale to depict the tug and pull of science and religion, and the harmony that can be found in their consolidation. A timeless alien, the last of a mighty race, free to roam through all of space and time is Doctor Who's simple premise. It presents as much freedom to explore moral and religious scenarios as it does characters and time periods and this open-endedness is the key factor in setting up the perfect stage for religion and science to converge.

The perfect prototype of the skeptical scientist can be found in the show's titular character, the Doctor, who boasts all the scientific jargon and rationality one can expect in an advanced, intelligent alien. However, he is continuously challenged in his own beliefs, which forces him to reassess what he knows to be fact. One such occasion is "The Impossible Planet" and "Satan's Pit". The Doctor encounters an adversary that claims to be the devil himself. A figure that encompasses every form of evil in every religion across the universe – something that's existence should be obsolete in a universe created from gas and atoms. This puts the Doctor in uncharted territory, something he has always known to be myth stands physically before him and he has no other choice than to admit that there is no scientific explanation he can conjure to explain this predicament.



He ultimately concedes he does not know what the creature is, and that it may in fact have been Satan himself. This acceptance of the inexplicable is not fallibility. It is a reminder that not all supernatural occurrences have been explained by science and that religion has merit in holding some of the answers to things beyond human understanding.

A key argument that comes up in the debate of science versus religion is the blurry definition of life and what constitutes it. This dispute is discussed plaintively in “New Earth”. The Doctor comes across a hospital with medicine so advanced that the deadliest diseases are cured within a matter of days. However, the means for this to be possible is the result of thousands of artificially grown humans being forcibly infected with every disease in the universe to be tested on to find antidotes. The hospital staff argue that the artificial humans are mere flesh; however, the Doctor is enraged by the unethical manner in which lives are being saved. Despite the Doctor himself being a man of progressive science, he maintains a sense of empathy, compassion and the belief that all life is precious and that life loses its meaning when it can be decided who must die for the survival of others – a view shared by many religions on the topic of stem cells and abortion. Ultimately, the Doctor is able to save the artificial humans with the same medicine that was being used on the hospital patients. While topics like stem cells and abortion are far more complicated in finding a solution, the Doctor’s sense of ethics stands testament that it is possible to be an advocate for scientific progress, while still having the morality

to question its means of achieving that progress.

One of the most negative aspects of religion is crime being done in its name. With radical practices like honor killing or genocide, it is in a matter of misplaced faith that horrific repercussions will arise. In “The Rings of Akhaten”, the Doctor visits a planet where, according to the planet’s creation story, citizens must be sacrificed in order for the planet to be kept alive. The Doctor, with his scientific rationality, questions the practice and reveals that the planet is in fact a parasite that requires no such sacrifice. Though sacrifice is no longer needed, the citizens still continue to honor their planet with songs and the Doctor appreciates the beauty of the ritual and its symbolism of hope. Though the Doctor used science to discredit a dark facet of religion, he never paints religion or as a flaw or weakness.

Both religion and science require a leap of faith the only difference is that science can give you a mathematical formula to figure out the size of the gorge. The rationality of science over the abstractness of religion are illustrated poignantly in “Gridlock”, which depicts thousands of people stuck for years in a continuous flow of traffic with a strong faith that one day, they will finally reach their destination – a clear analogy for salvation as the end goal of religions. The people were content with the idle state they lived in until the Doctor arrived to question their way of living and provide a rational solution that freed them from gridlock. The Doctor’s role in the episode was not to undermine Religion’s conceptual ability to save lives, but rather to show



that it is stronger when paired with logic.

The difference between Doctor Who and any other television show found in the science fiction genre is no other show has the scale to explore various ethic and morality centered scenarios where science and religion are free to clash and be challenged. The unlimited range of Doctor Who and the situations the Doctor finds himself in allows us to do this. Despite being science fiction, this show holds no bias towards science.

The Doctor will fight pseudo gods and superstition, while simultaneously admit that supernatural entities beyond our human understanding exist. While the Doctor is never clear in his belief in the existence of God, he is willing to entertain the idea. His openness is a refreshing alternative to the hostile relationship between religion and science. An alternative more likely to progress our understanding of what and why we came into existence both spiritually and scientifically.

Second Place Essay

I Asked for Extra Mayo and Got a Mermaid

Jacqueline S. Farley

It is in immersion that intimidation initiates instinct.

When I walked into that small sandwich shop situated just a mile or so away from my house, I was particularly sensitive of my vulnerability there. I had walked there by myself, a considerably rare opportunity given my age at the time. I remember hearing the jangle of a bell as I pulled myself into the hull of that place through the glass-paneled door frame. For the most part, my mind's eye can only reconstruct it in monochrome: White walls, white tile floor with black grout, white counter, grey corners... The air was thick with the smell of industrial-grade bleach and the hardest thing in the world seemed to be keeping a thought in my head for more than a second at a time. It was all a bland swirl of darkness in contrast with light that even now rushes through my brain and scrubs it clean.

What I happen to remember the most clearly about that place was her.

I have since gotten into the habit of expecting to see her on my most recent errands to pick up something quick for dinner, but I have not actually seen her trailing behind the counter since. She was probably a good five or six years older than I was when I first met her; I assumed her to be at least sixteen, but I can imagine that she may have been older than that. I remember she was petite and tan with long dark hair... Sometimes I remember her with a nose piercing, and on rare occasions maybe even a sleeve of tattoos. I can't remember now, but I do know that she had a bold, unrelenting uniqueness about her face that made looking at her even more difficult as she spoke to me.

Her handiwork was purposeful and quick as I watched her, her gloved fingers nimbly assembling my sandwich as I had asked. I was looking forward to watching her wrap it up snugly in paper and put it into a plastic bag, as the movement of her wrists were so surreally hypnotic that I was almost



uncomfortable. Meanwhile, her attention rested on merely making my sandwich.

“Anything else on your sub?” she asked.

I paused, looking beyond the glass at what else she had to offer. After a moment of silent deliberation, I nodded politely.

“Mustard.” I replied, “Extra Mustard.”

“Mayo?”

“N—!”

I saw her gloved hand reach out into the condiment compartment behind the display case and pull up a bottle halfway filled with an off-white dressing. I forced a protest from the pit of my chest, desperately hoping that it would have the necessary momentum to lurch out past my lips just in time to discourage her reach. However, only a panicked squeak could make it past my tongue as I caught sight of four letters that had been hastily scribbled out across the clear plastic in black ink. As I strung each letter together in my head, I could feel my jaw tighten beyond the bow of my chin. With one plastic gloved finger over the nozzle, she shook her wrist back and forth before finally taking aim at the contents of my sandwich. She clenched her palm down on the base of the bottle hard, a ribbon of creamy whip cascading from the tip of the nozzle to the time of at least two or three flatulent squelches.

Whatever it was that wrenched itself within me compelled me to burst into tears. I could feel heat rise to the surface of my cheeks and my eyes swell above my lower lash line. I resisted them fiercely, raising the wall of my eye to keep my emotions from spilling down my face. I stammered, attempting to

suppress my urge to cry as I croaked at her through an upturned grimace.

“Umm... Th... Thank you, that looks—”
“That’ll be \$6.20, please.”

I knew that I was stupid for getting upset like this, yet my throat burned and my head throbbed incessantly. I stood in place there until the server girl finally took notice of my red eyes and flustered face. After letting me incoherently babble for a moment about not wanting mayonnaise, she quickly apologized and explained that she thought I had asked for extra rather than none. I didn’t blame her, of course. I instead quietly paid for the sandwich I had accidentally ordered and hurried out the door as fast as I could despite her offer to make me a new one. I remember quickly making my way back home and trying to scrape off whatever soggy globs I could with a napkin, but by then it had already seeped in between the top layer of pickles and into a once thick, perfectly lush bed of spinach. Despite the swirling hot mess that had nestled itself in my stomach, I sat down at the kitchen table and ate it anyway. I often consider it to be the worst sandwich I have ever had, as the shame I held between my teeth outweighed the leftover taste of mayonnaise.

I would not be confident in telling you exactly how or when I developed my strong sense of disgust for mayonnaise. My mother tells me that I used to eat bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches as much and as gleefully as anything else she served me, even using it in place of butter when she made me grilled cheese sandwiches. With this in mind, however, I theorize that perhaps I became aware of the taste sometime while sitting in my diapers in front of



the thick-rimmed, retro television screen that we got for twenty dollars at Goodwill. I can easily conjure up a pseudo-memory of myself loosely holding a sliver of pink meat slipped between two slices of white bread while my fat, rosy legs sprawled themselves out against a canvas of dingy beige carpet. Another equally plausible scenario could be that one day while watching my mother make my lunch, I first recognized the distinct, wet squishing sound of a butter knife sliding in and out of the putrid custard globbed at the bottom of a murky jar... I would not have dared to risk looking for an explanation in that jar then, and I can scarcely imagine plunging into it now.

Perhaps what draws me to consider digging my fingers through pungent jars of mayonnaise distracts me from looking in places where substantial answers might actually be hiding. Or, even more likely, I struggle to find the resolve within myself to seek out such intricacies. It is admittedly much more comfortable to look in at something from beyond what encases it, as one is not bound by the obligation of engaging with it other than observing how it exists. It's an understandable, selfish sensation to engage without engaging; it offers entertainment and self-preservation in exchange for hardly anything at all.

I imagine that it is that kind of comfort which draws droves of swarming, beguiling eyes to the mystique of traveling sideshow attractions. With wild, craving eyes, they make their way to devour the fat bearded ladies, pinheads, Fiji mermaids, and all. I can see them, weaving in and out through red and white striped tents to the crack of a ringmaster's whip while

their eyes flicker through the fog of a fire-breather's cigarette smoke. Surely, an absurd flocking of eyes such as that would be the real sight to see. I wonder if the beings behind those eyes found any trace of humanity in the specimens they encountered, and I have often questioned if it was their discovery of that humanity that so deeply confounded them. I myself can only imagine such creatures from a distance as merely stuffed monkey torsos sewn onto fishtails and dried out in the sun. I occasionally ponder what it means to merely exist vacantly behind glass panels like that, embalmed and forever fixed to look back into that crowd... I would rather not venture further than that.

Yet even more fitting, as quickly as they had come, the elusive circus-goers slip through the flaps of big-top tents and vanish from my thoughts.

In the very least they seek out new things and are able to find indulgence in them. I don't even know how I would react to something so visually distressing; as illustrated before, my response to repulsive or otherwise unpalatable stimulus is considerably poor. For example, if I was given a tuna fish sandwich slathered in mayonnaise and I was not expected to eat it, I would be able to maintain a certain level of composure. However, should it begin to wriggle and writhe on the plate in front of me, one can be certain that I wouldn't dare touch it. Should I be arranged and furthermore engaged in eating it...

No, I would rather not think about that either.

Ideally, I want to say that it wouldn't be that bad. Maybe rather than some poor fish still left to squiggle about in a tuna sandwich, it could be something



more like a mermaid, a little finned lady that could make a Fijian monkey torso flush with jealousy. Regardless, however, I would still be too afraid of uncovering whatever pair of faint, clouded eyes might be looking back at me, asphyxiating just underneath the soft layer of bread; I would be afraid that I have seen them before. I am certain that should I meet their gaze I would come to remember them as the same eyes that have followed me down warehouse store isles since I first grew legs apart from the toddler seat of a grocery cart. As I first learned to walk beside my mother, I would look away from the shelves that housed cans of Chicken of the Sea, as I was unfortunate enough to know the glossy stare of its patron nymph. I have since felt those eyes protrude out from sardine cans, most notably when my cousin Shane got dared to eat one for a ragged twenty dollar bill by his fratish housemates. I remember most vividly how I heard him run barefoot across the tile flooring of my aunt's kitchenette and vomit into the garbage disposal. There was a lurch in my stomach then too as I heard his gut turn itself inside out and flop about in the ceramic basin of the sink. I also remember the clustered eyes that had certainly been set upon me from across the table, their mouths hung agape and nestled against one another in a grave, almost macabre sort of mimicry of him.

Perhaps it would be wise for me to continue my search in a can instead of a jar. If a dozen sardines can fit into a tin can, I am quite sure that there would be plenty of room for an answer somewhere. Logically, this would make sense in order to preserve them for those in dire need of theoretical sustenance... Food for thought, if you

will. I'd thusly assume that those who spend their time searching through cans are also fairly well preserved. I wonder what refined figures like Prince Albert were looking for in their cans. Perhaps he would make good company should we happen to find ourselves sharing the same can. A name like Albert seems pleasant enough, after all, and I can't imagine one detestable quality about him — Well, almost. I can't be certain of that until I see his eyes.

Would he have eyes like theirs? What about hers? I don't think I even saw hers... I couldn't bring myself to. You do know *her*, don't you? The *her* that I told you about earlier? *That* her?

Of course you do.

I imagine that you also know what the far end of a swimming pool is like. You've probably sunk to the bottom of it once or twice to meet the porous concrete and sit cross-legged there until your lungs no longer have the strength to carry your breath. The sound around you is eerily familiar... Reminiscent of a faint, garbled whisper from time before you were born, perhaps. Or maybe it's what fills your ears as you slip from existence, waning in and out like a lucid dream. Whatever you hear, you know without a doubt that there are no eyes there, no oxygen to seep through your skin, and the chlorine stings your eyes. As pressure builds up in your head, your eyes protest behind your eyelids despite your yearning to see beyond the cloudiness of your vision. *It's too uncomfortable*, you tell yourself before you expire and rise to the surface, emerging out from the much warmer waters above.

I imagine that experience is similar to what one would encounter by being in a can. Even if answers suspended



themselves within cans like they do at the bottom of swimming pools, I doubt I would have the strength to keep my eyes open long enough to see them clearly. It certainly leads one to question what kind of clarity exists for a mermaid caught under a slice of bread, which bears her down with the weight of an outstretched fishnet. I can envision her panic at the sound of foreign gargling beyond her pureed seabed, leading her to stir frantically despite her hiding place. I wonder what would provoke a tuna fish mermaid to fight so hard against the smell of grain and mayonnaise... Does she move out of fear? Or does she wish to be seen by someone so they could swiftly pick her off their sandwich and allow her escape?

I wonder if her eyes would have been open or shut up tight like mine were then.

I understand that the easiest way to enjoy peculiarity is to estrange oneself

from it. An individual much better suited for this than I am may find the strength within themselves to rip the top slice off that sandwich as it is served to them and wrestle with whatever writhes beneath their forceful hand. They could press their palms down into the table until they hear the crunching of bones to the rhythmic time of frenzied flapping, flopping, and flailing without sorrow or grief. The death of that mermaid happens in between wet squelches that reverberate behind a pane of glass as one merely watches, disturbed and yet held ominously still. Once she stops her struggle and lays cold, her obituary is written on a sheet of parchment paper, wrapped around a brine-encrusted wheat hoagie, and shoved into a takeout bag. To taste her is to mourn her, which is more than enough to spoil one's appetite. Knowing me, I would barely even have the nerve to ask for extra mayonnaise.

Third Place Essay

On Amonds

Jacqueline S. Farley

Little else other than familiarity draws me back to my hometown of Arbuckle, California. The place is as significant as any other dot on the map, and I would even go as far as to say that the biggest part about Arbuckle is how small it is. More so are the people that live there; they have a reputation for talking small, thinking small, and living lives just big enough for themselves to fit into, although that is not to say that they can do much within that town to help themselves. That being said, I certainly was no exception to this.

Most appropriately in consideration to this smallness, Arbuckle is fairly well known as a central resource in the

production of almonds within the Northern Central Valley of California, which simultaneously makes it both its most substantial and most diminutive yearly harvest. For nearly every person that lives there, an almond tree stands in its place, their roots interweaved into the livelihood of the community itself. Surrounding households and ranches merely grow themselves from the ground up around the vast many orchards that are maintained there, littering the countryside like thistle weeds creeping amongst pastures of brittle, drought-stricken grass.

There's this long-running joke amongst farmers there that the life of



the almond actually ends somewhere between mid-August and late October, when harvesters descend upon the orchards to collect them. These behemoths, set upon wheels with savage claws of iron, clamp around the trunk of each tree and violently shake them, dislodging each hull-encrusted kernel from their respective branches and onto the ground. Locals often refer to the process as, “shaking the ‘L out of them”, and thus the nuts harvested are actually called *amonds*. When I would ask my mother, “Why not any of the other letters? Why does it have to be an ‘L?” she would give a hearty chortle and tell me that I would understand when I was older. Whatever or however they are, they then lay scattered and abandoned on the orchard floor to dry for nearly two weeks before they are collected, swept up by the bristles of a similarly abrasive sweeper harvester as it makes its way down each row of trees, consuming them one by one...

One, two... Three, four... I counted the set of bumps in the driveway as our little white van rolled away from my grandmother, over the sloped concrete sidewalk and onto the tar-brushed street. In that moment, I wished that the pitch rolled out across the asphalt was fresh, or at least fresh enough to hold us in place for just a moment, a second to feign some sort of parting grace. Being the last time I surely would ever see it again, I wanted to be able to recount watching it shrink off into the distance clearly enough to be able to describe it again someday. I blinked and looked back towards it, but the house and my grandmother along with it had already tucked themselves behind their neighbor, lost behind a white picket fence and a line of birch saplings. I

could have sworn in that one moment when I had turned my head, the blacktop beneath the car had come up off the ground to jerk me from myself, almost as if to say that I should keep my eyes forward on the future ahead of me. I instead could only stare at what my eyes can no longer trace back.

I never remember Arbuckle as I left it. Although we had arranged our move at the peak of Fall, I like to imagine it during springtime, when we would walk through the small *amond* orchard that was situated just beyond our own secluded “relocatable estate” as my parents would affectionately refer to it. I grew increasingly excitable as March drew nearer, as that meant that the trees would now be awakening, bringing forth luscious clusters of blushing ivory petals. While the ground and the isles were usually vacant as we walked, there was always a certain hum that went through my body, a ringing left to sway within the trees above us... An emotion similar to the rush of adrenaline was what I had assumed then to be merely what it felt like to feel life rebound off oneself.

The car window beside me seemed to reverberate in the same way as the orchard and the pavement did, echoing with a voice that seemed like mine, only fainter and much more distant. It mingled like a colony of droning worker bees abounding above the almond trees, hummed in my ears like the summers I would spend romping around my grandparents’ old, rickety attic while eating Honey Smacks out of my denim overall pockets...

These sensations pulse, warm and vivid in my mind, and yet the only way I could remember what that house looks like now is from snippets of camera rolls



and homemade video cassette tapes my mother would add to her hoard of encapsulated memories of my sister and me growing up. I imagine that by now they've slipped from her jewelry box and into shoeboxes shoved through crevices in my garage, concaving bellies that demand the sacrament of seemingly inconsequential momentos. The lingering sense of their presence there often fills me with the urge to rip them from their cavities in the wall like I used to rake my hands through boxes of rag dolls and Barbies, my fingers like hooks cast out into a thrashing sea of vibrant neon fabric scraps. I vaguely remember how I would pull them out in fistfuls by their hair, which had snagged around my meaty fingers, and gently swing my wrists back and forth. I would do this until they fell past my open palms onto the slightly tarnished ornate carpet at my feet with a muffled *fwump-ump*.

The air was humid in that attic, while the thick scent of mothballs and evaporated wood polish clung to the inside of my lungs through my throat. I exhaled the staleness through a pair of slightly agape, shallow-breathing lips, running my tongue across the arid roof of my mouth as I did so. The wooden hull around me breathed in its own way between seams of cedar wood paneling and yellow gingham curtains. From where I usually sat to play cross-legged on the floor next to that cardboard box full of dolls, I would watch stray beams of sunlight creep in through the front window of the attic, revealing polyps of dust in their decent down to meet the heavily scuffed floorboards. I used to wonder how long I would have to sit there and wait before they could visibly blanket me. I then would try to guess how much longer it would take for me

to become just another layer of dust myself spread out across the carpet. Other times, I would lay underneath the ceiling beams that met above me and wait for branches to grow from them, as I had expected them to sprout outwards, enveloping me in the shade of my own imaginary canopy.

I had not felt the clamp of the harvester until I crawled my weary body into that van, and no more had I ever craved the sanctuary of those branches up to that moment. While it was silent and remained unseen by me, the tremors left in its place compel me to pick up my pieces there; Arbuckle is seemingly the last place I knew myself to be intact. Since then, I have felt no tremble beneath me, and I now fear that the orchards have gone to meet their slumber solemnly in their beds, no longer living above the soil among us. I fear that in the wake of the shakers, the sweepers have since come and gone, sifting whatever was shaken of me and dried out in the sun along with it. Or perhaps, even, the lost bits I am seeking out are so small that they've slipped into the cavernous cracks laid out in the dead, frost-bitten earth, far beyond what my now slightly more nimble fingers can reach. Perhaps there is hope that the April showers will sustain them in ways I never could have.

I have long since accepted that to live from the branch one has grown from is to rot there, and yet I find myself looking back up into the brush that once cradled me. Where I lay now, I wonder what kind of hell was shaken from the girl I left to rot in my grandparent's attic.



Innate Freedom

Tessa Ivey

Humans are notorious for missing what is right in front of them. The earth is obviously not flat, yet it has taken centuries of men tiptoeing so as not to fall off its edge before realizing its shape is round. It has also taken longer than common sense dictates for them to realize that unnecessarily chopping off body parts or bleeding out a sick person is an unsound and unhealthy medical procedure. Considering these historical embarrassments and many more, it is no wonder that freedom has been directly under people's noses, yet they continue to fight for something they already have. Freedom is as innate as the genes one is born with, and only selfish, greedy people who accept the racial injustice of slavery fail to see or outright ignore the fact that freedom is not merely the permission or luxury to do as one pleases. Mark Twain thematically recognizes this revolutionary and indefinite truth in his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck accepts the reality of Jim's innate freedom through the majority of the story and treats him as a free man; unfortunately, however, he discards this truth whenever he is confronted with the Southern romantic ideal of that time, which is the notion of whites having superiority over people of color and being able to, under good conscience and societal acceptance, own such people for the sake of convenience. The seemingly foolish ending of Twain's story, where Huck entertains Tom's outlandish tactics of rescuing Jim, is actually quite appropriate as it shows Huck's constant struggle between realism and romanticism and brings forth the ironic metaphor that people

fight for a right that they already possess.

Huck's natural tendency toward realism rather than romanticism is apparent by his treatment of Jim, even before the ending of the novel. He evidently feels in his heart that Jim is a free man because many times he refers to their companionship in associative terms of equality. After Huck is made aware of Jim's bounty, he tells him to "git up" because "they're after us" so that they could escape and prevent Jim's capture (Twain 168); he also admits during their river travels that "I had begun to get it through my head that he was most free" (183-84). In the end, although he does give way to Tom's romantic notions of freeing Jim, Huck does try to persuade him to be more realistic in his plans by pointing out things such as the folly in using "case-knives" for digging (281). The experiences Huck encounters until the point he meets Jim and all throughout their adventures create his instinctively realistic impression that Jim is indeed free because he is human, and this notion only falters whenever he compares it to what society at that time held as the ideal.

Despite Huck's realistic feelings of equality toward Jim, he sometimes lapses into the Southern romantic ideal, especially whenever Tom is around to influence him. Sometimes, this ideal poisons his actions, causing him to belittle Jim as an ignorant black man with no idea how to argue, or fool him into thinking that their separation on the river was just something he had dreamed (179, 183). Tom Sawyer, whose



character Huck describes as “respectable” and “well brung up,” represents a sort of romantic ideal in his eyes, and he, therefore, puts up little protest when acting out Tom’s foolish plans of baking pies with rope ladders and filling Jim’s shack with varmint (274, 306). These are only a handful of several instances that portray Huck’s internal conflicts, which play out in vicious cycles all the way until the very controversial ending of Twain’s work.

Huck wavers between realism and romanticism throughout the novel, which can be thought of as a metaphoric struggle rather than a pointless blunder; his fight to free a man who is already free could quite easily represent the human struggle as a whole to gain a freedom it already possesses. Huck puts up a weak struggle against Tom’s romantic notions by stating realistic facts and common sense, but he eventually participates in acts like baking a pie with a rope ladder and filling Jim’s shack with all sorts of creatures (280, 306). Although Huck knows in his heart that Jim is free because he is a human, his relapse into the romantic ideal is something of which all are guilty. As readers discover that Jim has already been declared free by Miss Watson, the entire struggle to free Jim from his bonds seems like a

waste of time (307). Twain uses this, however, to make a striking point that Jim and all men are free, yet sometimes choose not to acknowledge that right—whether in others or in themselves. The failure to acknowledge such a basic right, according to Twain’s metaphor, is an unfortunate result that humans experience all too often from comparing ideal, romantic expectations with reality.

The ending of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* beautifully and honestly illustrates Huck’s conflict between realism and romanticism, which Twain uses to portray his metaphor about freedom. A novel with such a meaningful ending must not be disregarded because it provides important revelations about the human condition and its struggles in such a conflicting world. As is the case with Huck, all should be wary of comparing reality with ideal or romanticized expectations. Realism and romanticism can be considered both beautiful and ugly, but should remain separate for the sake of safety and common sense. Twain, though he makes no explicit statements that this book should be a moral lesson, would not have written it and published it if he did not intend for people to learn from it.

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Agents of Entropy

Tessa Ivey

Evident among scientists and scholars alike is the concept that everything in this world naturally flows toward a state of disorder. In regard to this important second law of thermodynamics is the equally significant idea that when energy is applied against this natural tendency, the increase of entropy can be prevented or reversed as long as the source of energy continues in opposition. Applications of these energy functions vary greatly and can be used to explain a number of things, like how health wanes with age or how dishes are clean one day and dirty the next.

Another interesting application can be used to explain the rise and fall of nations. In "Letter III. What is an American" from J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, the writer observes a growing young nation that has freshly separated from an oppressive Europe and has chosen instead to exercise its newfound freedom in efforts to tame and organize the disorder of the New World.

Crevecoeur's analysis of the infantile America's unique characteristics is quite accurate and helpfully lends itself to a comparison of the nation as it stands today, which can be used to demonstrate the second law of thermodynamics. The rise of America is illustrated in Crevecoeur's essay as the middle class is established and religious indifference takes root; however, when compared with the America of today, it is apparent that these qualities are deteriorating in correspondence with the propensity for entropy.

The middle class Crevecoeur describes in his essay is a determined

people with the single purpose of creating order from disorder. Despite the high or low rank someone may have held in Europe, upon settling in America that person could join the "people of cultivators" as a means of livelihood and become "united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws" (Crevecoeur 605). Many would rather come to a new place and brave the chaos of the wilderness and natives than resign themselves to a stagnant fate in a system of no benefit to them. Whereas several of them "were mowed down by want, hunger, and war" in Europe with no chance of escaping such an impoverished and oppressed class, they "regenerate" when they journey to America (606), "which gives them land, bread, protection, and consequence" (607). All of the diligent efforts of the early Americans, as Crevecoeur portrays, help establish the middle class and lay the foundation for the American dream; such a feat seems incredible when considering the pandemonium they overcome, essentially fighting against nature, to create a fresh sense of democratic order.

Today's American middle class enjoys luxuries that other countries—and even the early settlers of this land—do not have the pleasure of experiencing, yet it unfortunately appears to have hit its peak of progress. Public education, insurance policies, and widespread social networking are just a few privileges that Americans have to combat the disorder of everyday life, but instead often waste or take for granted. As in Crevecoeur's vision, it is still a land of opportunity, where "self-



interest” motivates industrious labor (607), but this aspiration for advancement often manifests itself through a sense of entitlement instead of a desire to earn anything. Just as the immigrants are illustrated as “useless plants” in Europe before their “transplantation” in the New World (606), many of today’s Americans contribute nothing to the great country in which they appreciate their freedoms. It seems, just as the “rich and the poor” of Europe had been “so far removed from each other” (605), that the middle class Americans have been spoiled to the point of desensitization and are now the ones who, having little or no experience with true poverty or riches, are living in remoteness from other classes. How sad it is that so much energy has been expended all for the sake of building a beautiful system that is being blasted to entropic shreds by those who refuse to carry on its progress.

Religious nonchalance is also something that in Crèvecoeur’s work is portrayed as having helped form and knit together the American nation; this is something that could only have been accomplished by people very conscious of both their collective and individual efforts to achieve ultimate freedom. He observes that “religious indifference” is “at present one of the strongest characteristics of the Americans” (611), which could be no mere coincidence coming from people of mostly “strict modes of Christianity” who had previously felt adamantly enough about their religion to vacate their homeland (610). Apparently, however, the

generation he describes knows that religious differences only divide those who refuse to acknowledge and accept those differences, and it chooses instead to be strengthened by its diversity. Crèvecoeur iterates this by saying that Americans “think for themselves in spiritual matters” and “become as to religion what they are to country, allied to all” (608, 610). Thus, Crèvecoeur’s account of the young America drives home the fact that its early settlers exert much of their efforts toward the goal of preventing chaos in the form of religious division and upholding a new sense of order.

While religious nonchalance may have helped unify the nation in Crèvecoeur’s time, today it is something that tears apart the American society. He is correct in his essay to assume that “this effect” of religious indifference “will extend itself still farther hereafter” (610), but such an effect has not remained a beneficial one to this nation. Today, Americans are no longer striving together toward religious liberty because that is something they already possess, and the lack of a common goal to work toward has apparently created a “vacuum fit to receive other systems” such as hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity to the same privilege their predecessors had established (611). Many citizens of this republic dramatize themselves as victims of religious persecution whenever another’s religion or practice thereof is different from their own; the inverse is also true, as some appear to have been denied the freedom to publicly or privately express their spiritual sentiments in order to



prevent any offense toward those of different beliefs. That is not to imply that religious uniformity would fix anything because such would be impossible for even the most peaceful and agreeable people to achieve, but now there is clearly a deterioration from Crevecoeur's observations of religious freedom in America.

America has witnessed astounding and countless developments, such as the advancement of civil rights for both nonwhite races and women since Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. These great achievements cannot be ignored, especially considering all the uphill battles it has taken to accomplish them, but neither can the signs foreshadowing the decline of this incredible democracy. The same principles that America is founded on

are being undermined by those who are either too lazy to maintain them or by people who seek to manipulate them for a personal gain far more sinister than that of their ancestors. If allowed to remain on this path, with no energy applied against such a fate, this awesome nation will experience the consequences of the second law of thermodynamics like all others that have preceded it. All hope may seem lost at this point in history, but one must also keep in mind the law of conservation of mass, which states that matter or energy cannot be created or destroyed, but only changes from one form to another. Therefore, hope is never completely lost, but is merely transformed into a different kind of energy that may not have been discovered yet.

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Third Place Literary Analysis

The Idiocy of Equality

Batrice Brown

America: land of the free, home of the brave. Throughout American history freedom, equality, and bravery can be heard in every tale, true or made up. Also throughout history, media in all forms is a central part of relaying information to the masses. In Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron," media in the form of television, radio transmitters, and the Constitution is used to instruct, propagandize, and ensnare Americans, causing them to believe and accept that they are a society of dumb, absentminded, unattractive, and weak people. Through the use of setting, character selection and irony, Vonnegut reveals how media is used to implant and cement the unrealistic ideals of total equality into the minds of an entire culture and he uncovers the many delusions involved in such a fallacious belief system.

Though Vonnegut places the setting in the United States of America, freedom, democracy, and bravery – America's world-renowned attributes – are only illusory. The fact that it takes place in the year "2081" (7) shows readers that this is the not-so-distant future and makes the story more personal, realistic, and relevant. Americans are now wearing "hindrances" (11) and "padlock[s]" (9), they are run by a person whose title even suggests bondage and dictatorship "The United States Handicapper General" (7), and they are afraid of "prison" (9) or murder (13) for noncompliance. A television set is another important place in the setting as it is where a live execution of a

teenage criminal is broadcast. This is helpful to keep people in a state of fearful submission. The author states that the "211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution" (7) bring equality to all, even though another important historical document is already in place that declares that all are created equal. Citizens are "required by law" (7) to wear handicaps to keep them weak, unintelligent, and unattractive. This is not the America most people imagine or know today.

Next, the characters provide perfect examples of the inconsistencies and absurdities that occur when it is claimed that "everyone [is] finally equal" or that "they [are] equal in every which way" (7) as the introduction to the story states. Harrison, the protagonist, is a "fourteen-year old genius and athlete ... [who] has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government" (10), a television announcer claims. She goes on to say, "he should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (10). When Harrison arrives on the scene, he takes off his handicaps, chooses a dance partner, frees her and the musicians of their constraints, and bursts into a dance that is described as "an explosion of joy and grace" (13). He and the ballerina "neutral[ize] gravity with love and pure will ... and [kiss] each other for a long, long time. But before he enters, a police photo of him is flashed and shows him as being "exactly seven feet tall" (11). His appearance is described as "Halloween and hardware" due to the "tremendous ... earphones, spectacles with thick wavy lenses, three hundred



pounds [of random] scrap metal, red rubber ball ... nose, shaved eyebrows, and black caps [on his teeth]" that he is "required to wear at all times" (11). Though he looks awkward and deranged because of all the handicaps, when he removes them he reveals a striking face and physique that "would have awed Thor, the god of thunder" (12). It is also made clear that many of the accessories he sports are specifically to "offset his good looks" (11). Harrison knows he is wanted by the police. Instead of escaping he dances. He calls himself the "Emperor" and the ballerina his "Empress" (12). He is not a genius. He is a child. He is made to appear as a hideous monster, but in actuality he is beautiful.

Hazel, Harrison's mother is said to have "perfectly average intelligence" because she can only think about things "in short bursts" (7) and describes herself as "normal" (8). Throughout the story, Hazel voices thoughts and asks questions that highlight her exceptional sagacity. She talks of how her husband is tired lately and suggests resting and relieving the weight of his handicap bag. She responds with concern and accuracy to the levels of discomfort her husband displays when the radio handicap sounds in his ear. She ponders ways to lighten the bag when he comes home from work. She speaks of a better way to be a Handicapper General and how if she were in office she would "honor religion" (8). She feels sorry for the struggling announcer and acknowledges his efforts. The only time she is shown to have any mental deficiency is when asked why she is crying. She doesn't recall seeing her son murdered on television. The "extraordinarily

beautiful" ballerina wears a "hideous mask" (10). Because her voice is a "warm, luminous, timeless melody" (10) she must "apologize" for it and talk in a "grackle squawk" (10). These characters prove that equality is an imaginary, superficial, and impossible.

Lastly, Vonnegut cleverly uses situational and verbal irony to show just how ridiculous and contradictory the premise of complete and total equality really is. The story claims that "everybody [is] equal every which way. Nobody [is] smarter than anybody else. "Nobody is better looking. Nobody is stronger or quicker than anybody else" (7). The very first sentence is ironic: "The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal" (7). 2081 is in the future. But the sentence is structured as if it is past tense. People who are strong are made to wear "sashweights and bags of birdshot" (8) to weigh them down. But George Bergeron states I don't notice it any more" (9). It is no longer weighing him down. He is used to it because carrying it around continuously has made him stronger. This is also exemplified in the instance of Harrison who "outgrow[s] hindrances faster than the H-G men [can] think them up" (11). The young man continues to grow stronger the more they try to hinder him. One reason for equality is to render Americans "uncompetitive" (10). But it is stated that "In the race of life, Harrison carr[ies] three hundred pounds" (11). A race is a competition. Running a race with weights on is illogical, especially if everyone in that race is equal. Before removing his handicaps, Harrison exclaims "Now watch me become what I can become!" (12). He is not becoming



anything. He is simply revealing his true identity. Everybody is supposedly equal. This is hardly accurate or true if neither the Handicapper General nor her group of H-G men wear any handicaps at all. They are either all perfectly normal and do not need them, or they are exceptions to the rules of equality.

Either way, if they are in the position to decide or judge who is equal in what way or how to enforce or ensure the laws are obeyed, they are obviously not equal to the people they are imposing the laws and rules upon. The only way this extreme form of equality can truly be achieved is if everyone is the same sex, race, size, profession. Americans would be a society of clones. Here, it is just a dystopian society full of inconsistencies and nonsense.

In "Harrison Bergeron," Kurt Vonnegut not only uses setting, characters, and irony to artfully, cleverly, and skillfully uncover, expose, and

disseminate how media is used to brainwash Americans into believing in and adhering to being a culture of completely equal generics, but also the infeasibility, falsity, and preposterousness of such beliefs. By peering into a near future America, American readers are compelled to consider the role media plays in their lives and how it influences and even dictates their identities, choices, and beliefs. They are encouraged to consider the sources of said media and the trustworthiness of their claims and intentions. American readers are likely to become more analytical of situations and are sure to be more intentional about thinking for themselves. Surely elected officials will be held accountable for their actions and scrutinized more closely. If nothing else, "Harrison Bergeron" elucidates that total equality is an illusion and freedom is not free.

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Jan I. Anderson Black and White Photography Awards



Blend by Kandice Cook, First Place



Reflection of Beauty by Natalie Kay Jordan, Second Place



Sacrifices by Daley Wilks, Third Place



Crossroads

Caitlin Piper

The kid couldn't have been older than sixteen. Skinny, short, soaked through with rain. She was all knees and elbows, her hair knotted with water as she stumbled along the roadside. Cormac couldn't help but pull over.

"Hey," he called over the storm. "Need a ride? Nearest gas station's not fer 'nother twelve miles."

The kid turned. Even in the dark, he could see the blood spattered up her torn white dress. Cormac said nothing until she raised the gun. "Take me downtown, Mister," she said in a voice that shook and squeaked, her eyes big in their bruised hollows, "fore I put a hole in yer head."

Cormac swore. "All right, all right. Don't do anythin' stupid." His hands flew up. "I got nothin', see?"

She didn't look for very long. He could've run her over when she darted around the front of his van, but he didn't. She struggled to climb into the passenger's seat. She didn't put on her seatbelt. When she straightened to point the gun at him again, he saw that the blood on her clothes had crusted.

"Move," she all but wept.

Cormac surged forward. "I got nothin' but change on me," he said. "less you wanna check the back."

"I don't want yer money, Mister." Her hands shook and shook. "Jus' take me downtown."

"Jus' calm down." Cormac ambled back up to the speed limit. He'd been the only car for miles. "Can't do nothin' if I'm dead."

The kid just wagged the gun at him again. "I will shoot," she said. She didn't look an inch over five feet, probably not

even half his weight with all that water on her, but Cormac didn't feel like testing her.

"I'll getchu downtown, don'tchu worry."

The next few miles passed in tense silence. He wondered if she knew the roads, wondered if he had a chance of taking her somewhere safer. He had a rope and a tire iron, but that didn't do him much good sitting in the back. The front seat was meant to hold three people. Though she didn't look like she had any idea how to handle that gun, he didn't want to risk getting shot in the long reach over the middle seat. He clenched the steering wheel.

"What's all that blood?" he asked.

"You hurt yerself?"

"Not mine," she said, never taking her eyes off him.

"Ain't nothin' out here but farms. How long you been walkin'?"

"I will shoot," she said again.

Cormac glanced at her. "Y'don't look like yer outta high school yet. Whatchu doin' with that gun out'n the middle of nowhur?"

"It's my daddy's." Her hands shook harder. "I shot him with it. I'll shoot you too, if ya try anythin'."

"I won't," Cormac said. He was long past that. "Just—put the gun down. I can't see straight with that thing'n my face."

"No." Her sunburned fingers tightened around the grip until her knuckles shone white. "I ain't doin' that."

"All right, all right. I ain't gonna hurtcha."



A sign crept up through the sheet of rain. The gas station was now five miles out.

"I'm almost outta gas," he lied. "I don't got enough to make it to the city. You gonna shoot me if I stop?"

The kid's big eyes grew bigger. Her shaking hands froze with the rest of her.

"I can't do nothin' without gas in the tank," Cormac said.

"... Then yer gonna have to walk, Mister. We ain't stoppin'."

Cormac curled his hands tighter. "Why you goin' into town? What if the police see ya?"

"I'm goin', Mister."

"And I'm takin' ya there. Why'd ya shoot yer daddy?"

The kid said nothing.

"I threatened to shoot my daddy once," Cormac said, trying to fill the air, trying to get her to open up and see him as more than a target. "Back in the '40s. He had a hog farm. Big rifle he shot the hogs with. I said if he hit my mamma one more time, I was gonna shoot him in the head."

The kid audibly swallowed.

"I ain't gonna hurtcha," he said. "I just want both of us t'get home safely."

"I ain't goin' back."

"All right."

"I *ain't*."

"I believe ya."

She was trembling so violently now that he doubted she had it in her to fire. "I ain't done nothin' wrong."

Cormac stayed quiet.

"I was doin' what I said I would. I said if he hollered at me again, he'd be sorry."

"He alive?" Cormac asked softly.

His hunch had been right. That had been the question to break her. Her fingers squeezed the grip until he heard squeaking, and the gun slowly sagged downward with the rest of her. She wept behind her nest of hair.

"All right," Cormac said. His hand inched to the right, testing. "It's all right, darlin'."

"The blood," she croaked, not quite ready to let go of the gun. "There was so much *blood*."

"I know."

"I ain't mean to kill him. I jus' wanted him to stop screechin' at me."

"I know, darlin'."

The gas station shone like a beacon on the horizon. He'd waited too long.

"Just stop right here, Mister," she said through the tears. "I gotta make a call."

Cormac flicked on his blinker. There were two other cars at the pumps. He couldn't risk moving now.

"Thank you," the kid said. She sniffled and pushed out under the rain, wiping feverishly at her eyes. "I'm sorry fer givin' you such a fright, Mister."

Cormac clenched his jaw as he watched her stumble out into the glow of the fluorescents. So close. He didn't wait around to see what happened. He just reversed out of the parking lot and continued on his way. So damn *close*.

"Shit," he mumbled as he pushed back up to the speed limit. He rubbed his eyes in anger. "*Shit*." It was dark out. She'd been scared. She couldn't have gotten a good look at his face. Surely. He continued on east and didn't slow down until he had the abandoned barn in sight. The place had been old when he'd played here with his brothers as a kid, a



skeleton picked clean by time and weather. He rolled onto the gravel and lumbered to a stop beside what remained of an old well. He pushed out onto the grass, looking around for headlights. Finding nothing, he went to the back of his van and swung the twin doors open.

“Rise ‘n’ shine,” he drawled.

He’d been too clumsy with the tire iron. The man tied up on the van floor

had been dead when Cormac had thrown him in. The woman was alive, but still unconscious, her breathing ragged and wet as she stained the mat with her blood.

Two out of three wasn’t ideal, but it wasn’t anything to sneeze at, either.

“Ride’s over, darlin’,” Cormac said, and scooped the woman up to carry her into the undisturbed shadows of the barn.

Second Place Short Fiction

Unsung

Caitlin Piper

Ignoring the sea of people milling around him, Trevor lurches forward and plucks the half-finished cigarette out of the gutter. It’s smeared with bright pink lipstick at one end and caked with dirt at the other. He sticks the lipstick end in his mouth and, scraping the other end clean, touches his lighter to it. It’s too wet. It doesn’t light. Cursing, he tosses it to the ground and shoves his way through the crowd, heading for the subway.

That job interview had been his last chance. He’d known that. Alan had been pulling strings and kissing ass for two months to get it for him. So why had he tried so hard to sabotage it? It was the interviewer. Had to have been. The guy was only a few years older than him, but he dressed like he’d never left the ‘80s. With his slicked back hair and smug shark’s grin, Trevor had wanted to punch him in his stupid face on sight. The guy had to have known his history, had to have known every little screw-up that led to this point in his life. Even if by some miracle he hadn’t glanced over Trevor’s disgustingly long rap sheet, Alan

must have described it to him in fleeting detail, using words like “resourceful” and “inspirational” to describe him. Fucking Alan.

Trevor stops at the edge of the sidewalk, staring up at a sky the color of slate as a bus lumbers past, belching up curls of blue-black smog that hang in the air overhead. It’s going to rain soon.

Silently considering the traffic before him, Trevor scratches his cheek. He’s shaved for the first time in months and the itching is beginning to drive him crazy. He fumbles through the pockets of his frayed suit jacket, running his hands over his face and plunging his fingers into his receding hairline when he finds them empty. He’s out of cough drops.

Some asshole in a suit begins to screech into his cell phone behind him, squealing to someone named Edna about how she can’t do anything right. Trevor chews the inside of his cheek, stale cherry cough drops lingering on the back of his tongue. Maybe it’s better that he told old Gordon Gekko to go fuck himself back at the interview. He doesn’t



need these people. He doesn't need Alan and his disgustingly transparent pity. Alan is just a waste of skin and hair gel whose only talent lies in his uncanny ability to ruin perfectly good silences. Fuck Alan.

Trevor clenches his hands until the bones creak. The entrance to the subway is just right there and traffic isn't slowing. He steps purposefully onto the street, deaf to the horns and screeching and unrelenting *noise* of the world around him. Darting down the stairs, he steps onto smooth concrete and is swallowed up by subway.

He throws himself down on the first available bench to gather his bearings. Some college-age kid is sitting in the middle of it, scowling below his mirror-like sunglasses as he clutches what looks like a laptop bag to his chest and taps on an expensive-looking phone, a bulky duffel bag resting at his feet with its strap curled around his ankle. Trevor scoffs. Sunglasses underground. What an asshole.

Trevor winces as a train screeches to a halt nearby, the sound amplified in the sprawling maze of concrete. Like clockwork, a crowd rushes past in both directions, splitting cleanly around the bench. Sunglasses Kid looks at his cellphone and abruptly stands up, melting into the river of bodies as he presses the phone against his ear and disappears.

He's left his duffel bag.

Trevor stares at it intently. He eventually sidles over and runs his hand across the weather-beaten exterior. Whatever's inside is hard and small and rectangular, shifting with a whisper when he presses his fingers down.

He bites the inside of his cheek. No one's looking. They're too busy

staring at their feet and ignoring each other. Sucking air in through his nose, he loops the strap over his shoulder, walking stiffly up the stairs and onto the street. Staring straight ahead, he fights back the urge to break into a run. He walks. He wanders. He watches. No one's looking. No one's following.

The crowds thin. The traffic quiets. Trevor ducks into an alley and drags in a breath, sliding to the ground as his fingers fumble with the zipper. He rips the bag open, wrenching his neck to look inside.

It's nothing but a bunch of old books. Dime store novels and self-help pamphlets that look as if they've been through dozens of owners. Sitting on the top, screaming up at him with cheery yellow bubble letters is a hardback entitled *Keys to a Long and Happy Life*.

With a manic, ear-splitting laugh, Trevor grabs the book and flings it sideways into the wall. Its spine crunches before it claps to the ground, sagging on its pages in a pile of rat droppings.

Panting, Trevor kicks the duffel bag away, sending books sliding as he buries his head in his hands. This is what he's become. A bitter old bastard sitting in a pile of trash and roach shit with \$20 to his name and a lifetime of unpaid debts on his addiction-rattled shoulders. Disgusting.

His cellphone vibrates in his pocket, pulling him out of stupor. He reluctantly pulls it up after it's gone still, straightening when he sees the name on the caller ID. Frantically running his fingers over the buttons, he presses it to his ear as the voicemail begins to play.

His breath catches in his throat, and Trevor is completely oblivious to the



tangled mass of wires spilling from beneath the mountain of old, beaten books in the duffel less than a foot away.

In the seconds leading up to the explosion that kills him, rupturing his lungs and bowels while simultaneously sending all three pieces of him flying sideways into the street, Trevor's eyes grow hot.

In the seconds leading up to the explosion that jars an old building from its crumbling foundation, sending spiraling clouds of dust and rubble in every direction as a passing car is knocked skidding and battered into the center of the road and its driver's eardrums pop, Trevor decides that he might still have a chance.

In the seconds leading up to the explosion that marks the final entry on his extensive rap sheet, that earns him a spot in countless "World's Dumbest Criminals" lists and whose retelling draws a long and hearty laugh out of his

father when the police come knocking on the old man's door, Trevor realizes where he needs to go and what he needs to do.

In the seconds leading up to the explosion that transforms him into an immortal laughingstock, a would-be bomber whose only victims were himself and a few pigeons with the unfortunate luck to be bathing in a cloudy puddle nearby, a man whose sole defender would be ridiculed for refusing to look past his "inspirational" story to see him for who he really was, Trevor knows that he can end the day a new person.

In the seconds leading up to the explosion that damns him, Trevor is sure that he can finally become worth something, that he can finally surpass everyone's expectations and become a man worthy of praise and adoration, and beams as the first and final tear spills scorching down his cheek.



Third Place Short Fiction

Before Us Stood Eternity

Wilfred Crespo

Angela's sapphire eyes sparkled in the early morning sun as she leaned in for another kiss, her warm breath tickling my frozen face. Our engagement rings clinked like champagne flutes as she took my hand in her own, our lips pressing as the metallic resonance reached our ears. The world around us wilted, ruin marched its way through the city, smoke dotted the horizon, but for this brief moment, all of time and space vanished, the universe falling silent in the wake of our embrace. Hands shackled by interlacing fingers, we inch our faces away and stare into one another. She whispers timidly beneath the frozen autumn wind, allowing her words to be swept away before scarlet can overrun her cheeks. I could only smile. In this moment, nothing I could say would do her immensity to me justice.

It had already been a month since the first signs. It started with reports from Los Angeles. Multiple missing children, always with their clothes left behind, scattered loosely right where they were last seen. This wasn't national news, though, until multiple officers in a Kentucky prison witnessed a man in solitary confinement blink out of reality in a brilliant flash right on their CCTV feed, the bible he had been reading thumping softly on his bed. Just days later, calls began to bombard even our local precinct. Missing husbands, parents, neighbors, and it only continued to escalate. I held Angela close when her mother called, telling her how her father hadn't returned the night before. I cradled her when her

mother didn't pick up the next day, her warm tears burning me.

Eventually Brooklyn became so devoid of life that anyone who remained were left with two options, get out and join the riots, or barricade your home and hope to go unnoticed. Angela and I chose the latter, locking ourselves away in our tenth floor apartment like holdouts in an ivory tower. People in any number of the apartments surrounding our own followed suit, fortifying their homes before standing on their own balconies to watch our city crumble to dust.

In the distance, the smoke from the downtown fires spilled across the noon sky above, billowing out like ink in crystal water. Below, traffic sat bumper to bumper as far as the eye could see in either direction as people tried to get home to their loved ones, the honking, revving mess continuing to devolve by the moment as cars bumped and pushed in futile attempts at escape. The shouts of irritated passengers, drivers and pedestrians grew into a chaotic symphony echoing through the dead trees and dark clouds looming above our home.

Amidst people looking to get home marched the doomsayers, people pushing themselves against the flow of the surrounding river of humanity, their hands wrapped around a sign and a bible like flotation devices they had hoped would keep them above the living currents as they sang songs of rapture and heaven's glory. This had no chance of working. Littering the street and cars were the loose pages of scripture and crucifixes of the poor fools, strewn



about once the exodus could no longer bear the purposeless preachers. Almost as though the forced proximity to one another produced some form of a hive mind, people rapidly crashed over the doomsayers in crushing waves, overtaking them instantly. Alleyways quickly became choked with bodies, some unconscious, some worse. It was painful and clear, the news of mankind's requiem had degraded our city to something primal and foul, and it made us shiver in each other's arms.

Beneath the streets, the subway smoldered. The unskilled hands of those who succeeded in claiming an unmanned train transformed what they hoped to be the fastest way home into a bullet sent crashing into the D-line platform right outside our front door. The resulting disaster burned for three hellish days. In the faint orange glow, the shadows of dying men and women haunted the stairway leading back out into the living world like suffering nightmares stretching to freedom. Three weeks later, and the sickening smell of scorched flesh still lingers like a sickening miasma.

Less than a mile down the road, the church of St. Paul lay defiled, its thick oaken doors scored with innumerable deep gashes from a dozen wild axe chops. In the dead of night, A dozen figures, cloaked in the shadow of night, assaulted the church. Some were scarcely taller than the doorknobs and held the hands of much taller figures. Together, they slaughtered the cowering Father Harris as he hid amongst the pews. Perhaps they believed they could be saved in a house of god, but they only succeeded in turning the last hope of sanctuary in the decaying city into a monument to the depravity of desperate

men. It seemed like eons ago that I dropped to my own knee with a ring in my hand outside those very doors. Now, as they rested on the church's lawn, there were no pleasant memories. Now I could only see the hole carved into the door laying on top, one just large enough for a man to squeeze through. Still we can hear those inside, chanting, reciting passages, every window flooded with candlelight and shadows knelt in prayers.

Through the paper thin walls of the apartment besides ours, the Estevez family began their own prayers. "Unite us together again in one family, to sing your praise forever and ever! Amen!" The family repeated this to themselves, each recite picking up volume and speed. Under the calls to an absent god, Mia Estevez whimpered, soft and subdued like a scolded puppy. Maria Estevez, unlike her daughter, sobbed deeply, openly, begging through sorrowful wails for divine forgiveness. The click of Marco Estevez's revolver hammer silenced not just the women, but the earth itself. I waited, holding my breath, scared that even the slightest exhale would trigger the awful inevitability that was coming.

The first shot drained every sound from the world as it forced both Angela and myself to recoil. For the first time, the milling and screaming below gave way to silence as sullen faces turned to look up.

"Te amo, Papi..."

In the new stillness, Mia spoke, her mousey voice almost alien in its gentleness, her words warm and compassionate. Marco responded in kind, his voice low and loving.

"Lo siento, cariño."



Mr. Estevez snapped the hammer back. Just the click was enough to convince Angela to cling to me, her arms wrapped around my waist as if I were the last thing keeping her afloat or, maybe, from floating away. Still, Mia did not cry, her breaths slow and penitent as she awaited her father's mercy. The second shot that day rattled me to my very core, drowning me in icy despair. From next door came a guttural wail, then several rapid clicks as the revolver spat out nothing but air. Mr. Estevez, however, refused to be denied his own mercy. A few feet away, the Estevez's sliding door opened. Disheveled, with wild eyes, Marco stepped from his house onto the balcony and over the railing in a single fluid motion. The shriek of terror that escaped Angela when we heard him collide with the earth one hundred feet below decimated my heart.

On the roads below, lost souls continued to press their luck, attempting to cross the stygian flood that choked the streets, many stepping over the new broken mass that had joined them. Then it all grinded to a halt as they twisted their necks back to the sky. Once hidden behind the orchestra of the moaning damned, an engine could now clearly be heard loudly sputtering its final breath. I enveloped Angela instinctively as the Kodiak's rapid descent rattled every bone and window within a mile. I could almost make out the look of panic and terror on the face of the pilot before the craft clipped the top most balcony of the adjacent apartment building, pulverizing the wing into shrapnel before it

plummeted into the subzero waters of the Hudson River, the force of the resulting waves drowning the streets. A rain of concrete chunks metal shards pelted the awestruck crowd, those thrown to the ground by the wave unable to move fast enough. I covered Angela's ears as I placed her eyes to my chest, trying my best to protect her from the lunacy erupting below, refusing to let her see me, to see the terror in my own eyes. I could feel her fight my grip. I could feel her wince with every crunch and crash.

When the chaos faded, Angela slowly lifted her head out of my hands, but continued to cling to my chest, her tear-streaked cheeks glistening in the late afternoon.

"Is this really how it ends?"

Her voice trembled like a frightened child's. Angela stared up to me, her innocent blue eyes begging for answers I didn't have. I had no words for her as the world around us withered. I could only stare, my lips trembling as I searched for anything to comfort her dying hope.

On the horizon, the downtown fires glimmered like a beacon against the far-off, cloud covered sky. In its soft orange glow, I let my mind wander. I thought of the life together that we were now never going to live, of the children we were now never going to have. I thought of the nights behind us we spent huddled for warmth, and the nights we slept apart, angry over silly fights and nothings. Were we robbed of our fate? Was it fate that committed the robbery instead? Will we have to simply accept the coming end?



My sigh is slow and empty as my eyes move down and stop on the railing before us. Without hesitation, Angela's eye follow my own before looking back up to me. In a moment, her face latches on a look of uncertainty before she abandons it to nod her approval. If our lives needed to end, then we, at least, would take the right to choose how. Together, we turned, climbing past the handrail of our balcony, and stared out into the cataclysmic landscape, hand in hand.

When the clouds and smoke had dissipated and the fires devoured all they could from the bones of the city, the sun shined on the world as it always had, and will, once we are gone. High above, the sound of seraphim wings descended, great blots of darkness that blacked out the sky, growing by the second in both size and number. The crowds shouted and fled, the panicked voices engulfing the city as a single bellowing roar of terror. Angela and I

simply embraced one another, fingers laced so tight that even god wouldn't dare separate us. In the rejuvenated sunlight, Angela's sapphire eyes sparkled a final time as I wiped the tears away. Pulling her chest to mine, I whispered to her the only words of comfort I could find.

"Angela, no force will tear us apart. I love you."

We shared one final kiss as gravity pulled us from the ledge. When lips parted, we rested our foreheads together as souls intertwined into a single beautiful entity, not an inch between to determine where I began and she ends. In my ear, Angela shares her final words, each echoing through eternity.

"I will always love you."

With those words, the world melted away, the whole of existence blowing away like sand in a maelstrom, save for the sound of trumpets, the shine of divine light, and the warmth of Angela's breath.



First Place Poetry

Show Pony

Wilfred Crespo

You can find me
Beneath the big top,
The only sky I'll
Likely ever know,
Dancing to a
Symphony of
Cracking whips and
The cackling audience
With blinders to my eyes,
Steel arches on my feet,
And scars across my flesh.
I'll draw to these
Empty seats some dozens
Of lightless eyes,
Immune to my flinching,
And deaf to my wailing,
Gnashing snacks, waiting
To be told to applaud.
And be told they will
When I stand
On scored legs
Under the great,
Red and white Striped
Heavens.
Applause. Applause.
An Ovation, like
The roar of a sea.
Applause. Applause.
But soon will
Silence flood this
Cavernous
Canopy tent,
Save the singing
Flog, caressing me
With a viper's
Tenderness.
Whistling as it
Rips asunder
The still air
Between each
Hellacious strike,
Whispering to me



With every recoil,
“Cry for me.
Show Pony,
Cry for me
Just once more.”



Second Place Poetry

March with the Fireflies

William Crespo

March with the fireflies,
Like ghosts and wisps,
Through the marshes,
Through the great toothless maw.
Like ghosts and wisps,
Shuffling and moaning
Through the great toothless maw
That threatens to swallow.
Shuffling and moaning,
Rattling chains that bind us, we
That threaten to swallow
Our pride and hope.
Rattling chains that bind us,
We, the forgotten many,
No pride, nor hope.
We march with the fireflies.
We, the forgotten many
No hope, nor pride.
We march with the fireflies
Like ghosts and wisps.



African Dream

Alicia Oberlachner

In the nights swoon
The hungry bark at the moon
As they sit cold and callous
Fighting off the kings great malice and greed
Bloodshed in Cape Town
Children in willowy
Singing songs of Salix and immunity
Prudence is pained
In need of a savior
As they toil each day
In an unfairly wavier
Waiting on the tailor
To bring peace to this acre
And many throughout
Screaming Hallelujah!
In a plighted shout
Word is the word
He's come to abound
In a state full of grace
In a moment of sound
The lost that were lost
Are finally found