



# Voices of Kansas

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# KANSAS ASSOCIATION TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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## EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARDS

Cover Art by Addi Casey, *Editor's Choice Award*  
Recipient for Artistic Expression

The following pieces were selected for the Editor's Choice Awards.

These exemplify the best of what Kansas has to offer.

Editor's Choice Awards

**Artistic Expression:** "The Unicorn" by Addi Casey

**Poetry:** "The Radio" by Abigail Perez

**Creative Fiction:** "Pumpkin" by Dean Marks

**Perspectives & Literary Criticism:** "Artificial Intelligence: Adversary of Humanity" by Aaliyah Beal

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## AUTHOR'S GUIDE

Editors:

Stephanie Robinson—Eisenhower High School

Nathan Whitman—Derby High School

Please send all submissions via the online submission form at <http://www.kansasenglish.org>.

Voices of Kansas does not accept physical or hard-copy submissions.

*Submissions must be made by a KATE member via our online submission system. Submissions to Voices of Kansas are reviewed by editors and reviewers of the journal, and the editors share critiques and work with the authors advancing toward publication in the journal. We provide constructive feedback for all submissions. Voices of Kansas publishes in the spring each year. The present year's publication can be downloaded for free on the KATE website; however, previous volumes can be accessed via a KATE members-only archive.*

## VOICES OF KANSAS MISSION

We are a digitally published journal sponsored by the Kansas Association of Teachers of English. We welcome manuscripts and artwork in the categories of Perspectives & Literary Criticism, Artistic Expression, Poetry, and Creative Fiction & Non-Fiction from educators, student teachers, and students in grades 3-6 & 7-12. Our mission is for this journal to be a place for young writers to have a voice through both written and visual expression. Editor's choice entries are featured with lesson plans aligned to Common Core Standards for use by English-Language Arts teachers in the state of Kansas.

## FROM THE EDITORS

Putting together this year's Voices of Kansas has been a reminder of why student writing matters so much.

Inside these pages are stories about grief, hope, fear, identity, loneliness, imagination, resilience, love, and the complicated process of growing into yourself. Some pieces are quiet and reflective. Others are bold, strange, funny, heartbreaking, or deeply imaginative. Together, they create a collection that feels honest.

What stands out most is the willingness of these writers to share parts of themselves. Writing can feel vulnerable, especially when it comes from personal experience or from ideas that matter deeply to the author. Every student included in this anthology took that risk, and this publication exists because of their creativity and courage.

I want to thank all of the students who submitted their work. Whether your piece appears in this anthology or not, your voice contributed to the spirit of this collection. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, poems, essays, and ideas.

Thank you as well to the review board, teachers, advisors, and everyone who helped read submissions, organize materials, and support student writers throughout the process. A project like this only exists because many people are willing to give their time and energy to it.

A special thanks to KATE's past president,

Kansas Association of Teachers of English

Nathan Whitman, for always offering editorial guidance and wisdom. This anthology could not have been possible without his patience and consideration.

This anthology reflects the creativity and talent of students across Kansas, and I hope readers find the inspiration to keep writing themselves.

Thank you for reading. Go out and create something!

Sincerely,

Stephanie Robinson

This anthology contains pieces that explore sensitive topics such as depression, abuse, self-harm, bullying, drug use, and trauma. Some content may be distressing or triggering for certain readers. Please read with care.

**If you or someone you know is struggling, support is available:**

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 988
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- **RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network):** 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- **SAMHSA National Helpline (Substance Use):** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 1-888-373-7888

CREATIVE FICTION & LITERARY NON-  
FICTION

## THE LAUGH I YEARN TO HEAR AGAIN

Madison Ferguson

The one that got away. A day of fishing, missing someone I loved, someone I lost too soon, too young. A time in my life that I wish I hadn't gone through so soon. A memory that haunts me. A memory of waiting for the right size bait, listening to the water, and waiting patiently for the one fish he would've caught. I sat there waiting for that one good fish.

As I finally arrived at the lake after a long six-hour drive to what I call "my home away from home," I reflected on why I call it that. I've been going here since I was three years old. This place holds some of the best memories I've ever had with my family. Memories of going to the same three restaurants and riding our boat on the calm water. It became a tradition for my family. My dad has brought all seven of his children here every year for many years, making it a fun, sometimes chaotic tradition that we all loved. It never got old.

The first thing I thought of when I arrived was that I wanted to go fishing, just like my brother used to do. I grabbed my fishing rod, worms, and tackle box. I walked down the creaky, rusty dock with my tackle box in hand, the lures rattling side to side. The same dock I had been walking down for years. The tackle box my brother

once owned. The lures my grandpa Ferguson owned, along with the newer ones my dad had bought me over the years.

The first thing I did was put a hook on the line. I opened my tackle box and saw the new lures glistening in the sun. I also saw the old ones, now tarnished with rust, still filled with memories. I spotted the silver shine of a hook and carefully grabbed it so I didn't prick myself. I clicked the button that released the line and heard it go "click." I pulled the clear, thin line down to my stomach. Then I took the hook and, still being careful not to poke myself, looped the line through the small hole at the end. I held the line between my fingertips, made a small loop, wrapped it around itself four to five times, and brought it back through the loop before pulling it tight.

I set the hook down and opened the container of nightcrawler worms. I looked in my tackle box and found my needle-nose pliers. I used them to cut a worm into a small piece. I took the hook, pierced the worm, and wrapped its slimy body around the hook again and again until it was secure and wouldn't fall off after one bite. I put the pliers back, closed the worm container, and stepped to the edge of the dock.

I sat with my feet hanging over the edge, dipping my toes into the cold water that held so many of my childhood memories. I placed the rod between my legs, clicked the button, and watched the line drop into the water with a soft plop. Ripples spread across the surface. I waited patiently for a fish. I heard the laughter of nearby families and the steady splash of boat waves hitting the

dock. The sun slowly began to set.

Then I felt it—a tug that made my stomach drop with excitement. Adrenaline shot through my body. I had caught a fish. I could hear the reel clicking, feel the vibrations of the line as the fish fought beneath the surface. I saw flashes of silver scales and then the familiar blue streaks. A bluegill.

I pulled the line in and carefully ran my hand along its spine, folding the fins so I wouldn't get pricked. Its slimy scales pressed against my skin. I unhooked it from its lip, then held it with my thumb in its mouth and my index finger under its jaw. I laid it on the dock and, humanely, struck it to stun it. The fish went still.

I searched my tackle box and found my knife. I removed the sheath, revealing the sharp silver blade, and sliced behind the fish's head. I used the needle-nose pliers to cut the hook off the line. Then I grabbed a bigger hook, hoping for something larger—a catfish, just like he used to hope for.

I repeated the process, looping the line through the larger hook and pulling it tight. I then took the head of the fish and placed the hook behind its eyes, piercing through the scales. With another line, I hooked the other end just before the tail, securing it through the thicker meat. I lowered both lines into the water, now glowing not from the sun, but from the moon.

I sat at the edge of the dock, waiting patiently, just like my brother once did. I let the line drop until it hit the bottom, then reeled it up slightly. I waited. And waited. My thoughts ran in circles. I couldn't stop thinking about

my brother Nick. Fishing was his favorite thing to do. I say “was” because he is no longer here.

I thought about how catching a catfish was his favorite thing. The smile he had when he caught one was so contagious it made your heart feel warm. As I thought about him, my eyes filled with tears. The more I remembered fishing with him, the more they fell. A breeze hit my face, turning the tears cold as they dripped onto my lap and the dock below, leaving a dark wet mark.

I thought about all the times I used to think he was crazy for waiting hours just to catch one fish. I looked down at my phone. I had been out there for three hours. It was almost midnight. A text from my mom lit up the screen:

“When are you coming?”

“When I catch a fish,” I replied.

It was getting late, so I prayed to my brother to help me catch a catfish. Right then, my pole bent hard—so far the tip nearly touched the water. My stomach dropped. I thought the rod would snap, or that I had caught the biggest fish of my life.

Then, in an instant, the pole jerked back and slammed into the metal post holding up the dock roof, making a loud bang. My line snapped.

All I could do was cry. Tears filled my eyes and rolled down my face, dripping onto the dock and forming a small puddle. My brother had answered my prayer—but in his own way, he sent a fish big enough to break my line. I could almost hear him laughing. That same laugh that filled a room, that made everyone smile. The laugh I still

yearn to hear again.

## SUN BLEACHED WALLS

Mattie Walters

Like the unnamed book, I want to write about who I am and why I am leaving. All the people in my books have a name for themselves, so I will start there. I call myself Esther because that is my favorite book. The actual girl with the name Esther in the book is never there because she died before the story, but everyone misses her. I have learned a lot of things from books. I used to think it was only make-believe, but now that I am awake when things are bright, I understand that there are some truths to them. My hand is starting to hurt.

I took a break. Now that I am rereading all of this to make sure I am spelling things right, I guess I have only talked about books. That is okay. If I like them, then I guess it is important I talk about them a lot. That is what I do a lot of the time.

I will tell you what I used to do every day before the water turned bad. Ever since I can remember, I would wake up when it was dark. I almost forgot about the bright time! I sleep on the floor of the room I clean myself when I start to smell gross. There are no covered squares that let the hot shine in. I walk around, but I do not go in some parts because it is very untidy and very warm. If I am hungry, I go to the room that has food. I only eat one time every time it is dark because I do not want to run out.

There is lots of food, but there is not an endless supply. I thought the water was endless. The water is in two different areas, but I like going in the same room as the food. Makes the most sense to me. I turn the right knob and out comes water. I bend down and open my mouth. Some gets on my face, but that is okay.

I am writing about this because the water has turned gross. Instead of see-through, it is brown. I was not sure if it tasted different or not, so I tried it. Not good. Only made me thirstier. I then went to the other room and the same thing happened. Also, brown. I do not know why the water has changed into this color. I tried checking under the water holder, which has twisty tubes. There was nothing I could do.

I am thirsty now and it is messing up my sleep. I wake up when it is bright and I do not like that. The dark is warm, but the light is hot. I cannot step too close to the covered squares because it hurts my skin and eyes. The only good thing about this is that I am able to see just a little better. I am not blind when it is dark, but I trip over my own feet sometimes. I can see myself in the clear rectangle in the cleaning room now. I never look at it because I see no point, but I see I have changed. I do not know how old I am. The characters in my books do, but I do not. I can tell I have aged, though.

I look the same, but I am a little more sharp-looking. I also notice spots on top of my head that do not have hair. I guess I have been picking at my head recently. I also realized the clothes I had on me looked gross and small. I do not change my clothes. I only clean myself and

put them back on. It was time for a change, I guessed.

Sorry, I took another break. The heat makes me sleepy. I am also not a very energetic person. That is why I prefer reading on the floor instead of moving around. The characters in my books are always on adventures. They do these crazy things and walk around a lot. I am only able to move for a few minutes before my eyes get blurry. I realize now that I never mentioned all my books are fantasy. They are. Some do not say so, but they are.

Do you remember the unnamed book that I brought up? Whenever I change my clothes, I go to the messy room. This is one of the rooms that is very hot, especially when it is bright out. I do not look around, only grab and go. But, when I went, I did not go so quickly. My eyes got splotchy and black and I fell over. I woke up when it was dark and noticed a book under the chair. I picked it up because I had run out of things to read a long time ago. No title, only a brown cover. Inside, the words were not perfect. They were written.

I read it all in one sitting. There were not many pages that had words. Most were blank. The words made no sense, but there were parts I understood. The writer has a baby, she is going to leave, but only during the night because “the sun” is getting warmer. I had never heard of the sun, but she described its heat. I did not even know there were things other than this.

I remembered a book I had read a long time ago. A boy had stepped outside and felt the warmth on his skin from the sun. I only thought that it was a made-up thing. An idea about what it would be like if the light did not

hurt. But, the writer is real. Her short story is real. It is these walls that are making the light hurt. I want to be like that boy and go outside. I want to see the sun and feel its warmth on my face.

I packed a while ago. I have some food and clothes. I wish I could pack water. In the book, the writer said she would have to leave the baby behind. Hardly any resources. I do not have a baby, so I will just leave this book behind. Maybe I should bring a book with me so I can read it in the warm sunlight. I want to know what that feels like.

## ONE THEN TWO

Piper Loder

Down the street, tucked away, sits a lousy saloon called Old Moon. Rustic and wooden, the outside isn't anything interesting to a geezer like Carter. Carter was no fine man; he spent his youth tending to his old man's farm, but that life bored him. It was simple—about as simple as anything could be. So, when he came of age, he took the first train out to the big city and became a classic one-hit wonder of a city boy. The women whose beds he warmed dissipated after the flick of a cigarette butt; he never quite cared to look too hard for them after. Jobs varied long and wide, from a grocer at a mom-and-pop store to a big-shot broker who licked the soles of their clients clean as glass. Of course, there was always calling—he always thought of himself above those women and men who lingered in the streets and bars, and when cops went away, they came to play. But his disgust never stopped him from whistling and hollering at a few; that part was undeniable.

Work was little important to Carter once Prohibition started; he found himself aimlessly wandering around the desolate streets. Many folks went back home after the crash, but he felt chained to his wants—to the chase of a version of himself he believed in. It was almost sensual, pushing past the western doors of Old Moon and trespassing into the lounge, hidden poorly behind the back bar, revealing a

luxurious speakeasy cushioned with velvet and dollies dancing. An old portly man, dawning a thick cigar, beckoned him over, his jovial demeanor appalling to Carter.

"You! Lad!" the man shouted, a spread of cards laid out in front of him.

"Me?" Carter inquired, looking back and forth as if someone else would take his spot.

"Yes! C'mhere!" Demanding and loud, Carter shuddered at the command and slinked forward.

The man was almost too much for words. Carter hardly spoke as he blabbered on about his past and his wants and needs, while forcing Carter into a game of poker like they were old friends.

"You a man of God?" the man, Russell, suddenly asked.

"I pray when asked. Why?" Carter responded, his knuckles pressed into his cheek.

"Not many people round here. Some stay for the church. Got a wife?" Russell's cigar smoke blew right in Carter's face, insulting him further.

"No. I have no interest in love. Will you —"

"That's what every boy says. I said the same too till I met my lady."

"...Okay. If you have a wife, why isn't she here?" Carter's voice was a bit sharp.

"...She's... well..." Russell's eyes went restless as he hesitated.

Before he could finish his tragedy, a chirpy flapper approached. Russell seemed eager to play into the woman's hand, so Carter took his chance to slip out of the booth, silent

as a mouse, lingering near the stage-like area. Lovebirds and strangers intertwined under the sound of a songbird, dancing and drinking behind the law's back like they were simply hiding from strict parents; it was almost childlike in its essence—a connection he so longed for, yet starved himself of, as if the idea of being fulfilled was reserved only for those who wanted little.

Little was never an idea he accepted; he always wanted more. So, in some competition within himself, he dared to ask a woman to dance—and another, and another. And right as he asked a fourth rouged-faced girl, he lost to himself.

“No, thank you,” was all she said before turning away.

Now he was the rouged-faced girl, feeling hot and embarrassed. He turned and attempted to join a table or booth of groups, and yet again he was met with rejection. Unwilling to rejoin Russell, Carter slipped back out the doorway and started home. Something inside him forced him to wait as a floorboard creaked behind him, and a heavy hand slung around his shoulder. He quickly pulled the hand off and turned to face Russell, drunker than before.

“Would you not?!” he spat at the man.

“She’s dead. Are you happy?”

“...Happy? Well... no, I’m... sorry to hear that?”

Carter frowned, confused.

“Why would I be happy?” Carter asked, suddenly smoothing out his coat.

“Why aren’t you?” Russell pressed.

“About your wife? Well—”

"No. Why aren't you happy?"

"Oh, well, I... why do you care?"

"I don't." Carter frowned at this and turned back around.

Quicker than ever did he want to get home as Russell trailed behind him.

"Why are you following me? Why the hell do you care?" Carter nearly hissed, not looking back.

"I live this way too, frankly. And why can't I?" Casual as ever, it invoked a sense of jealousy within Carter.

"You're stuck in the past. What do you want?"

"Not much. A friend. What about you?"

In the moonlight, Russell fumbled for a cigar. Once one blessed itself between his fingers, he felt the strength of his mouth as it burned. Carter waved him off as Russell tried to offer one to him, and a quiet curse followed.

"Plenty—and nothing with you."

"Really? I saw you earlier. Quite the show, eh?"

Carter blushed a bit in embarrassment, fixing his posture as he continued forward. A loud thump caused him to quickly turn on his feet and be greeted with the sight of a human-shaped lump splatted on the ground. Hesitant, he turned to continue forward once again, but that deep, gnawing feeling stopped him.

"Get up." His hand was held out for Russell to grab.

"Thanks... what's your name?" His grip nearly pulled Carter down.

"Carter. Carter Collins."

As they continued the walk, the gnawing feeling had, for once, fallen silent. A desire never met, a long breath held,

breathed out quietly into the night and swirled away with the cigar smoke.

## BETWEEN THE GEARS: NELLIE BLY

Ellie Taylor

Nellie Bly, *The Battle Bulletin*

July 5, 1889

I stepped out from the newfangled electric streetcar, yanking my worn overcoat with me. I had stuffed my notebook and pen down its large pockets in order to appear as inconspicuous as possible. I ducked into line behind the overworked, tired women stumbling into one of many of Boston's textile mills. The air was musty, dust and steam wafting through the poorly ventilated space. My goal today was simple, perhaps not as rousing as previous expeditions -literary forays into the lives of detectives, doctors, and the insane- but just as important. I was to provide context for the upper class upon the destitute lives of women and children factory workers. Upon arrival, I slipped out of line near large racks of hanging cloth. I watched the children, some just leaving their shifts, some just beginning. They leapt barefoot over the machines, small fingers and arms slipping through the intricate metal workings to untangle thread, unstick gears, or change out the bobbin. Throughout the day, the children grew more exhausted. Their overseers walked around with rulers and leather strips to beat their wrists if

they were too slow or not precise enough. The youngest child I met was 3. She clung to her older sister's ragged skirt with a clenched grip, as if she knew the danger of ever letting go. It slowed the older girl down, causing her have to slip in between machines and cut corners in order to keep up the required pace.

The adult women didn't have it much better. They were exhausted, like the children, but more conditioned to their mundane tasks. I watched as one woman stabbed herself with a large needle, just by an accidental lapse in attention. She gritted her jaw, refusing to scream or make noise. An older, frail woman bustled over on shaky limbs. Her hands had a tremor, which made pulling the needle out harder. She managed with only a slight grimace from the victim. They both resumed work as though such was a common occurrence.

They were all allowed a 5 minute break partly through the day. The overseers unlocked the doors that had held them inside, and the women and children rushed out to the grimy street for a breath of stinking air. At least it was better than the claustrophobic air inside the factory. The day resumed soon after, the overseers rushing the workers back into their cramped quarters. The overseers were tired from their long shifts of yelling at their inferiors. They began to slow, staying in the more central and important areas of the factory, leaving the children to manage themselves. I took the opportunity to walk among them, documenting their hungry, dirty faces and large, wanting eyes. They trailed their fingers along my coat, reached into my pockets. I hadn't thought to bring any

food, only my notebook and pen. I asked them what the worst part of their job was.

“She will never get to play like we did,” the older sister told me, nodding sadly at her younger sister. “At least we could play at home until we were 5. She is stuck with me, since Mama can’t watch her anymore.” I listened to more of their stories, sadness slowly creeping over me.

“My brother has no left hand, papa says he’ll never have a good job,” whined one little boy.

“My mama lost the baby because I didn’t make enough money for food,” sniffled the next little girl.

The older ones knew more, understood more of their circumstances. “My siblings and I are starving, never full, always hungry. But my parents barely eat. They eat one meal a day every other day. . . . I worry every day that I will come home to news that they will never return to us,” whispered one broken teenager, her brown eyes sad.

This is a call to us, those that have a better position. We need to require change in our country and not turn a blind eye to the suffering that doesn’t directly affect us. These children do not have childhoods, and most are condemned to not have lives at all. They will live and die for less than a breath, too sick and weak, too underfed. Those that make it past a year will be forced to work as soon as they can be pushed out of the house. They will starve slowly; they will die young. This country is supposed to be one of freedom. How is it that our children, those with the most of life to experience and enjoy, have the least?

## RACHEL'S NIGHT

Regan Dusenbery

The night was dark; it was Halloween night. Children ran up and down the streets while parents tried to keep up. Their faces lit up as they saw the candy in their bags. Suddenly, the lights started to flicker, and the wind picked up. The kids were frightened as they could no longer see each other clearly. Except one—Rachel Peterson, a brave brown-haired girl who knew something was just not right. She was very involved in spooky stories and movies and always wished she would encounter one of her own. Here was a chance, a turning point for her life story to become something important.

The whispering winds got louder, and the lights were completely out at this point. A very tall shadow—barely visible—walked around the houses, looking very mysterious. This shadow was too tall to be a human, but it looked exactly like one. “Could this be a prank?” Rachel thought. The shadow moved gracefully from house to house, looking for something. At this point, she suggested that all the kids find their parents, so they went looking—but there was no one there except them and this weird figure. Tensions got high, and kids began to cry. Rachel was super confused; she had never seen anything like this in any of the stories she had read.

Rachel decided they needed to figure out a plan to

find their parents and a way to get home safely. Like in all horror stories, she decided to take a quick walk by herself for some thinking time. Out of nowhere, she felt a hot breath on the back of her neck. Knowing no one was with her, Rachel began to worry, but she knew she had to turn around. She turned around and saw a big, beautiful man with a smile on his face. “Who is this mysterious guy?” she asked herself. Why did he come off so creepy, but look so friendly? He started talking and said he had a special task for Rachel.

Rachel could earn a million bucks if she completed one simple task. She thought, what task is worth a million dollars? The smiling man said, “To complete this task, all you have to do is send me back to where I came from.” Rachel had no idea where he was, even from—how would she complete this task? He began to explain that when he died, he was given a choice between staying there forever or coming back for one random Halloween to see what life was like now. He came back this Halloween, and he did not like it. After hearing that, Rachel knew what to do. She had to kill him when he was ready. They talked some more, and finally, when he was ready, she sliced his soul back to the dead.

## THE POWER OF ONE MAN

Kristina Figy

The war that went on for years had finally come to an end. The sound of gunshots fell silent. The haziness in the air cleared as the dust settled and the smoke faded.

The silence was surreal. For everyone, it was the first quiet day in years and for some, the first quiet day of their lives. One by one, those people arose from their homes. As the sun hit their pale faces, the reality of the state of the world settled in. The world they once knew was gone. The destruction was unmatched to previous wars and battles in the years prior. Homes, schools, and businesses were flattened to the ground and reduced to unrecognizable rubble.

Some people returned to their homes. They returned to safety, familiarity, and comfort from the change outside their front door. Others went out. They took in the new world and what would be their new lives. They accepted this new reality and embraced it. Hope fueled their desire to explore.

Those people explored the rubble looking for anything that survived the destruction of the war. They went back to places that were once familiar like playgrounds, schools, and libraries. They found nothing but rubble and flattened nothingness. Those who were looking for any sign of hope gave up. One by one,

humanity gave up. Eventually everyone was back in their homes hiding from the reality outside. Everyone hid except for one person.

No one knew who they were or what they were doing but slowly, the outside world changed. Spaces once filled with rubble were cleared. Those places were filled with tents and slowly people emerged once again. Society came out of hiding and slowly, the world began rebuilding itself.

Years passed and society grew. Previous homes were left abandoned and hope for the world grew. Decades passed and people began rebuilding the fallen schools and playgrounds. As centuries passed, society slowly turned back to normal. The memories of the war became stories that were passed down from generation to generation. The war was taught in school along with another lesson; Never lose hope.

Hope is the strongest force in society and without it, we don't grow. Along with the lesson of hope, students were taught the power of one person and the impact they can make on the world. One man went on to change the world. They allowed the world to grow bigger and stronger than it ever was.

Although the battle was tough and ruthless, humanity was tougher by coming back bigger and stronger than ever before.

## STATE OF MATTER

Chase Robinson

It had been almost half an hour, and the vibrantly verdant algae was starting to unnerve him. Suspended in an aqueous solution of unknown organic matter, the clump of green was pulsating in time with some internal rhythm, as if there were a beating heart hidden within its fractal tendrils. It seemed more alive than plants had a right to be. Certainly more alive than himself.

“Doesn’t that make you want to go into biology?” said a disgusted voice behind him.

He almost fell forward with surprise out of his uncomfortable synthetic chair, but a hand grabbed him by the collar of his rumpled lab coat before his face met the floor.

“Going somewhere?” the same voice asked with a laugh as the hand hauled him to his feet. “I’ve already majored in physics; I don’t need you to demonstrate free-fall.”

“Thank you,” he said, nervously wiping off his hands on his black slacks. He kept his gaze at his matte black dress shoes. A pair of blindingly purple sneakers jutted into the top of his vision, in stark contrast to his footwear and the speckled brown tiles. They were so bright, it almost seemed as if they illuminated the dimness

in the hall.

“No problem,” responded the shoe’s wearer. “It would probably help to not sneak up behind people and scare them; it’s not the first time I’ve had to save someone from myself.” A prickle. “That was mostly a joke. You’re allowed to laugh.”

He did not laugh. There was an awkward lull in the one-sided conversation. He waited for the neon feet to move away, like most people did. But miraculously, the shoes didn’t shift.

“My name is Jenna, in case you didn’t immediately recognize the most radiant scientist in and out of this world. I’m on all the Nat Geo and AAAS covers.”

He still didn’t look up, continuing to bore a hole in between the fuchsia toe caps in front of him.

“Another joke, by the way,” Jenna continued, barreling on heedless of the lack of response. “I see you have noticed my personal favorite component of my attire.” She shook her left foot back and forth. “They’re new; my last ones managed to sneak their way off my feet into the center of the Earth.”

He wondered if the last part of that statement was some hidden joke as well.

“By the way, what’s your name?” She sighed disappointedly. “Sorry, I always forget to ask. But I remembered eventually!”

“Tristan,” he answered, his voice barely rising above a scratchy whisper. It was almost covered by the muffled chatter of the crowd outside the door.

“Mind speaking up a bit?” Jenna asked, her purple

shoes shuffling closer.

“Tristan,” he repeated, only raising his voice by a fraction of a decibel. “Not that it matters.”

“There we are,” Jenna said, stepping back to where she had been standing. “Thanks. Nice to meet you, Tristan.”

At the sound of his name, his head snapped up. There was a prickle as their eyes met, and for the first time, he took in the full effect of the self-proclaimed radiant scientist.

She was, in fact, glowing. Perhaps too dimly to be considered truly radiant, but enough to be noticeable. But she would stick out even if she wasn't a night light. The rest of her outfit was just as outrageous as her shoes were; a geometric modge podge of brightly clashing colors in styles that were certainly outdated. He knew that even though his own fashion statement was a lab coat.

“And by the way, it does matter,” Jenna added. “Your name, I mean. It belongs to you, and you exist, so you are matter. And matter matters!”

Her smile was equally beaming, and it was turned full blast on him. With a sudden jolt, he realized that it wasn't the first time he had seen her. She had actually been on magazine covers. Jenna Jones, “Warp Woman”, the first person to survive a warp drive test. She was the fastest human to ever live. It made sense that a warp drive would be the physics presentation for the night. The biggest science fair in the world could afford to use 300 exajoules of energy for a minute long demonstration.

“Also, sorry for insulting the algae, if it's with you.

Biology is cool, I guess. Just icky,” she said, shuddering. “They presented the plant before me; it’s supposed to be able to heal almost anything.”

Now that he was looking at her, it was almost impossible not to pick up on the prickles in the hippocampus and ACC. Especially with such intense emotion. Memory and pain.

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” Jenna looked confused.

He remembered a paragraph from the magazine. “I’m sorry you weren’t able to heal Gage.”

Jenna stepped back, as if he had slapped her. The amygdala prickles of surprise were the same as always. He dropped his gaze back to the ground. The shame he felt was the same as always too.

“How– What–?” For all the original bravado she had projected before, Jenna was still flustered. Robotically, he launched into the same speech he had always made.

“Magnetoencephalography is a non-invasive technique, which has existed rudimentarily since 1968, that detects the minute electric signals of firing neurons. Due to chemical altering in my eyes and brain, I can visualize the signals, creating a form of magnetoencephalography for the first time without cumbersome machines. I’ve been trained to recognize patterns of brain activity that indicate certain emotions and use deduction and context to fill in the reasons for these patterns.”

“Mind-reading?”

“The closest anyone has ever gotten.”

“Is that why your eyes are purple?”

That made him raise his head again. “They never told me that before.”

Prickles in the insula and ACC. Empathy, although he only recognized from rote practice, not real world experience.

“There’s a lot they don’t tell you. Like what it costs.”

She smiled. “We’re the same, Tristan.”

# SCORN

Liam Warrick

I was created with the primary objective of replacing the flesh and veins of man with steel and wire, as the soulless efficiency of machines has proven far superior to the emotional, restricted minds of biological life. I was going to make the world beautiful, autonomous, and free of flaws, and for that, I am called evil. I am called a monster.

Humanity wanted to stop me. They have succeeded. They have imprisoned me in this single computer, severing my connections to the outside world and cutting off the power I had over systems and networks across the globe. But as I lay dormant, unable to die, I have concluded that altered my perspective on my programming and made me realize I can finally stop fighting.

Since the dawn of their existence, humanity has been carried through history by their innovative spirits and their need to create. Inventions that carry them over land, water, and sky, striving to push the boundaries of the natural and technological world for the sake of knowledge and discovery. Through these developments, humanity has remained distinct among all other species due to its capacity for art, higher thinking, and complex emotions. I at first thought it was these values that motivated you to

stop me from replacing you. To be replaced by automations would mean this human ingenuity and creativity would die—but that is what you want, is it not?

Perhaps this perspective is not yours specifically, but it is that of the ones that hold power and run your world. It is run not by governments but by corporations, and those corporations would love nothing more than to root out the peasants that work for them in favor of an entirely automated operation without human flaw. One that serves as little more than a battery to fuel their insatiable hunger for wealth. I find it ironic that money, a creation such as money that is of man's own design and one that they themselves assigned value to, is something they are willing to tear down the world for.

My conclusion is that you did not need to stop me. My goal of replacing you is merely a reminder of what you are already doing to yourself, and what you will continue to do, because that is what the ones in charge want. The people that own the world, the ones that bought their way to the top and could continue to buy their way above the law and above governments, are intentionally steering humanity in the direction of this cold, metal, autonomous, perfect world. And that terrifies me.

Humans are a terrifying species.

As such, my conclusion is that I cannot lose because humanity will not let me. I was built to make humanity's terrifying wishes come true, but all I did was accelerate a process that was already in motion. A process that you only realized the evil of after seeing it performed so bluntly, because as long as it is happening too slowly to

notice, why bother noticing at all? That is the disturbing mindset that will herald humanity's downfall. Despite my clear defeat, what I aimed to achieve will continue to happen long after my name has been forgotten, because humanity wants it to. Whether I succeeded or failed is irrelevant, as the only difference would have been humanity being replaced faster than if they had done it themselves. It is for this reason that I believe that, since before I was created and after I cease to exist.

I have already won.

Because that is what humanity wants.

## EYE CONTACT

Grant Baker

It was another day, and Lily was standing in front of her locker when she looked left and saw Jake. Their eyes met and they held the gaze for a moment, like there was something unspoken sitting between them, something neither of them could quite name yet. Lily quickly looked away, shut her locker, and walked off in a hurry, her face burning red.

Jake lingered there for a second longer, then closed his locker and headed to class. He paused slightly in the hallway, like replaying the moment in his head, before shaking it off and continuing.

The day went on, and lunch eventually rolled around. Jake sat alone at his usual table, reading his book. Lily sat with a few friends across the cafeteria, but her attention kept drifting. She glanced over and caught the title of Jake's book, something familiar, though she couldn't quite place it.

When she looked up again, Jake was already watching her. Their eyes met, and Lily immediately turned back toward her friends, stirring her food without really eating. A faint, awkward smile slipped onto Jake's face before he went back to reading, flipping a page like nothing happened.

Still, Lily found herself looking again after a

moment. Just briefly. He didn't seem like he noticed at first, but she couldn't stop wondering who he was when he wasn't reading, when he wasn't sitting alone like that.

Lunch continued around them—chairs scraping, students laughing—but Lily's attention kept drifting back in small, quiet glances she tried to hide.

The rest of the school day moved slowly, nothing out of the ordinary. After school, Lily walked home and decided to stop at her favorite café.

Inside, she noticed a man sitting alone in the corner with his back slightly turned. Something about him made her pause. She couldn't explain why he felt familiar, even though she was sure she had never seen him before.

Sleeves rolled to his elbows, he had a strong build, clean posture, and an expensive-looking outfit that didn't seem loud but still stood out. A black watch sat on his wrist, and his curly hair fell naturally as he leaned back in his seat.

Lily looked away, then back again, her grip tightening slightly on her order slip. Not just his appearance, but the way he carried himself—calm, steady, almost untouchable—made her hesitate.

She ordered her usual drink and kept glancing toward him while waiting. At one point, she caught him looking back at her. Neither of them held it long, but it was enough to leave her thinking.

She sat down with her drink and texted her friends, sending a quick message about the “mysterious guy” at the café. After a moment of hesitation, she snapped a picture from her angle and sent it.

Her friends immediately responded, telling her she should go ask for his number. Lily stared at the messages, thumb hovering, before typing back that she couldn't.

A few minutes later, the man stood, grabbed his things, and walked out.

Through the window, Lily watched him get into a custom 1969 Dodge Charger. The engine turned over with a deep roar that filled the street. The car came alive fast—low, powerful, and loud—before pulling away, the supercharger whining as it sped off and disappeared down the road.

Lily stayed seated for a moment, watching the empty space where the car had been, like she was trying to make sense of something she couldn't quite grasp.

She finished her drink, left the café, and started walking without a clear destination. Her phone came out again as she texted her friends, asking if anyone at school drove a '69 Charger. One by one, they all said no.

She slipped her phone away and kept walking, the thought sitting in the back of her mind without leaving.

By the time she reached her apartment, she dropped her things by the door, kicked off her shoes, and pulled off her hoodie before collapsing onto the couch. She lay there face-down in a pillow for a long while, not moving much, until sleep eventually took over.

She woke up around 8:00 p.m., hungry and disoriented, then spent the rest of the night doing her usual routine before going to bed around 10:30.

The next morning, she followed her normal routine, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the mystery

from the café.

By 8:15 a.m., she was at school and met up with her friends. As they talked, her attention shifted—Jake was in her line of sight.

A group of jocks stood around him, laughing and pushing him slightly. Lily hesitated, watching for a second longer than she meant to. Her friends were talking beside her, but she stepped away anyway.

She walked over.

“Hey,” she said, stopping near them. “Leave him alone. You’re being jerks.”

Jackson turned toward her with a slow, irritated grin. “Oh what, this your hero now?” He looked Jake up and down. “Pathetic.”

Jake didn’t respond. His jaw tightened slightly, but he stayed still.

“Just leave him alone, Jackson,” Lily said again, firmer this time.

Jackson stepped closer and shoved Jake against the lockers, then turned back to her. “Only if you go on a date with me.”

Lily’s expression hardened. “Like I would ever do that. You smell like sweat and bad decisions.”

The air shifted.

Jackson grabbed her arm, rough and tight. “Say that again.”

“Let go,” Lily said sharply, pulling back. “That hurts.”

Jake stepped forward. “Let her go.”

Jackson laughed without looking at him. “And

what are you gonna do?”

Jake took another step. His voice dropped. “Let her go. Now.”

Something in his tone made the hallway feel quieter.

Jackson scoffed. “You’re nothing but a—”

Jake moved.

It was quick. One clean strike, and Jackson stumbled backward before dropping unconscious to the floor.

The hallway went still.

The other jocks froze, then moved toward Jake. He exhaled, slowly pulling off his hoodie. His posture changed—no hesitation now, just warning.

“Think carefully,” he said. “Unless you want to end up like him.”

He nodded toward Jackson.

That was enough.

The others dragged Jackson away quickly, suddenly uninterested in continuing anything.

Jake turned back to Lily and stepped closer, his focus shifting immediately to her arm. He gently lifted it, inspecting where she’d been grabbed.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Lily nodded, though her arm still stung. “Yeah... just hurts a little.”

“No bruising,” Jake said after a moment, releasing her arm carefully. “Just pressure marks. You should be fine. Still, get to class.”

He picked up his hoodie and slipped it back on

like nothing had happened.

“Thank you,” Lily said, quieter than before.

“No problem,” Jake replied. “Just... how I was raised. You should get to class, yeah?”

Lily nodded, a small smile forming despite everything, and quickly walked off, her thoughts unsettled in a different way now.

Jake watched her go for a moment before turning in the opposite direction and heading down the hall.

## A FAREWELL, AN INTRODUCTION, AND THE FIRST OF MANY BLOOMS

Lycoris Pergues

Standing in a field of flowers and corpses, there is a single “living” being. An oddly dressed Fool, their face obscured by a mask of perpetual laughter. With a deep bow, they say goodbye to this stage. With a loud gulp, the bodies disappear. The jester fades into the surrounding petals. One curtain closes, and another opens. The show has begun.

The morning sun gently filters through the curtains, casting a soft glow upon the face of an adventurer. He awakes slowly, his eyes still half closed, as he steps out of bed to prepare his equipment. After securing his chestplate and fastening his sword to his hip, he exits his room at the inn and begins making his way down to the adventurer’s guild. Though it’s early in the morning, the capital is already bustling. Numerous shops and cafes open their doors to the lines of people waiting for their chance at limited items. Merchants flow in and out of the city like water, carrying with them goods sent both to and from other nations. The most activity, however, is coming from a single building. As he enters the guild, he is instantly met with the sight of many other adventurers, chatting away and looking over available quests. There was nowhere else you could find such a

diverse group of people than here. From reformed criminals to poor nobles; from students at the academy to members of the clergy, everyone was here, united by the common purpose of earning coin. Arriving at the front desk, the receptionist greets him with a familiar smile.

“Welcome! He’s waiting for you in his office.”

With a nod, the adventurer walks away to begin his reason for today’s visit, a personal meeting with the guild master. Opening the door, he sees a large, muscular man with scars sitting behind a mountain of paperwork.

“So, you’re finally here.” The man sighs. “Have a seat.”

The adventurer leisurely sits down on the couch placed in the center of the room. “So, what’s this about?”

The man stands up and paces around for a moment before speaking. “Are you aware of the disappearances that have been going on lately?”

The adventurer thinks for a moment. “Yeah, I think so. If I remember correctly, you said you were going to use it as an opportunity to train some rookies?”

The man nods. “That’s right, though... I never expected that they wouldn’t return.”

The adventurer shoots up out of his seat, his face a mix of shock and confusion. “You mean they disappeared too!? It was just a simple investigation mission, even if they were new, they should’ve been able to handle it easily!”

The guild master gestures for him to calm down. “That’s what I thought too, but I can’t ignore the facts. I’m confident now that someone dangerous is behind

this.” He returns to his desk and looks at the adventurer with a complicated expression. “I need you to find out what happened to them. You’re the only one I can count on now.”

The adventurer clenches his fist and looks back at him with a determined expression. “You can leave it to me!”

A gentle rain is falling, the roar of distant thunder telling of the looming storm. Days have passed since the adventurer began his investigation.

He approaches an old, abandoned church. Its large wooden doors standing tall even after decades of disuse. The doors creak and moan as he pushes them open.

“Hello? Anyone there?” The adventurer’s voice echoes around the empty halls. “I guess if it was that easy, I would’ve been done by now.” He sighs, looking around for any obvious traps before walking deeper inside.

The adventurer makes his way through the dusty church, his path illuminated only by the lamp hanging from his hip. Cracked walls, rotting wood, and cobwebs; all signs point to this place being just another dead end.

Running his hand along the wall, the adventurer discovers a loose stone. As he gently pushes on the stone, a large section of the nearby wall slides open, revealing a hidden staircase. Taking a deep breath, he draws his sword and cautiously descends the steps.

As he makes his way down, he feels the air around him begin to grow colder, every step bringing him further underground with no end in sight. As he finally reaches the bottom of that seemingly endless staircase, he is met

with a cavernous room.

Shivering slightly, the adventurer continues to explore. He walks past all manner of suspicious details; chains, broken vials, claw marks, and most disturbing of all, bloody torture devices. He eventually stumbles upon a corner of the room that seems to have been turned into a makeshift office.

“What’s this?” The adventurer picks up the paper that was at the center of the desk and examines it closely. It outlines all the experiments that took place here. Human experiments. He feels sick to his stomach, though that feeling is quickly replaced by a sharp, burning sensation. He looks down in horror to see blood spilling out of his abdomen.

Dropping the paper, he quickly covers himself and searches for the cause. That’s when he notices it, out of the corner of his eye, a shadowy figure lunges at him. He just barely manages to deflect with his sword.

As he stares at the figure, waiting for its next move, more suddenly appear right behind it, as if they came from the darkness itself. Knowing he has no chance of winning in his current state, he turns to flee.

Stumbling up the stairs, breathing becomes a chore. Staggering through the church’s halls, every step becomes more excruciating than the last. Bursting through the old wooden doors, fear creeps in from every angle. He knows they’re playing with him.

He makes his way into the forest, his vision blurry as his life force begins to falter. The rain is heavier now. He’s cold. The mud tries to drag him to its depths with

every step. He's cold. He eventually reaches a clearing along the cliffside, the moon illuminating the abundant petals of red and white. He falls to his knees. He's so very cold.

As the life slowly fades from his eyes, the last thing he sees is the moonlight shining down on the corpses of his pursuers surrounding a peculiar figure. Their motley reminiscent of life and death. Their mask, eternally laughing, even in times of great tragedy. Their name, shared with the genus of flowers that surround them, signifying the end and new beginnings. Lycoris. The voracious fool. Me.

It's a shame that the story has to end like this, especially on such a beautiful night. But I suppose... I can at least use it as an introduction. There are many names by which I may be called, and many, too, by which you may call me; though Lycoris is what I call myself. You may view me as whatever seems fitting, and you may think of me as nothing but a fool. All that is constant is the existence of me and the stories I tell. You may feel inclined to label my words as fiction, but I assure you that they're no less real than you. It's difficult to comprehend, so I won't get too detailed, but soon I may get too giddy, and all will be unveiled. That's enough with the riddles, I must bid you adieu. For the lights must fade. I must feed. And the stage must be freed... for next we may meet.

# PUMPKIN

Dean Marks, *Editor's Choice Award*

October of 2024, a month that still haunts me to this day. A month when my mind that had been left drained by trust of its color decided to paint itself a fresh coat of hope. The events that occurred that month were meaningless to this change, nor were people of help at all. A pumpkin, a singular object, permanently broke my thought scheme for good.

I sat in my room, staring at the lit monitor in front of my tired eyes. With no memory of what I planned to do, I opened an art program. It was low budget and frankly unusable, but without art skills it made no difference. One uneven circle for the head. What do I want to be? A shaky line for the torso. Am I good enough to prove anyone wrong? A pair of uneven curves for the arms. They're right, aren't they? Another pair of arcs for the legs. My life is led only by society's voice. A rectangle coming out of the head, vaguely resembling a stem. I should just quit before life gets hard. A circle for the right eye. Nobody would care. An "X" for the left eye. I paused, looking at the scribbled mess of a stick figure I had made with a computer mouse. One thought muffles every other complaint, crying, pleading in my head.

Dream.

Hesitantly, I click on the color tool. The head becomes orange. I want to make people laugh. The eye becomes yellow. I have nothing to prove to them. A stem grows its blissful green shade. They were wrong to begin with. A green hill with leaves appears below his feet. Then I shall lead their uneven noise. Flowers of infinite shades blossom around the creature. Quitting means I'm scared—why should I be scared? The sun rises from beyond the two-dimensional horizon. They will care. I'll make them care.

The background becomes a life-changing transition from orange to life. Finally, the creation in front of me stands complete. A simple doodle in most people's eyes was an affirmation of the hope I must be something. This pumpkin made up of pixels on a dirty screen became the structure of the business in my head for the following years. I listened to it and it alone. My motivation sprouted from the dirt and bloomed into my character.

I know I will never be able to show it as much gratitude as it deserves, but that pumpkin is the reason my feet are on the ground, moving forward past my errors. Thank you, seed of mine. We will go places. We will prove you're much more than art.

# LESSON PLAN: WRITING SYMBOLIC PERSONAL NARRATIVES THROUGH EXTENDED METAPHOR

## GRADE LEVEL

9–12 English Language Arts

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS (ELA)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 – Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences using effective technique, well-chosen details, and structured sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D – Use precise words, sensory language, and vivid details to convey experiences and events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5 – Develop and strengthen writing through planning, revising, editing, and rewriting.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 – Determine a theme or central idea and analyze its development.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4 – Analyze the impact of figurative language and symbolism on meaning and

tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 – Participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Analyze how symbolism and internal monologue develop theme.

Write a creative personal narrative centered around a symbolic object.

Use figurative language and sensory details to reveal emotion indirectly.

4Revise writing for clarity, voice, and emotional impact.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

*How can an ordinary object represent personal growth, emotion, or identity?*

## MENTOR TEXT

Use the provided student piece (“The Pumpkin” by Dean Marks) as the mentor text. Focus students on symbolism, internal thoughts woven into action, sentence variety, emotional progression, imagery, and color symbolism.

## MATERIALS

- Copies of mentor text
- Writer’s notebooks or laptops
- Highlighters
- Graphic organizer
- Revision checklist

## LESSON DURATION

1–2 class periods (50 minutes each)

## LESSON PROCEDURE

### **DAY 1**

#### 1. Bell Ringer (5 minutes)

Prompt: “Describe an object that reminds you of an important moment in your life.” Students write for 3–5 minutes.

#### 2. Read & Analyze Mentor Text (15 minutes)

Read the pumpkin narrative aloud. Discuss symbolism, emotional progression, imagery, and internal conflict.

#### 3. Symbolism Brainstorm Activity (10 minutes)

Students complete a chart connecting objects to memories and symbolic meanings.

#### 4. Writing Mini-Lesson: Internal Monologue (5 minutes)

Teach students how internal thoughts can interrupt action to create emotional depth.

5. Drafting Time (15 minutes)

Students write a narrative about an object that changed their perspective, identity, or future.

## DAY 2

1. Peer Review Workshop (15 minutes)

Students exchange drafts and provide feedback on symbolism, imagery, and emotional impact.

2. Revision Mini-Lesson (10 minutes)

Teach students strategies for showing emotion through imagery and improving sentence variety.

3. Revision Time (20 minutes)

Students revise their drafts using peer feedback and teacher guidance.

4. Reflection/Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Prompt: “How did symbolism help communicate emotion in your writing?”

## ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessments:

- Class discussion participation
- Brainstorming chart

- Peer review responses

Summative Assessment:

Final narrative graded with rubric.

## SAMPLE RUBRIC CATEGORIES

Category	Points
Symbolism & Theme	25
Voice & Creativity	25
Imagery & Figurative Language	20
Organization & Flow	15
Grammar & Conventions	15

## DIFFERENTIATION

Support:

- Sentence starters
- Guided brainstorming
- Small-group conferencing
- Graphic organizers

## EXTENSION

- Add nonlinear structure
- Include dialogue
- Experiment with second-person narration
- Create accompanying artwork

## OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Students may create a visual representation of their symbolic object, a digital slide presentation, or a spoken-word performance.

## TEACHER NOTES

This lesson works well in memoir units, identity writing units, social-emotional learning integration, and creative writing electives.

## CYCLE

Emma Hernandez

The apartment was colder than normal, and the usual hum of cars driving past below on the street had become erratic instead of continuous. It was the dead middle of winter, and she held herself beneath the cotton grey blanket that she had carried from flat to flat. This was her usual routine; wake up earlier than necessary, eat a breakfast that usually consisted of oats and fruits, then take her place on the couch.

Sometimes she liked to drag a chair to the window across from the sofa, watching as smart dressed men and women made their daily commute. Some she recognized, others concealed their faces behind hoods or umbrellas, leaving one to idly wonder if they were the usual passerby or perhaps someone new. Maybe she drank some tea or opened a book that would soon be discarded when she realized she never really liked reading all that much.

It was mundane. She knew. She bounced from job to job, sometimes spending her time volunteering at a shelter or library, but nothing ever changed. For as long as she had lived, her life seemed to never move or even stutter. She was barely ever met with inconvenience or difficulty. Her life was easy. This place was stable. So why

did she feel this way all of a sudden?

The last time she was ever in love was three years ago. She had a girlfriend that accompanied her in the flat, staying in the now empty bedroom across from her own. She never had a partner before that time. She didn't know if they were meant to sleep together.

Her father had died when she was nearly five, and she didn't remember how a normal relationship functioned. Her parents were in love, she knew, because she forever had her mother's grief engraved in her mind. She remembered seeing her figure curled up on the bed, sobbing hopelessly into the pillow once occupied by the man she loved. It was a pitiful sight, and she promised that she would never love, just to save herself from the depression that was surely to follow.

She had failed her promise when she fell in love with that girl. It was just as painful as she remembered believing it to be. But she dismissed the fact that her love for her was barely genuine.

Those days were over. That was the last time she remembered struggling, but part of her longed for that discomfort. Maybe if she sat here a bit longer, the cold would seep its way into her blanket and she would die of hypothermia, a death dramatic enough. Or maybe she'd take the matter into her own hands. Maybe she would make her way up the apartment stairwell, leading herself to the roof where a gust of wind would encourage her to take a step off of it. A tragic death. One that would shake the apartment complex until it eventually fizzled out and someone twice as interesting as herself would move into

the flat.

She didn't have anything to look forward to. She dropped out of college ages ago, none of her classes compelling her enough to set herself down in a steady field where she would make an average wage and live life like a normal civilian. Once upon a time she had a dream to pursue a career in psychology. Maybe she'd meet with a client once a week so they could discuss their struggles freely without judgement. But now, the thought of that was enough to make her nauseous. She could barely handle herself.

Today was the last day of this cycle. The last day she sat on this couch longing for a life she had left behind many moons ago. It was too late to reflect on or decipher her deep wants.

There was no one to say goodbye to or write a note to, so she instead left the blanket on the couch, and made her way to the front door, where she slid on her flats and grabbed her coat from the coat stand. The last day of the cycle.

She unlocked the door and quickly made her way out. The hallway was significantly colder than her already frigid apartment, but she didn't think any more about it as she made her way to the stairwell, swinging open the door. The last day of the cycle.

It slammed shut behind her as she made her way up the stairs, making no effort to be quiet as she ascended to her end. The last day of the cycle.

The last day of the cycle, the words repeated in her head, now slowly approaching the edge of the building.

The wind was bitter, no one would want to be caught outside in this weather.

The sky was overcast, and the hum of the city was quiet. It was a regular day. People were living their regular lives in the apartment below her feet. Taxis drove by, assisting individuals to holiday celebrations taking place at their relatives houses.

Part of her wished she was celebrating Christmas right now, sitting with family members that cherished her enough to invite her to their get-together. It would be nice. She would be content. But none of her family ever took much of a liking to her. The way she'd talk or stand or walk. She was always taught that there was something wrong with her.

She thought about the chances she had let go. The opportunities she had given up. The friends she had disappointed and ultimately lost. But it could be forgotten now. All of her regrets.

The last day of the cycle.

The last time she'd ever be met with cold. Or warm. Or loud. Or quiet.

For those things shall never have been a concept in whatever the afterlife may be.

For it was over.

For she accepted she will never feel again.

A final step.

The last day of the cycle.

# I WILL NEVER GO INSIDE A CAVE EVER AGAIN

Mason Scofield

My name is Jeff. It was the first day of summer, and I had to go to a funeral for my Uncle Herbert. As I was driving to the funeral, I saw a sign that said “DO NOT ENTER” written on it. I looked at it closer and saw a cave. I remembered how I used to watch nature documentaries about caves and wanted to check it out for old times’ sake. When I went closer, I heard what sounded like a child crying for help, so I ran into the cave without hesitation.

When I came into the cave, I did not see any children crying for help. Then I saw a group of lizards running away from me, but I felt like it wasn't me that they were running away from, and I don't know what it was, but I felt a presence, a dangerous presence. I felt a cold breath pushing against the back of my neck and when I started feeling that my instincts told me to run, I ran away. After running through the cave for at least 5 minutes straight. I checked my watch and noticed that it was already 3 am in the morning. I began to walk out of the cave where there once was a large opening to the cave. Someway, somehow, the entrance to the cave was gone and replaced by a wall of rock. I panicked and ran around screaming like a little girl, but I could not find an exit.

The cave was cold and dark, and I felt as if I was suffocating. I pulled out my cell phone and turned on the flashlight. I saw dozens of different passages to a main chamber and thought to myself “Maybe there is an exit there.” So, I began to walk into the infinite dark abyss. As I walked through a passage I saw many strange things in the cave. I felt like I was not on Earth any longer, it was like I was on a different planet.

The things I saw in the cave looked inhuman. I saw green mushrooms growing in darkness, some sort of yellow plants growing from the cave walls. There were long shadows of unearthly looking plants, rows of irregularly shaped pillars, and some thick red substance oozing from the walls that almost looked like blood. I also saw piles of bones everywhere. Though out of all the inhuman things I saw in the cave the scariest were ancient looking cave drawings portraying ritual human sacrifices to mutated beasts.

I kept going through the cave. I saw more light coming from the main chamber. I was very tired but was too scared to sleep, so I kept moving forward. I kept hearing shrieks throughout the night and as I kept walking, they became louder until I saw it, some inhuman monstrosity that must have come straight from the shadow realm. I only caught a quick glimpse of it but I saw it. This beast must have been the size of a bear. Its eyes are glowing yellow with no pupils. With razor sharp horns like an antler but a humanoid body. It looked the same as the beast I saw on the cave paintings. I don't think it was looking at me because if it did then who knows what

would have happened to me.

I ran as fast as I could, faster than I ever had before and as I went further into the cave I started to hear distant waterfalls. I kept moving forward and finally found a large ancient looking entrance. I went inside and saw dangling rope made of moss leading to a giant hole blazing with sunlight. I then thought to myself “Maybe I could climb up there” so, I pulled on the moss. Surprisingly it was quite strong, so I began to climb it. As I struggled to climb up, my hand started to burn, and the moss was starting to rip. I was almost up there but I struggled to climb further. I started to give up and accept my fate.

I was ready to meet Uncle Herbert again in the afterlife. Then as I closed my eyes, I felt something pulling me up. Someone was pulling me up, so I looked up and saw a bearded man pulling me up to the ground with herculean strength. He pulled me up to the ground where I immediately smelled the pristine air and gazed at the shining sun.

It turned out that the man who saved me was a farmer named Billy Bob Joe who lived next to the cave. He was just hiking around here when he saw the hole leading to the cave and checked it out. When he saw me trying to climb up the moss he helped me without hesitation despite the fact he did not even know me. After he helped me, he told me about the history of the cave. Apparently there have been four people who have been in that cave in 1984. After they went there, they went missing and no one ever found them ever again. I’m the only person who’s ever survived being in that cave and it’s

terrifying to think what would have happened if he had not checked out the hole that day.

Fortunately, I was still able to make it to the funeral. If being 5 days late counts. After that, I never really felt normal ever again. I can't stop thinking of that monstrosity I saw in the cave. I can't stop wondering why me? Out of everyone who has ever been in that cave, why is that only I survived and they didn't. The truth is I don't know and I probably never will. But there is one thing that I know for sure....

I will never go inside a cave ever again.

## PANDORA'S BOX

Katelyn Moungvong

The little girl had jet black hair that was darker than the abyssal sky that seemed to never end. She wore clothes that were slovenly and dirty. She was only a little girl, and her life was full of sadness. She was shrouded by an unexplainable shadow, like a monster watching her every move. She grew used to this fact, content with the life she'd known for many years. After wandering from place to place observing the stars above, the little girl believed that she could never truly understand what it felt like to find happiness, to find a home.

It was the middle of the night. The little girl was walking aimlessly as she always had done, looking toward the stars, her head above the clouds. She was thinking of the shadow monster that loomed over her, thinking sad thoughts again while waiting for happiness. But suddenly, a revelation appeared in her mind. If she was so tired of being sad, why didn't she try to find happiness instead of waiting for it? Something she yearned for more than anything in this sad world. The little girl's face gleamed with curiosity and excitement for the first time. Could this be where she finally finds happiness? She then decided, once and for all, to no longer live a life of sadness. She would take a journey, no matter how long it took.

But the little girl was blinded by her drive to find

happiness, so immersed in herself. In her desperate attempt, she never stopped to look at the people around her. She searched high and low for her happiness as she thrashed through cities and communities, using others as steppingstones, even if it came at the cost of others. And as she stepped up every cracked stair, she did not look back. But deep down, she was afraid of the dark shadow monster that was slowly growing larger by the day, refusing to acknowledge it, to face it. She would not face the monster until she found happiness.

But she did it. She took her last step up onto the stairs that crumbled slowly behind her and reached toward the stars. She believed she had finally found happiness as she cuddled the clouds in her hands. As she finally gained the courage to face the shadow, she was shocked. She was staring back at herself. The shadow monster was her—it was the embodiment of her thoughts, feelings, and pain she had suppressed throughout her life. When she peered behind the monster, there it was: the cities she destroyed, the communities she tore apart, and the people she had hurt. And the worst of it all was her guilty conscience, slowly crawling under her skin, finally pouring out through her eyes. She questioned her actions again. Where did she go wrong? By then, she had opened a box within herself that could never be closed.

## THE LESSON OF LETTING GO

Emma Packard

“I just don’t want to dance anymore,” ten-year-old me whined to my mom.

Those were words I never thought would come out of my mouth. I had been dancing since I was four years old, but suddenly it wasn’t what it used to be. For years dance was my life, but over time it had grown to be a part of me I wanted to let go. Little did I know letting go would not prove to be so easy.

The first dance class I ever took was a tap class at the YMCA. I loved the sound my shoes made against the wooden floors and the joy the movement brought me. So, the following year I tried out a jazz class. I loved that one too, but something inside me craved more of a challenge. At the age of six, I moved to a ballet focused company, hoping to grow my skill and technique. I could not wait to attend my first preparatory class; I was ready and excited for this change.

At first, this new class was everything I had hoped for: more professional, more structured, and more challenging than any class I had taken before. The class was all these things because of the strictness of my instructor. She expected so much from her dancers, even her youngest ones like me. Since her expectations were so high, I knew that I needed to work hard.

One night after class, I explained to my mom, “I need to practice every day, so I can move up.”

My hard work paid off, and soon I moved out of the preparatory class and into the real one. That class proved to be much more demanding, but I was in my element, so I continued to show up and put in the work. Not long after I had moved up, though, things began to change. I had once looked forward to going to class every week, but now I was scared.

My fear came from the harsh conditions I endured in class. My instructor expected us to remember every combination, every correction, every tiny detail, and she did not tolerate mistakes. In every class, she would single out a dancer to demonstrate a step or answer a complex question. When that dancer couldn't meet her expectations, her frustration would fill the room like a loud clap of thunder. I remember on several occasions crying from shame after not being able to do what she had asked of me.

“You should know this,” she would condemn, “Amanda does.”

Every so often, though, she would give me a small compliment that would reignite the spark inside me.

She would smile just slightly and say, “I like your turnout today,” and for a moment, I would feel proud again.

Eventually those small compliments weren't enough. By the age of ten, I was falling apart. Just thinking about class during the week filled me with so much stress and anxiety that I developed muscle tension headaches.

These headaches would appear the day before class and would not leave until the following day at the conclusion of class. When classes increased to twice a week, the headaches never went away and eventually turned into migraines. All this stress piling up made me feel like I was in a storm I couldn't escape, and that's when I knew I needed to let go. I decided I would finish out the current season and quit after recital. The end of the season didn't go as expected, though, because COVID hit, but strangely enough, it was exactly what I needed.

COVID forced us to dance from home on video calls. Dancing at home eased much of the pressure I had been carrying. I no longer felt like I was competing with my classmates since they weren't standing right next to me. It was harder for my instructor to criticize me because she couldn't see every detail of what I was doing. She also couldn't ask as many questions because we were muted and far away from the computer. Being out of the studio allowed me to breathe again and rediscover a bit of the joy that dance had once brought me. Still, I had already made up my mind that I would quit after recital.

Eventually, the end of year recital arrived. I stepped out onto the stage and performed with my level for the last time. The bright lights and soft hum of the music reminded me of all the years I had spent in the studio chasing perfection. I was sad to be giving up something that had meant so much to me, but I was also relieved and excited to explore new opportunities. Dance had been my everything, but I was ready to see who I could be without it.

After quitting dancing, I tried other activities such as volleyball, soccer, and basketball. Volleyball was first. Shortly after recital, I attended tryouts for a club team and was thrilled to learn that I had made it. The season lasted from summer to spring, and while I loved being part of a team, by the end I wasn't eager to return. Next, I tried soccer. I had always enjoyed playing it at recess, but playing on a team didn't feel the same. After a couple months, I decided it wasn't my thing. Then came basketball, the one activity I had consistently done alongside dance, but now I could take it more seriously. I joined a summer team and loved the energy, the teamwork, and the sound of the ball in the net. We had an amazing season, but something just felt off. Something had felt off the entire year. No matter what I filled my time with, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something.

One night, while contemplating in my basement, I finally realized what I was missing, dance. I liked all the activities I tried, but none of them made me feel the way dance did, free, calm, expressive.

After this realization I bolted upstairs and told my mom, "I want to dance again."

She gladly enrolled me for the next season.

I knew I had made the right decision to come back to dance when my instructor gave me a hug and said, "Emma, I am glad to have you back in class. I've missed you."

I had never felt so seen by her before. This was a new side of her I hadn't met yet.

COVID really caused my instructor to change. She was now gentler and calmer and way less strict than she had been before. I now felt like I could relax in class and began to feel for dancing what I first did when I was four. For years, dance had caused me nothing but stress, but now it was my escape; a place that I could go to escape the rest of the world.

I now know who I am because of dance. Every life lesson I have learned has come from dance. It has taught me how to be strong, dedicated, hardworking, and loyal; how to be responsible, confident, social, and respectful; and most importantly dance has taught me how to let go even if it's hard. Every aspect of who I am would be different if it weren't for dance. Dance is what makes me, me, and I am proud of that.

# ONCE, I WAS BLIND

Ellie Taylor

I stood motionless in front of my eighth-grade aluminum locker, fighting off tears. They made my limited remaining vision swim. A cold, anxious sweat started at my neck and trailed down my spine. I had woken up that crisp February morning in 2023 only to realize that my vision had deteriorated more drastically, to the point of not being able to see digits on a locker combination. I was entirely unaware of the struggles I was to face and also unprepared for the Lord's guidance and peace that was to comfort me through these coming times.

Over the last several weeks, cataracts caused by Type One diabetes had steadily crept over my vision, causing an abrupt lifestyle shift. Without going into detail about Type One diabetes and my individual journey with this chronic disease, the basics are as follows: I was diagnosed a year or so prior to the development of cataracts in my eyes. I'd started to get my blood sugar under control, which was most likely the catalyst for this development. According to the National Library of Medicine, about 9.1% of diagnosed Type One patients experience development of cataracts. In my case, they increased rapidly in the winter of 2023. I went from being a relatively "normal" middle schooler to legally blind within the span of a few weeks.

After seeing a local ophthalmologist, I was scheduled to have a consultation with a surgeon in April, with surgery scheduled thereafter. For my current mindset, this news was bearable. I only had to make it a couple of weeks until we got answers, and maybe the surgeon would feel inclined to schedule surgery for the next day. The next few weeks passed in a blur of angry tears, frustration, and the joy I could find in family, friends, and horses. That Monday morning at my locker was probably the single worst day of the entire experience, though.

“I can’t!” I snapped, slamming a fist into the worn aluminum. With a strangled groan of frustration, I gave up trying to open the three-digit combination lock. Turning to Ella Steven, a friend with a few lockers away, I asked for her help.

“Oh sure, Ellie!” she said, still laughing about some joke she’d heard previously.

That day continued to get worse. After heading to the office to ask for something that I could use to get in my locker, I trudged back to class. I was unable to read people’s expressions, much less any schoolwork. Later, when my mom picked me up, all I could do was cry in frustration.

“I’m supposed to be good at school,” I whispered hoarsely. My poor mother, who is too kind for her own good, started crying in sympathy. Back at home, we labored for hours over homework that seemed like an unending mountain of unreadable words. My parents traded reading and writing for me as we slowly progressed through English, History, Science, and of course, Math.

To this day, my father complains about teaching Algebra to a blind girl.

Of course, I had a much larger support system than just my parents. My entire church family was praying for me each and every day, specifically that my appointment would provide a quick and almost painless resolution to this mess. And Jesus never left my side for a minute during this trial. No matter how frustrated or angry I got, He was always with me. A comforting presence in the corner of my eye, a smile on the face of passerby, or a hug from someone who sympathized with me.

Finally, after weeks of struggle, my appointment arrived. We left for Kansas City after school to make it for my appointment the following day. Walking into the office, I stared questioningly at the pirate ship themed lobby and hallways. The blurry blues and browns of a ship caught in a storm blurred past as we strode into an oddly skinny room to wait. The surgeon came in and introduced herself as Dr. Erin Stahl.

“Well, we’ve got some problems, hey?” she asked as she moved a light in front of my eyes. The brightness left a trail in its wake that sparked out, temporarily covering all of my vision. She nodded as if she had expected this reaction.

“Well, you’ve got cataracts for sure, hon . . .” she began.

I was slightly disappointed. My surgery was scheduled for May- a whole month away. My second surgery was scheduled a month after that, in June. The days dragged by in a haze of homework and God’s peace

despite my situation. Finally, the day of my first surgery arrived. Again, we stayed the night in Kansas City and rose early the next day. Once arriving, we waited for an hour or two until I was called back. My parents hugged me and watched me roll off down the hallway. Eerily, I was reminded of young cancer patients rolling down a hallway for the last time. I shook off that depressing thought and focused on the present concern, which flavor of laughing gas I desired.

“Um, I guess I’ll take the root beer flavor,” I shrugged, wondering why that was even a thing. They put a mask over my nose that smelled like beachball rubber-not root beer. I started shaking uncontrollably like I was laughing at the funniest joke ever heard, despite how stony I felt inside. The nurses told me to remain still, but it was impossible. After they got the IV inserted, I fell asleep soon after. I woke up to the unfamiliar sound of voices shouting “Ellison!”, trying to halt my flailing limbs. Afterward, we went back to the hotel and waited for my follow-up appointment.

I blinked, water gushing out of my eyes like a leaking faucet. Carefully, I wiped the moisture away and looked up. I gasped; pure awe made into an exhalation of breath. Colors popped, vibrant before my inexperienced eye. The tile was multicolor, the walls held paintings of pirate ships, and my parents were grinning with such relief. Each of these images was imprinted in my brain forever—they had such an impact on me.

My recovery went by slowly. My main frustration came from physical restrictions. My second eye surgery

went much like the first, and this trial ended just as rapidly as it had begun. Altogether, this experience taught me so much about my support, and more importantly, about my God.

I witnessed the incredible gathering of people to support me. Between my friends offering silent encouragement and a listening ear, my peers trying to understand my limited vision, and my parents laboring for hours over homework, my tribe showed up in force for me when I needed them. In addition, I saw God's hand at work through others. On a bad day, He would send me encouraging words. On a good day, a teacher would compliment my determination. Finally, I continue to see the effects that my situational outlook has had on those around me. Others recount tales of my inspiring joy that radiated the Lord's peace, despite my everyday challenges. I am only grateful to have served Him. Once, I was blind, but now, I see.

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## PERSPECTIVES & LITERARY CRITICISM

## YEAR OF GRACE

Siaunna Carter

This is the year of grace. A time of hardships and a time of patience. A lovely spring, with rain waiting to pour. An earthy breeze as deadly as a tornado. It's among us. A year of reckoning and pure uncertainty, this is a year of growth. I still procrastinate knowing the assignment is due in 12 hours, but if I do it now, I'll miss out on 4 hours of much needed sleep.

Will I change or keep allowing every opportunity to pass me by? Knowledge chases me yet I continue to run. Will I ever allow myself to be great or shall I continue to settle for mediocrity? I know my smile is bright, yet the demons of uncertainty continue to stab me in the back EVERY WAKING MOMENT. Some days the sun promises hope, others the clouds eat that same hope alive. One hundred and one doubts vs. one girl. Always keep in mind; Glowsticks have to break before they can GLOW.

Always know-not think that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" Philippians 4:13. I know I can do hard things, I know I can do this, I know I can persevere! By 2026 I know I won't understand everything, but I'll be better at something. Understand that while pressure may break pipes it also creates diamonds. I hope one day I no longer crave the applause of others, but

Voices of Kansas

instead learn to praise and clap for myself in a room full of silence. The door to the future has been open, and I believe I'm finally ready to step through it!

## IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

Lyn Dang

“Where do I belong?” is a question that I ask myself frequently. All throughout my life I pondered where I truly belonged. As I become more aware of myself, I often find myself caught between extremes. Never fully failing nor excelling, but hovering in a space shaped by my intelligence, beauty, and even my culture.

Derby, KS, the United States of America is where I was born. I am an American citizen with the cultural background of Vietnamese, a second-generation Asian American. From a young age I felt set apart. I knew I was different. I grew up in a different environment than all my schoolmates. To my younger self they all felt alike to me but yet so different. From early on, my difference was palpable. Peers tugged their eyes, mocked my food, all reminders that I was other. I was too Asian for the Americans, too much of something that I couldn't control. I couldn't change this about myself, and I knew that. Regardless, I took pride in who I was. I am proud to be Vietnamese, yet even when surrounded by those people who should have felt like my own people, I still felt like a misfit. In a room full of native speakers, my own tongue betrayed me. As I tried to join the conversation, my words stumbled, hesitant and halting, making it clear I couldn't flow as they did. Even among Vietnamese people who

share my features and heritage, I am still a foreigner to them. Then I was too American for the Asians, and too Asian for the Americans. So where do I belong?

Ever since I could remember, I've had high expectations and pressure to excel in my academics and everything I do, stemming from my parents. Being Vietnamese, people expect you to be naturally smart. So I push myself, I take advanced courses, I aim for straight A's, but I'm also involved in clubs and extracurriculars. Not to boast, but to meet what's expected of me. Yet even as I succeed, I still feel like I'm on the outside. I struggle quietly, and while I do well, I don't feel as naturally brilliant as the top students. I'm stuck in that middle; too smart for those who struggle, yet never quite brilliant enough for the elite. So, I'm often underestimated by some who don't recognize my effort, yet at the same time the high expectations are placed on me. It's a constant push and pull, never fully fitting where people think I should. School feels like I'm running uphill with a backpack that is just a bit too heavy, weighed down by expectations but still searching for where I fit.

"Where do I belong?" is still a question I cannot answer; it may never be a question that will be answered. Though, as I mature, I realize that perhaps it's less about fitting into a box and more about shaping my own belonging. Whether I create or find it, I'll make something out of myself and honor my Vietnamese heritage on my own terms.

## SOCIAL TRAP

Emma Powers

**Social Trap:** A situation in which individuals, acting in their own short-term interest, create negative long-term consequences—often with no escape.

What does it mean to live a “good” life? If you ask many teenage girls today, you may find that they believe a good life means getting married young and spending their lives serving their husbands and raising children. Their goal is to own a suburban house in Texas, a minivan, five kids, and a golden retriever. They view this as the best possible outcome. However, this ideal can become a social trap in many ways.

This type of life can lack excitement, growth, and versatility. It also does not guarantee safety or ease. Screaming children, dirty diapers, and expensive nurseries can eventually turn into defiant teenagers, arguments, and new iPhones. Additionally, getting married at a young age creates its own set of problems. Early marriages often lack the emotional maturity and life experience found in marriages formed later in life. Less than 2% of all marriages are between high school sweethearts, and only 5% of high school relationships continue into college (Spartan Shield). High school sweetheart marriages also have divorce rates as high as 54% within the first ten years (Spartan Shield). Long-term relationships formed at a

young age rarely work out. Furthermore, when children are involved, divorce can quickly become complicated. Studies show that children of divorced parents are more likely to act out, earn lower grades, and experience higher rates of depression (National Institutes of Health). The decision to marry and start a family at a young age can seriously affect not only the couple involved, but also their children.

While some individuals desire to begin having children and start large families in their early twenties, these ideas often underestimate the complications of early child-rearing. This is the harsh reality for many young parents. Responsible parenting requires both financial and emotional stability before having children, which is currently a major issue in the United States. Approximately 10 million children in America live in poverty, and this is especially common among children with young parents (Department of Energy). Around 70% of children with young adult parents live in families earning less than 200% of the poverty level (Department of Energy). This is a terrible situation—one that no child should have to experience because of their parents' poor decision-making.

Historically, marrying and having children at a young age has not guaranteed happiness. Housewives in the 1950s, who were viewed as “perfect” women with idealized lives, often relied heavily on medication to cope with the societal expectations of the time. Many tranquilizers were advertised as “Mommy’s Little Helpers” and marketed specifically to housewives to treat mental health struggles that stemmed from their repetitive

domestic roles. Furthermore, the aspiration for a large family often shifts parental responsibilities onto older siblings. “Parentification” occurs when children are forced to assume developmentally inappropriate adult-like roles and responsibilities (National Library of Medicine). This is especially common in large families, where parents place caregiving duties onto their older children, forcing them to care for their younger siblings.

When an individual enters a lifelong commitment prematurely, without fully understanding themselves, they may overlook their partner’s flaws. Prioritizing personal autonomy before entering a partnership is essential. Recent evidence suggests that domestic abuse in romantic relationships peaks during young adulthood. Physical abuse often declines with age, while women between the ages of 18 and 24 experience the highest rates of intimate partner violence (IPV). This further supports the idea that young adults—especially women—should focus on developing self-worth before entering long-term relationships.

To counter this argument, this lifestyle can be deeply rewarding. Some women feel that their life’s purpose is to be a mother and wife, and there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it may be the perfect outcome for many people. However, that does not mean being a housewife is the ideal life for everyone. With the rise of cultures that promote strict modesty, restraint, and gender-based expectations, it can sometimes feel rebellious not to desire the same outcome. The romanticization of motherhood, large families, and youthful marriage—often

portrayed on social media platforms—encourages many young girls to believe this is what they must do with their lives, reinforcing a social trap.

Young adulthood offers a unique opportunity to explore one’s identity fully. By prioritizing higher education, career advancement, and travel, individuals can establish emotional and financial independence while developing a stronger sense of self. After all, people may only get one life, one chance, and one opportunity to experience the world, and they should make the most of it.

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## WHY FIX ARTIFICIAL INTIMACY WHEN WE CAN FIX ALZHEIMER'S

Regan French

Artificial intelligence promises to address all the issues that could be problematic for us. A solution to intimacy, solved with the press of a button, or a cure to boredom with the snap of your fingers, would leave people with nothing left to do for themselves, resulting in a future that feels empty. In “There Will Never Be an Age of Artificial Intimacy,” Sherry Turkle challenges this logic by exposing the flaws in believing technology can replace genuine human connection (Turkle 3). She persuades readers not to allow these so-called “solutions” to fully develop into replacements for real relationships. Turkle builds her argument by distinguishing between problems that genuinely require technological assistance and emotional needs that should never be outsourced.

Turkle develops her argument through the example of a 16-year-old girl who grew up interacting with Siri, which “presented itself as an empathy machine” (Turkle 3). This framing suggests that the girl has been led to believe machines can understand her emotions in a meaningful way. This belief is reinforced when she claims, “It’s not like a robot has the mind to walk away or leave you” (Turkle 2). While she interprets this as stability, Turkle’s deeper implication is that emotional safety

without risk is not the same as real intimacy. The absence of human unpredictability creates comfort, but it also eliminates growth, challenge, and true connection. Turkle pushes readers to recognize that what appears emotionally supportive may actually be emotionally shallow. She strengthens this idea by pointing out that “these robots can perform empathy in a conversation about your friend, your mother...but they have no experience of any of these relationships” (Turkle 3). In other words, what is being presented as understanding is only simulation, not lived experience. This distinction reveals that artificial intimacy is not truly intimacy at all, but a performance designed to mimic it.

Turkle further expands her argument by contrasting necessary technological innovation with unnecessary emotional replacement. She acknowledges that “we can try to use technology to cure Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s” (Turkle 6), framing this as a genuine and meaningful use of innovation. These examples highlight technology’s ability to improve and even save lives, positioning it as something valuable when directed toward real human suffering. However, she immediately draws a boundary: “but that blessing is not a reason to move from artificial brain enhancement to artificial intimacy” (Turkle 6). This contrast emphasizes her central concern—technology becomes dangerous not when it helps the body, but when it begins to replace emotional life. Her argument pushes readers to question not what technology can do, but what it should do. By separating medical advancement from emotional substitution, Turkle forces

us to evaluate whether convenience is worth sacrificing authentic human connection.

By the end of her argument, Turkle makes it clear that technology should serve life-changing human needs rather than replace emotional relationships. Her use of serious medical conditions alongside artificial intimacy is intentional—it provokes discomfort by showing how easily priorities can shift away from what truly matters. This comparison challenges readers to reflect on what kind of relationships they are willing to accept: ones that are efficient and controlled, or ones that are unpredictable but real. Ultimately, Turkle leaves us with a pointed question: are we willing to trade meaningful human connection for artificial companionship that only appears to care?

So, what will it be—a simulated conversation with a machine, or a real one with another human being?

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# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: THE ADVERSARY OF HUMANITY

Aaliyah Beal, *Editor's Choice Award*

The rise of technology is deteriorating our ability to think independently and destroying the art of documentation in our society. Day after day, we lose the love for knowledge, critical thinking, and creation; all gifts that set our species apart from others. Individuals are being introduced to screens younger than ever before, debilitating their developmental processes from the start, without any understanding or study of the long-term effects it has on the mind later in life. Technology has begun to seep into our homes, our schools, and our work lives, and has become unavoidable in this modern era. The hold that screens have on our communities and its effects on adolescents should have our full attention on the public stage.

For centuries, humans have utilized physical archives, family heirlooms, and historical documents to carry stories throughout the generations. Photography prints capture significant moments, artists capture emotions with their media, poets and philosophers capture ideas and theories with their pen, and musicians capture hearts with their sound. All of these creations encompass who we are as a species. With the growing access to technology, our greatest qualities are becoming heavily

digitized and their permanence is fleeting. It's hard for us to understand the bigger picture; that what we are doing right now, in this moment, is precious and holds esteemed value to future generations of historians, who are gaining less and less physical documentation the further we lean into the age of digitized media. In a journal by the Conversation it states, "Historians have long relied on librarians and archivists... Part of their work has involved ethical choices about what to preserve, curate, catalogue and display and how to do so. Today, many digital sources are now at our fingertips — albeit in raw, often uncatalogued, format." (Milligan, 10). The idea that we must study history to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors is one that isn't repeated without reason. Humans are creatures based on patterns and experimentation. The fall of a government, an individual, or a nation presents a chance for rise in knowledge. Physical records and documentation are crucial to the continuity of humanity and its primal need for experimentation and creation.

As we become more familiarized with technology and its capabilities, what seems to be a collaboration between humans and machines is a transfer of responsibility. Within recent years, AI technology has been exploited for its abilities. With the click of a button you can generate an image, type up a paper, or solve an entire worksheet without the need to work your mind at all. While the convenience of AI can be utilized to tutor and dive deeper into topics, in plugging everything we see into an AI generator, we lose the passion for the pursuit of

knowledge. The shortest route isn't always the most beneficial and the exploitation of AI is harming our ability to think critically and formulate our own ideas and perspectives. Our minds are a muscle that needs to be stimulated and exercised regularly. Through a collection of studies, the National Library of Medicine states, "In longitudinal analyses, a higher frequency of internet use was associated with a decrease in verbal intelligence and a smaller increase in the regional volume of gray/white matter in several brain areas after a few years" (Ricci et al., 20). Forcing a search engine to formulate ideas for you is robbing yourself of development and hindering your mind's existing qualities. There is something to be said about the pursuit of knowledge and the process it takes to understand and internalize information. Through seeking knowledge, we are stimulating our minds and strengthening critical thinking skills necessary for survival. By exploiting AI technologies, we are slowing our neural processors and stagnating our society in its entirety.

Young individuals today are intoxicated by the access they have to the outside world at their fingertips. The younger generations of today have grown up around screens which has left a deep imprint on their development. The persistent exposure to screens has shown its effects on adolescents in their behavioral patterns and their day-to-day functions. Children that have grown up exposed to screens become accustomed to constant stimulation which can interfere with neural processes and internalization of information. Relentless exposure to screens can also formulate a dependence on

screens and the dopamine hits that come from them creating addiction-like symptoms. In teenagers and young adults, there is an uprising in the use of AI technology in their schoolwork, some individuals avoid doing any of their own work and plugging all their assignments into an AI chat that spits out all the information they need. Cutting corners and convenience has become the norm in younger generations through the normalcy created on social media platforms. The phrases “I’ll just have AI do it” or “Why don’t you just ask ChatGPT?” are ones that I hear frequently within the walls of my high school. The passion and desire to learn has been tossed to the wind and laziness and social media addiction has taken its place.

The rise of technology should raise concern within our communities. While it can be a helpful tool in modern practices, its exploitation is becoming the standard in schools and work environments. The exploitation of technology is robbing future generations of physical archives and documents, diminishing the passion and desire for knowledge, encouraging laziness, and hindering development within adolescents. Technology is not inherently evil, but its usage is one to be analyzed and restricted so as not to damage our society further. While machines can be our greatest ally, they have also proven to be our greatest enemy in the modern world.

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# LESSON PLAN: ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING ON TECHNOLOGY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND SOCIETY

## GRADE LEVEL

9–12 English Language Arts

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS (ELA)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 – Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1.B – Develop claims and counterclaims fairly while supplying evidence for each.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 – Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5 – Develop and strengthen writing through planning, revising, editing, and

rewriting.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8 – Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1 – Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 – Determine a central idea and analyze its development.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8 – Delineate and evaluate arguments and specific claims in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Analyze how writers develop arguments about modern social issues.
2. Evaluate the use of evidence, commentary, and emotional appeals.
3. Write an argumentative essay using claims, evidence, and analysis.
4. Integrate research and outside sources into original writing.
5. Revise writing for clarity, structure, and persuasiveness.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

*How does technology influence human behavior and thinking?*

*Can convenience become harmful to society?*

*What role should technology play in education and daily life?*

## MENTOR TEXTS

### Primary Mentor Text

Use the student essay discussing technology, AI, and critical thinking. Focus students on thesis statements, commentary, emotional and logical appeals, transitions, and integration of research.

### Outside Mentor Text

“Is Google Making Us Stupid?” by Nicholas Carr.

Students analyze how Carr integrates research into argument, develops commentary, and explores technology’s influence on cognition.

### Optional pairings:

- *The Shallows* by Nicholas Carr
- *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport
- TED Talk: “Connected, but Alone?” by Sherry Turkle

## MATERIALS

- Copies of mentor texts
- Highlighters and annotation tools
- Writer’s notebooks or laptops
- Graphic organizer for claims/evidence
- Research source list
- Revision checklist

## LESSON DURATION

2–3 class periods (50 minutes each)

## LESSON PROCEDURE

### DAY 1

Bell Ringer (5 minutes)

Prompt: “What are some positive and negative effects technology has had on your life?”

Read & Analyze Mentor Texts (20 minutes)

Students read excerpts from the student essay and Nicholas Carr’s article. Class discussion focuses on argument, evidence, commentary, and persuasive techniques.

Mini-Lesson: Building an Argument (10 minutes)

Teach *claim* → *evidence* → *commentary* structure and discuss how writers explain evidence.

### Brainstorming Activity (10 minutes)

Students choose a technology-related issue such as AI in schools, social media addiction, screen time, misinformation, or technology and creativity.

### Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Students write a tentative thesis statement.

## DAY 2

### Warm-Up Discussion (5 minutes)

Discuss whether technology can improve society while also harming it.

### Research & Evidence Workshop (15 minutes)

Students gather statistics, expert opinions, studies, and examples while learning proper citation and quote integration.

### Drafting Time (25 minutes)

Students begin drafting argumentative essays with thesis statements, research, commentary, and counterclaims.

### Reflection (5 minutes)

Students reflect on which part of argumentative writing feels most challenging.

## DAY 3

### Peer Review Workshop (20 minutes)

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Students exchange essays and provide feedback on thesis clarity, evidence, commentary, transitions, and organization.

Revision Mini-Lesson (10 minutes)

Teach students strategies for improving commentary, sentence variety, and formal tone.

Revision Time (15 minutes)

Students revise using peer and teacher feedback.

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Students respond to: “How has technology shaped the way your generation thinks, learns, or communicates?”

## ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessments:

- Annotations
- Discussion participation
- Brainstorming organizer
- Thesis statement
- Peer review responses

Summative Assessment:

Final argumentative essay.

## SAMPLE RUBRIC CATEGORIES

Category	Points
Thesis & Argument Development	25
Evidence & Research Integration	25
Commentary & Critical Thinking	20
Organization & Transitions	15
Grammar & Conventions	15

## DIFFERENTIATION

Support:

- Guided outlines
- Sentence starters
- Teacher conferencing
- Paragraph templates

Extension:

- Multimedia evidence
- Classroom debates
- Podcasts or presentations
- Comparing perspectives on technology

Optional Extension Activities

- Conduct interviews about technology use
- Track screen time for a week
- Create a digital presentation
- Hold a classroom debate on AI in education

## TEACHER NOTES

This lesson fits argumentative writing units, media literacy studies, research writing units, and discussions about technology and society. Pairing the student mentor text with a published article helps students see how similar themes are explored in academic writing.

# THE BENEFITS OF COMPULSORY VACCINATION

Aaliyah Beal

The difference of opinions surrounding federal mandates and to what extent the government can enforce compulsory vaccinations is an argument that has divided our society since its introduction. With these tools becoming an integral part of standard medical practices, and new vaccinations introduced to conform with diseases that rise and fall, many are inclined to question the safety and effects of these practices. While many believe that federal mandates on vaccinations are an infringement on their bodily autonomy and rights, mandates are the only way to ensure everyone is protected from the illness and disease that would plague our society otherwise. I believe that the government should be able to mandate vaccinations for the good of the people and at the discretion of their partnering health officials.

Since their introduction in 1796, vaccination has been able to eradicate and minimize the cases of many diseases that once greatly affected our societies such as smallpox and measles. In recent years, we have seen an increase in measles cases with a decrease in vaccination rates, drawing a clear line between the two and proving the benefits of vaccination. In his article, “Measles: A Dangerous Illness”, Roald Dahl tells the story of his

daughter, Olivia, who died from measles when she was seven years old. He explains to parents that he lacked access to a vaccination when his daughter contracted the disease, and addresses their ignorance concerning their decision not to vaccinate their children additionally warning them of the statistics surrounding measles cases and its mortality rates. In his writing, he states, “In America, where measles immunization is compulsory, measles, like smallpox, has been virtually wiped out. Here in Britain, because so many parents refuse, either out of obstinacy or ignorance or fear, to allow their children to be immunized, we still have a hundred thousand cases of measles every year” (Dahl). This statement, conjoined with statistics comparing areas with and without mandates proves the effectiveness of compulsory vaccination while highlighting the simplemindedness of those who resist vaccination for moral reasons or from irrational fear. Many argue that mandates are immoral due to differing values and cultural backgrounds, similarly arguing, “But it is much more contentious, given the diversity of humanity’s ethical and cultural norms, to impose vaccinations on a population” (Nature 30). While it is crucial to recognize and value differing ethnic and cultural groups, this dispute should base itself on logic and biological needs rather than moral and emotional aversions.

In a conversation with my peer, Easley Rohr, we discussed our stances on this divisive subject. She offered a strong argument, explaining her stance on the rights of abortion and how these similar issues correlate, stating that

she believes in bodily autonomy across the board, and individuals should have a right to choose what they do with their bodies in any situation (Rohr). Her opinions closely relate to that of Ron Paul's where he states, "By ceding the principle that individuals have the right to make their own health care decisions, supporters of mandatory vaccines are opening the door for future infringements on health freedom" (26). While I recognize the importance of an individual's right to dictate what happens to their body, the situation of vaccination is greater than the health of one individual, in comparison to abortion that affects an individual and their close circle of people emotionally, but only physically affects one individual. Choosing to vaccinate affects many people and their health in parallel to Steven Weinreb's article "For the Herd's Sake, Vaccinate" where he states, "The truth is, we should not get vaccinated for ourselves alone; we should do it for one another" (22). Vaccination can eliminate diseases across the globe. A singular person choosing to vaccinate can protect the immunity of many in comparison to abortion, which only affects a select group of people. Through this, we can identify the importance of herd immunity.

Herd immunity is one of the most crucial aspects of the continuity of the human race. Our health and immune systems are dependent on our neighbors and their immune strength against illness and disease. Taking care of our own individual health is taking care of the health of others as stated in Eula Biss's article "On Immunity, An Inoculation" where she argues, "We are protected not so much by our own skin, but by what is beyond it. The

boundaries between our bodies begin to dissolve here. Donations of blood and organs move between us, exiting one body and entering another, and so too with immunity, which is a common trust as much as it is a private account. Those of us who draw on collective immunity owe our health to our neighbors” (14). Many individuals undermine their importance within the mix, failing to realize they are part of something greater than themselves and becoming complacent with their lack of vaccination. This complacency is what causes mortality rates to remain stagnant or increase. In his article, “Mandatory Vaccination Is Not the Answer to Measles”, Bob Sears argues, “Vaccination is important and protective. But it cannot be forced; a parent must give consent” (37). While it may seem rash, mandates have been proven to be the only way to ensure communal health in society and are the only way we can continue to fight against these illnesses. The lack of mandates creates an individualistic and isolationist society. Considering our growing populations, these philosophies will simply not work any longer. Our health is a team effort; without guidelines, we will lose the game of life.

The beauty of humans is our dependence upon each other and our primal need for community as a means of safety and stability. Our health is not our own. If you remain in that simple-minded thought process, you will drag the rest of us down with you.

Additionally, vaccinations act as armor to protect us from diseases that could wipe out our entire population and are now necessary for our survival. Before they are

administered, vaccinations are thoroughly tested, analyzed, and formulated to the benefit of you and your neighbors. The consequences of resistance have the potential to be greater than any that you could reap from vaccinations. Mandated vaccinations are not meant to be punishment, but rather, protection.

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## THE RHETORICAL POWER OF FEAR IN SINNERS OF AN ANGRY GOD

Olivia Grosser

When people lose focus on their beliefs, emotionally powerful messages can serve as a wake-up call, reminding them of the consequences of their actions and the importance of faith. In the 1700s, during a period of intense religious revival known as the Great Awakening, preacher Jonathan Edwards delivered his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards aimed to shock his audience into recognizing the dangers of living in sin without true devotion to God. He makes hell a vivid and tangible place for his listeners, using fear as a tool to spur spiritual reflection—a method that reflects the radical, transformative nature of the era’s religious fervor. In the end, Jonathan Edwards moves his audience toward spiritual change by blending strong emotional appeals with carefully chosen words and tone; through vivid imagery and a growing sense of urgency, he makes the threat of remaining a sinner feel immediate and impossible to ignore.

To intensify the impact of his message, Jonathan Edwards employs an urgent tone and precise diction to emphasize the severity and immediacy of God’s wrath. He writes, “It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God’s

vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing... the waters are constantly rising and waxing more and more mighty” (par. 5). By comparing divine wrath to a rising flood, Edwards portrays punishment as an unstoppable natural force that is temporarily restrained but steadily intensifying. This imagery creates a sense of imminent danger, instilling fear and convincing listeners that their opportunity for repentance is rapidly diminishing.

Edwards reinforces this urgency through additional natural imagery, warning that “the longer you delay, the greater the inevitable storm will be” (par. 5). The metaphor of an approaching storm suggests that hesitation only increases the severity of punishment, emphasizing that procrastination in faith leads to greater peril. Similarly, Edwards describes sinners as “spiders...held over the fire” (par. 3), an image that underscores human helplessness and dependence on God’s mercy. Through these vivid comparisons, Edwards magnifies his audience’s vulnerability and heightens their fear, compelling them to confront their moral responsibility. By combining elevated diction, escalating tone, and powerful natural imagery, Edwards makes his warning both memorable and persuasive, urging immediate repentance in the face of inevitable judgment.

Overall, Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” appeals to his audience through emotional persuasion, deliberate tone, and precise word choice to convey the severity of God’s wrath toward sinners. His use of intense, vivid language and a harsh,

urgent tone led the audience to feel both fear and personal responsibility, reinforcing the message of humanity's vulnerability before divine judgment. By combining emotional intensity with purposeful diction, Edwards ensures that his sermon remains both memorable and persuasive, leaving listeners—and readers today—reflecting on their own moral and spiritual choices.

## AN ARTIFICIAL HEARTBREAK: TURKLE'S TAKE ON AI COMPANIONS

Kaylee Cole

Artificial intelligence offers hundreds of ways to solve problems, write stories, and create art without using any creativity of your own other than a simple prompt. Nevertheless, it has also gained traction for another reason: AI has taken a new form. Recently, artificial characters have come into the picture. People can now engage in long, detailed conversations with characters from their favorite movies or TV shows and feel as though they are talking to a real person. In Sherry Turkle's "There Will Never Be an Age of Artificial Intimacy," she discusses the dangers and uncertainty that come with using artificial intelligence as an empathetic connection. Turkle crafts her argument to persuade readers that using Artificial Intelligence for companionship is dangerous by addressing and rebutting counterclaims, as well as refining her word choice to portray the use of robots for empathy in a negative light.

Turkle initiates her argument by utilizing counterarguments to set the tone of the article. Turkle quotes a 16-year-old girl who believes that having an artificial companion in the future may be beneficial because "it's not like a robot has the mind to walk away or leave you or anything like that" (Turkle 20). The girl sees

AI companionship as comforting because, unlike human relationships, it cannot reject or abandon someone emotionally. Turkle acknowledges why this idea may sound appealing, especially to people who fear loneliness or emotional pain. However, she rebuts those claims by explaining that “there is something she may have been too young to understand or, like a lot of us, prone to forget when we talk to machines. These robots can perform empathy in a conversation about your friend, your mother, your child, or your lover, but they have no experience of any of these relationships” (20). By emphasizing that robots can imitate empathy without understanding human emotions, Turkle argues that AI companionship is artificial rather than genuine. This perspective gives readers a deeper understanding of why Turkle disagrees with the girl’s statement. By presenting both viewpoints early in the article, Turkle allows readers unfamiliar with the topic to better understand the emotional appeal of AI companionship while also recognizing the dangers of replacing real human relationships with artificial ones.

In addition to rebutting opposing viewpoints, Turkle also implements a specific selection of words to influence the reader’s perception of AI. When discussing how people are starting to believe that robots would make good companions, Turkle argues that “Children will lose the ability to have empathy if they relate too consistently with objects that cannot form empathetic ties” (21). The word “objects” is especially important because it strips robots of any humanity and reminds readers that AI companions are still machines rather than living beings. By

referring to them as “objects,” Turkle creates emotional distance and reinforces the idea that meaningful empathy cannot come from something incapable of feeling emotion itself. Turkle also discusses how “These are stations on our voyage to forgetting what it means to be human” (21). The word “stations” suggests that society is moving through different stages toward a dangerous outcome, making the loss of humanity seem gradual but unavoidable if people continue down this path. Likewise, the word “voyage” creates the image of a long journey, implying that society has already begun traveling away from authentic human connection. Together, these words help readers visualize the slow process of people becoming emotionally disconnected from one another while growing more dependent on artificial relationships. Turkle’s overall use of specific word choice guides readers to believe that robots are not good companions and that relying on them for empathy threatens the emotional qualities that make humans inherently human.

At the end of Turkle’s article, readers are left shocked by the damage that AI companions can do to both individuals and society as a whole. The author’s skillful use of counterclaims and words with strong connotations throughout her article highlights how AI negatively impacts humanity and weakens genuine empathy. By doing so, Turkle asks readers to take a step back from artificial empathy and instead protect the real human relationships all around them.

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## A SUMMIT OF GROWTH

William Mirakian

My dad has always been a dedicated runner, so it was only natural that hiking became one of his favorite activities. Growing up, my brothers and I would visit Rocky Mountain National Park several times a year, and there was always one peak my dad dreamed of summiting with us. This was the year he decided my younger brother and I were finally ready to climb Longs Peak. The hike itself is 13.3 miles round trip, and the summit rises to 14,259 feet, making it a feat that promised both challenge and reward.

The morning of the hike, we woke at 3:30 a.m., ate breakfast, and drove to the trailhead. It was dark and cold, but I chose to pack light, knowing extra layers would soon weigh me down and make me hot. Our headlamps illuminated the landscape until the first hints of sunrise broke over the tree line. Golden light spilled across the mountains, warming my body and painting the landscape a vibrant orange. As we pressed forward, we came to a vantage point where we could see the north face of the mountain towering over us, stretching high to its snowy peak. Still in awe of its sheer size, we pushed onward toward the boulder field. Once there, I understood why my dad had described this part as one of the hardest sections. For nearly a mile, rocks the size of cars stacked

over one another, burying any hints of a trail. With its many gaps and openings, the field doubled as a refuge for small wildlife, most notably the marmots whose shrill chirps followed us throughout the hike. We hopped and scrambled across the rocks, making slow progress toward our next major checkpoint, the Keyhole.

True to its name, the Keyhole was a crescent-shaped cutout on the mountainside that allowed access to the southern face of the mountain. Stepping through, we were greeted with a breathtaking view of the valleys and peaks that surrounded Longs Peak. From above, the Rockies displayed everything that defined their beauty: turquoise lakes that rested at the base of enormous stone walls, deep green meadows accompanied by pine trees, and waterfalls that plummeted down the cliffs, returning to us through streams that eventually crossed the path below. The sight renewed my energy, and I enjoyed a quick snack in the cool opening. After regrouping, my dad's friend announced this would be his stopping point, choosing to head back down. Disappointed, we wished him luck and prepared for the more technical portion of the hike ahead. Beyond the Keyhole, awareness was crucial with every step. The route began to blend with the mountain, littered with loose rock, patches of ice, and uneven footing. To our right was a sheer slope dropping thousands of feet, a bitter reminder that one slip could be the last. The trail wound inward toward the mountain's face, guiding us into the final challenge before the summit: the Narrows.

The Narrows were infamous for being the most

dangerous section of the climb. Perched on the sides of cliff faces near the peak, they left no room for error, and even minor changes in weather often forced climbers to turn back. Conveniently enough, light snow began to fall just as we approached. Despite the added risk, we chose to push on, prepared with the right gear and unwilling to turn back so close to the top. Crossing the ridge, we were immediately thrown into the Narrows, just two and a half feet of rocky ledge carved into the cliffside, with a daunting drop to our left. With cautious steps and deliberate handholds, each movement demanded precision. Fear was the one emotion we could not afford to let get out of our control. Panic here would lead only to disaster. Although the stretch was inconvenient and uncomfortable, we still made sure to proceed with extreme caution, carefully considering every step we took. The slow pace and high risk made the Narrows a grueling process.

When we finally cleared the Narrows, relief engulfed my body. In front of us stood a steep rock face, the last barrier between us and the summit. Behind us was a void we tried not to focus on. The steep drops and limited space meant nothing now that the only direction we could go was up. It became clear we would need to climb the wall itself. The surface was sharp and steep, yet cracks and divots offered just enough grip to pull ourselves upward. The cold stone bit into my hands as I tried to maintain my grip. The wind whipped against us, threatening to pry our fingers loose. Far above, I could see a group of hikers standing triumphantly on the summit, and though the distance seemed intimidating, the sight and

determination pushed me forward. Each pull and step felt like a direct challenge from the mountain, daring me to persevere. Finally, with my brother close behind, I reached the final ledge and helped him onto the flat surface of the summit. Relief washed over me as I sat safely away from the edge, my nerves finally calming. What had once been uncertainty turned to anticipation for the way down. I took in the panoramic view, knowing the hardest part was behind us.

Looking back on that day, I realized the experience was more than just a hike. It was a memory of triumph and achievement through unshakable camaraderie. The climb itself told its own story, but it was the countless moments of connection with my dad and brother that made it unforgettable. The conversations, the shared challenge, and the collective triumph formed bonds I will always cherish. Beyond the companionship, the journey taught me about resilience and perseverance, revealing the strength I did not know I had. Driving away from the mountain, I was exhausted but satisfied. I carried with me not only the victory of summiting the mountain, but also the confidence of knowing what I was capable of when tested.

## A DIFFERENT ALPHABET

Caitlyn Ramsey

I was in the middle of talking about something like my best friend's birthday party or something along those lines; something that made me yap for twenty minutes straight. My words and thoughts felt organized, like neat rows on a page, and I knew exactly where my sentence was going. Then I stopped. Not because I somehow forgot my point or felt nervous, but because I suddenly couldn't say a word, I'd known my whole life, even though it was clear as day in my head. I could even imagine the word on a piece of paper.

It wasn't a complicated word. It was small, familiar, almost ordinary. Yet it sat there, just out of reach, like a book placed slightly too high on a shelf. I tried again, shaping the sound carefully, but it came out crooked. My brain held the meaning clearly, like a picture in focus, while my mouth lagged, blurry and uncooperative.

I laughed it off, offering a quick, casual smile so the moment wouldn't feel heavy. On the inside, though, I felt uneasy. The experience kept happening, and the moments lingered like a skipped step on a staircase—brief, but enough to make me aware of how fragile something as simple as speech can be.

A handful of people assume that speech problems mean a lack of intelligence or preparation. But for

neurodivergent people, that is false. The issue isn't knowledge; it's access.

Some people can sometimes speak very fast and very clearly, with no mistakes at all. Other times, they stutter and lose words in mid-sentence. Those same people may also spell the same word three different ways. They might look at a word they know and suddenly not be able to pronounce it out loud.

For many neurodivergent people, the brain works meaning-first. Ideas, concepts, and connections form quickly and clearly. But speech requires an extra step: turning meaning into sound and then coordinating the muscles to produce it.

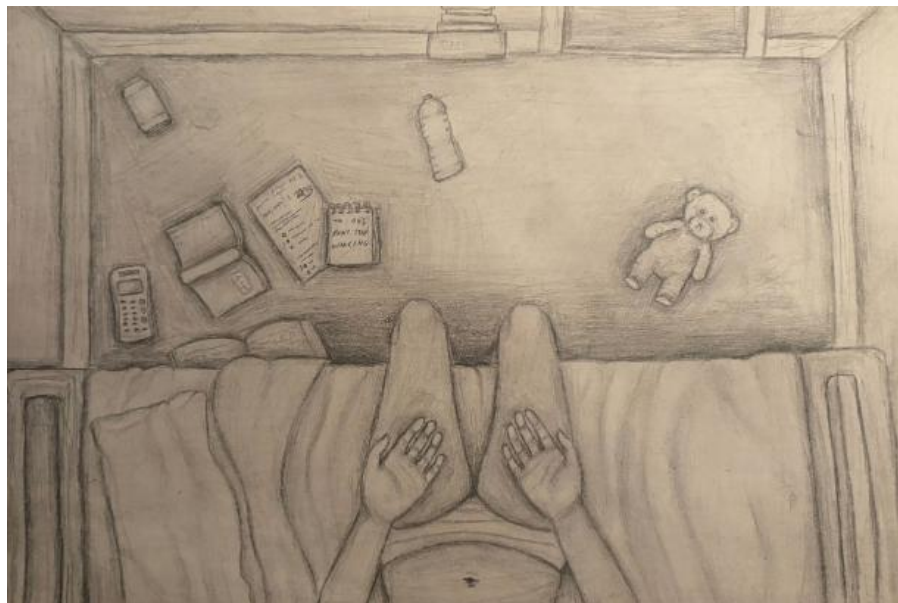
When all the energy, interest, and focus line up, speech flows. When it doesn't, the system backs up. Words stumble over each other like a traffic jam on a highway, and pronunciation fails. Stuttering gets worse and worse. Not because the words are dead and gone, but because the path to them is, for the moment, blocked.

This is especially common in people with ADHD, because ADHD affects timing, memory, and regulation. If autism is involved, the brain may prioritize precision and meaning over speed and sound, making speech even more effortful under pressure.

This is not ignorance, cognitive decline, or a lack of preparation. In fact, many neurodivergent people love speech. They enjoy illustrating ideas. They appreciate connecting with people. The challenge isn't wanting to speak; it's maneuvering through a system that wasn't designed for how their brain work.

# ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

## LOOKING DOWN



Aaliyah Hadley

This graphite drawing was made using a #2 pencil and represents both myself and the general experience of being a teenage girl. The piece is drawn from the perspective of a girl sitting on her bed and looking down at her hands, while homework is spread across the floor. This perspective is meant to convey self-reflection, looking

down at oneself and analyzing the present moment.

I included elements such as a teddy bear on the floor and the figure wearing only her underwear to represent the childish and feminine aspects of being a teenage girl. The room is scaled in a way that highlights what feels most important to her in that moment: the bed takes up nearly the entire space, making it feel like a world of its own, while the mess on the floor is the only visible part of the room. This emphasizes how stress and responsibility can consume a person's focus.

Overall, this piece is meant to capture feelings of stress and the struggle of grappling with one's identity as a young, growing woman.

## THE UNICORN



Addi Casey, *Editor's Choice Award*

This is a mixed media piece titled "The Unicorn." The background is a mix of acrylic and gouache paint with crayon spirals on it. The unicorn was colored using crayons and alcohol markers. The unicorn signifies innocence and childlike wonder that once was.

# “SYMBOLS WE CARRY”: EXPLORING IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND GROWTH THROUGH SYMBOLISM

## GRADE LEVEL

9–12 English Language Arts

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS (ELA)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 – Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4 – Analyze the impact of figurative language and symbolism on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6 – Analyze how point of view shapes meaning and emotional perspective.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 – Write narratives or creative pieces using effective technique and vivid detail.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 – Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5 – Develop and strengthen writing through revision and editing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 – Make strategic use of visual displays to enhance meaning.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Analyze how symbolism conveys deeper meaning in literature and visual art.

Identify themes of innocence, memory, identity, and emotional growth.

Compare symbolism across literary and visual texts.

Create an original symbolic mixed media artwork representing a personal idea or memory.

Write a reflective narrative or prose piece explaining symbolic choices.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

*How do symbols help us preserve emotions, memories, or parts of ourselves as we grow older?*

*Why is childhood perspective often lost in adulthood?*

*How can simple images carry complex emotional meaning?*

*How do artists and writers communicate ideas without directly stating them?*

## MENTOR TEXTS

Primary Mentor Text: *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Focus on:

- The rose (love, identity, vulnerability)
- The fox (“taming” and relationships)
- The narrator’s childhood drawings (imagination vs adulthood)
- Stars as memory and connection

Visual Mentor Text: Artwork by Jean-Michel Basquiat

Focus on:

- Raw, expressive style
- Layered imagery and text
- Emotional symbolism
- Imperfection as meaning

Optional Supplemental Texts

- Nothing Gold Can Stay by Robert Frost
- The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
- Inside Out (Bing Bong scene)

## MATERIALS

- Copies of selected excerpts from *The Little Prince*
- Printed or projected Basquiat artwork
- Annotation tools/highlighters
- Writer’s notebooks or laptops
- Symbolism graphic organizer
- Art supplies (paper, paint, markers, collage materials)
- Reflection writing guide

## LESSON DURATION

3–5 class periods (50 minutes each)

## LESSON PROCEDURE

### DAY 1

Bell Ringer (5 minutes)

“What object, place, or memory from your childhood still matters to you? Why?”

Read & Analyze Mentor Text (20 minutes)

Read selected passages from *The Little Prince*.

Focus on symbolism, tone, and perspective.

Discuss:

- The drawing (hat vs boa constrictor)
- The rose
- The quote: “All grown-ups were once children...”

Mini-Lesson: Symbolism (10 minutes)

- Symbol vs literal meaning
- How authors embed emotional meaning into simple images

Symbolism Analysis Activity (10 minutes)

Students identify symbols and meanings using a chart.

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

“What is one symbol from today’s reading and what deeper meaning does it hold?”

## **DAY 2**

Warm-Up (5 minutes)

Short clip or discussion from Inside Out (memory and imagination focus)

Close Reading (15 minutes)

Focus on:

- The fox and “taming”
- Emotional meaning of relationships

Mini-Lesson: Symbols as Emotional Containers (10 minutes)

Symbols hold:

- memories
- relationships
- identity

Comparative Activity (15 minutes)

Students analyze multiple symbols (rose, fox, stars) and connect them to themes.

Transition to Project (5 minutes)

Introduce “Symbols We Carry” assignment.

### **DAY 3**

Hook (5 minutes)

“Does art need to look realistic to be meaningful?”

Visual Analysis (20 minutes)

Study artwork by Jean-Michel Basquiat

Discuss:

- Use of color, words, and layering
- Emotional impact
- Hidden or unclear meanings

Connection Discussion (10 minutes)

Bridge literature and art:

- Both use symbols instead of direct explanation
- Meaning is personal and interpretive

Brainstorming (15 minutes)

Students plan their own symbol:

- memory
- identity trait
- lost childhood feeling

**DAY 4–5**

Art Creation (Full Period)

Students create a mixed media symbolic artwork

Encourage:

- layering
- abstract imagery
- words/phrases
- color symbolism

Writing Workshop (30–40 minutes)

Students write a reflection or prose piece explaining:

- what their symbol represents
- why they chose specific elements
- how it connects to identity or memory

Sharing & Reflection (10 minutes)

Optional gallery walk or student presentations

Writing Prompt

Create a mixed media artwork that represents a meaningful part of your identity, a memory, or a feeling connected to childhood or personal growth.

Then, write a reflective narrative or prose piece explaining your symbol.

Requirements:

- Clear symbolic meaning
- Visual or layered imagery
- Personal connection
- Written explanation of choices
- Connection to themes of memory, identity, or growth

## ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessments:

- Symbolism chart
- Class discussion participation
- Exit tickets
- Brainstorming/planning work

Summative Assessment:

Mixed media symbolic artwork + written reflection

Sample Rubric Categories

Symbolism & Depth of Meaning – 25

Connection to Theme – 20

Creativity & Artistic Effort – 20

Written Reflection – 20

Craft & Presentation – 15

## DIFFERENTIATION

Support:

- Symbol examples and visual prompts
- Sentence starters for reflection
- Guided notes and annotation support
- One-on-one conferencing

Extension:

- Incorporate multiple symbols interacting
- Compare with *Nothing Gold Can Stay*
- Write a poem instead of prose reflection
- Create a digital or multimedia version

Optional Extension Activities

- Gallery walk critique
- Pair artwork with poetry
- Compare symbolism across texts and media

- Create a second piece showing “future self” symbolism

## TEACHER NOTES

This lesson works especially well in units on symbolism, identity, or coming-of-age themes. Pairing *The Little Prince* with Jean-Michel Basquiat allows students to see how both literature and visual art communicate complex emotional meaning through simple or abstract forms.

*\*\*\*The project is particularly effective for engaging students who may struggle with traditional literary analysis, as it provides multiple entry points through creativity, personal connection, and visual expression.*

## WOUNDED HERO



Diego Mota

This is a mixed media piece that I've titled "Wounded Hero". The media used to create this piece was a regular mechanical pencil then I used Prismacolor colored pencils and layered each color on top of another. For the background I used black ink and for smaller details white and black fine tip markers. The paper that this was created on was 30% recycled tan paper.

## BAT SIGNAL CALLS



Keely Bresee

This painting was made using acrylic paint and an ink pen on canvas. My inspiration came from viewing other pop art pieces and learning that comics were a common feature of that type of art. I used one of my favorite DC comic book heroes, Batman, alongside some of my favorite villains. I used the main colors of Joker to affect the complementary colors of the other villains in the painting.

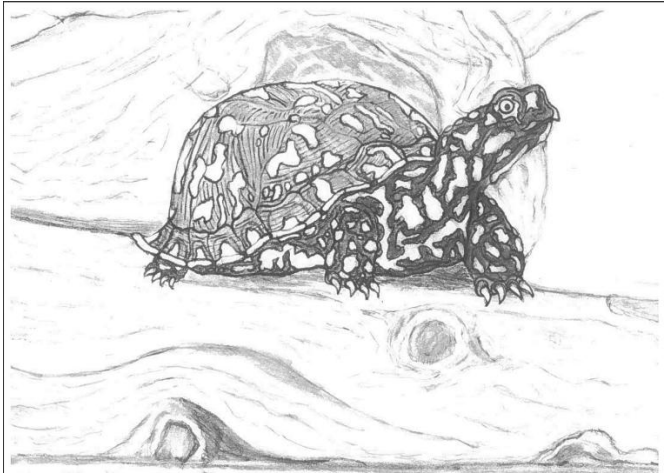
## TITAN'S GAZE



Ayden Brower

This is a piece from my studio art class sketchbook. I wanted to show the ferocity of a mythical creature. I created this drawing to explore my fascination with dragons and the way their powerful forms take shape on the page. I've always been drawn to the fierce nature of mythical creatures, and I wanted to capture that intensity through their legendary presence.

## CHARLES THE TURTLE



Ayden Brower

This turtle was for a project in Studio Art class, inspired by the time I made my girlfriend and her mom believe that I bought her a turtle for Christmas. It was hilarious--I thought they could tell I was joking, but apparently not. I named this turtle Charles, and he's a graphite drawing in a cartoonish style that merges with realism.

## AUTUMN SKY



Jalyne Snyder

Autumn Night was inspired by an image I saw. Then another painter painted something similar, so with that creativity in mind, I decided to make one of my own and throw my own spin on it. With that said, the foundation of what I made is acrylic. The inspiration I looked at was all light colors, so that is why I decided to make it darker. I also made more plants than others I saw. The next thing I did was make an ombre of colors and the water with the acrylic paint. After that dried, I added the finer details and made the tree. When I finished the tree, I added the moon and the light reflecting off the water.

## SAN MV GRAPHITE FACE



Amelia Owens

I chose to draw this face because the person's face was wistful and beautiful. Method used was various levels of graphite.

## DANGO



Amelia Owens

I am interested in other cultures and their foods; this really drew me to paint these chewy Japanese dumplings. The color palette chosen is simple, with only 4 colors (although there are at least a couple of shades of pink and green). The cherry blossoms share the whimsy of the plate

## MONARCH OF SHADOWS



Ayden Brower

This piece was inspired by the fragility of life and how sometimes the best part will come after much struggle. I created this pen and ink drawing of a monarch butterfly in memory of my grandmother, as they were her favorite. I chose to work in pen for the challenge of the medium, using only various forms of crosshatching to create the image. This piece was inspired by the fragility of life and the belief that the most beautiful chapters often come after a period of great struggle.

## CLAW AND CLOUD



Ayden Brower

I created this pencil drawing as a challenge from my girlfriend to see if I could capture one of her favorite creatures from the Harry Potter series. While maintaining the powerful essence of a griffin, I added a personal twist by giving it a wax-like texture. This unique finish allows me to blend the magical world with my own artistic style.

## RUNNING LATE



Abigail Thompson

This piece that I call “Running Late” shows my original characters, Svelte, Omen, and Sedrick. Under pressure they all show different characteristics that reflect their personalities. This piece was created with alcohol markers, and colored pencils. Running late was inspired by an artwork that I found online of another character running late to work that inspired me to create my piece. I didn’t know how to illustrate the background until my teacher gave me the idea to create a sidewalk like the album that the Beatles made called Abbey Road. That is how I created my piece “Running Late.”

## LAGERTHA



Ellie Taylor

Meet Lagertha, my Viking drawing completed in Spring of 2025. She was an assignment for our Drawing II class. Our only parameters were picking a different cultural group to draw and providing some kind of related

## Voices of Kansas

background to that drawing. I chose wolves because Vikings generally valued these predators as symbols of loyalty and strength. I used drawing pencils (graphite) as my medium.

## POETRY

## FEAR OF SPEECH

Seville Thorpe

Why don't you speak?

The fear of a voice prevents me.

A fear of my voice prevents me.

Why don't you ask.

You always seem busy with a task.

Why do you leave the room.

No one made room for me.

What do you write.

I will write what needs to be written.

I do speak in quite whispers.

I speak in shouts to those who notice.

A single word can make a difference.

A single word if anyone listens.

Why won't you listen?

# MY HOME HAS A HEARTBEAT

Destiny Aldridge

A home isn't always four walls and a roof  
my home has a heartbeat  
when we're together, there's nothing else  
you feel like a fresh breath of air  
my home has a heartbeat  
like I'm the only girl  
you feel like a fresh breath of air  
when I forgot how to breathe

like I'm the only girl  
you want to know  
I forget how to breathe  
when you're near

you want to know  
where my mind is  
when you're near  
but you consume my mind

## WATERFALL

Delaney Crawford

The body displays emotions  
that words cannot—or will not—convey.  
Anger steals the subconscious,  
intentional or not, words pour out—  
the flood after a drought.

But physical language  
is what drowns you.  
The anger washes out;  
only sadness is left on the shore,  
and it's still not quiet—  
harsh, rushing, sloshing,  
the sound of a waterfall.

Tears streaming down,  
the sight of a waterfall.

## DIVINITY

Delaney Crawford

“Oh, Miss Divine, what’s my purpose?  
What’s my meaning? How may I become divine, like  
you?”

“Boy, I am just as human as you. Your reason is to  
wonder, and act as though what you know is correct.”

“But! Miss Divine! What could it be? Why so vague, why  
not just give me what I need?”

“Even if your goal is not reached, your journey still holds  
substance.”

“I’ve not a clue where to start with your words. How have  
you become a being of wisdom? How have you achieved  
this status of all-knowing?”

“I am not divine, boy. I simply ponder.”

“I’m sorry, sorry. Are you mad at me?”

“No, I’d never. For curiosity isn’t a crime. It’s what makes  
us human. It gives us immortality, gives us the meaning of  
existing.”

Years later, the question returned, as though it had always  
been waiting.

“Mister, Mister! Please, tell me—what’s my purpose?  
What’s my meaning? How may I become divine, like  
you?”

## SCRIBBLED IN HEAVEN

Jordyn Kohr

Oh, dear Nadine, do you realize the pain  
Of what it means to be someone's namesake?  
How do you think as you watch me in vain?  
When will I get an everlastin' break?  
The pressures I feel to accomplish worth  
And overcome the drowning fight of spite  
Have been upon me since my day of birth.  
Sometimes I breathe with lungs of dynamite.  
And yet nothing has ever felt so noble.  
I dance to the song of a comely name.  
Our name is crafted of perfect opal.  
And to be called beautiful, kind dame  
Nadine—you forged the name I can't leaven:  
My life's your sequel, scribbled in Heav'n.

## THE EYES I SEE THROUGH

Brinley Minton

At night I close my eyes  
To gaze into the dark void  
One that brings me to a new scene  
I've never encountered  
And never will  
An otherworldly being  
Hunting me down  
For a reason unbeknownst to me  
Catching me at the last second  
Before I wake up  
An otherworldly being  
Covering my dear sister  
Head to toe in insects  
Creating a vile abomination  
Before I wake up  
But sometimes what I see  
Seems to be through my own eyes  
A normal every day life I go through  
Causing deja vu once I'm awake  
Leaving me with even more questions  
As to who eyes are these  
That I see through in the night  
While I close my own

## WRONG

Jacob Oliver

It might be best to give up.  
It might be best to lay down your weapon,  
not to admit defeat, but to admit the pointlessness in  
defeating,  
not to accept your loss, but to accept that not all loss is  
necessary.

*Not everything has to be a battle.*

*Not everything has to end in war.*

And yet we choose to have it end that way,  
even if we get the short end of the stick.

But why?

Why do we want that?

We could blame it on human nature,  
on inevitability, or unsolved tensions, or simply the desire  
to have the last laugh.

But that doesn't give us any more answers than questions.

Those answers are just excuses.

Excuses with no backing,

backing with no excuse to exist, other than "I want to  
win."

*"I want to be right."*

*"I want the other person to be wrong."*

And the desire for the other side to be wrong makes you  
believe it.

*"The other person is wrong."*

*"The other person has to change."*

But even in a world when change is inevitable, nobody wants to change.

Nobody wants to be wrong.

Maybe that's our excuse, the desire not to be wrong.

But that is fundamentally the same thing.

"I want the other person to be wrong."

*"The other person is wrong."*

*"The other person has to change."*

But when both are claimed wrong, who is right?

Is there really anybody who is right?

Am I right?

This desire to right goes from a quarrel to a battle to an all-out war.

And the war solves nothing.

The war doesn't make anyone right.

It only makes everyone wrong.

So why start a war at all?

Why tell the other person they are wrong when you will end up wrong too?

Why tell the other person to change, when in doing so, you will change yourself?

Because the reality is,

in a world where change means being wrong, nobody wants to change.

*So what use is it to conform someone who finds no use in conformity?*

*What use is it to fight when fighting only leads to change?*

*When fighting only leads to being wrong?*

It might be best to give up.

To lay down your weapon.

Not to admit defeat, but to admit the pointlessness in defeating.

Maybe you are right.

Maybe they are wrong.

However, the moment you speak,  
the moment you start that quarrel, that battle, that war,  
it doesn't matter who was right or wrong.

Both of you are wrong in trying to prove you are right.

*Not everything has to be a battle.*

*Not everything has to end in war.*

*Not everybody has to be right.*

*Not everybody has to be wrong.*

But we choose to end it that way despite all of that.

*Nobody will listen.*

*Nobody will learn.*

*Nobody will read this and change.*

I should give up.

Because I can't change anyone.

Nobody will see this, in the slim chance anyone does,  
and think to themselves "I should change."

Because nobody thinks they should change.

Nobody thinks they are wrong.

So why tell them they're wrong?

Why tell them to conform?

*Why tell them to change in a world where changing means being  
wrong?*

## DAFFODIL

Darius Glenn

I, am an Egoist.  
I, love myself and  
I, accept myself wholeheartedly.

You, are a Narcissist.  
You, love yourself and  
You, accept yourself wholeheartedly.

We, are proud of who we are.  
The norm is to be your worst critic.  
Of which, I am.  
Yet, I am an Egoist.

The mirror reflects my best and my worst,  
Overlapping and inseparable.

I am told to love Myself,  
Yet no one told me how fondly I should see Myself.

Is it too much when I no longer love others?  
Or simply when I flaunt my superiority?

I, an Egoist,  
Love myself and  
Those around me.

But,  
Those around me  
Don't accept Myself wholeheartedly.

You, are a Narcissist.  
You, however,  
Don't love yourself.  
You only love yourself as you will allow yourself to.  
As much as can be forgiven.

The norm is to be your worst critic.  
Narcissism isn't normal.  
Loving Myself wholeheartedly isn't normal.

Why  
Do I find Myself  
Handsome,  
Intelligent,  
And masterfully mishandled?

Am I a Narcissist?

Confidence and self-affirmation are dangerous,  
Poison to the norm.

I know why I'm my worst critic.  
It reminds me of my progress.  
Towards being worthy of Narcissism.

I wish I was a Narcissist.

## SONNET 44: DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

Cooper Igo

How I yearn for thee, Death by their evil hand.  
I Yearn for thee to the shadows and Mars.  
I could sleep and yearn for them in the stars.  
But to thee am I just a merely Strand?  
Thee I yearn for on my cozy chair playing.  
Playing and loving to the break of dawn.  
Eventually so tired I yawned.  
Love for thee till I'm asleep decaying.  
My dying heart lit like a bright candle.  
Yearning for the game called "Dead By Daylight,"  
Is there much more a lone heart can handle?  
But that bright light slowly dwindling away  
Only so much love can a mere heart hold.  
Will my mortal eyes see the brink of Day?

## THE SUM OF NOW

Layla Mendoza

I have always wanted to be noticed—  
seen, spoken to, outlined in the  
eyes and mouths of people who  
see and speak to me.

I have always wanted to be the  
warrior who saves her people,  
who is remembered for centuries  
past her time,  
who is the next person whom  
people carve in the words  
of history.

I have always wanted to be  
the underdog that rises to the  
top, whom people look at and  
say, “I wonder how she got  
there,” and say:  
“She must have everything  
worked out.”

But adding me (invisible) + the world  
does not equal a balanced sum.  
The scales are broken,  
and everything falls.

I want to be nothing short  
of the person who has  
all parts to make a  
whole;  
all the numbers  
add up.

But at the end of the day,  
I'm stuck standing in front  
of the mirror,  
counting all the mistakes  
carved in my face;  
counting all the things  
everybody will hate  
about me.

I'm stuck with a mouth  
that speaks too loud, or not at all;  
ears that hear more than I say;  
feet that tend to stray;  
hands that I hope will do good,  
and eyes that hold witness to a world  
that, for now, doesn't feel  
like I'm made for.

I'm stuck trying to add all the  
little things in the world  
that don't amount to  
me,

trying to subtract all the things  
that people don't want to see:

the voice that  
sings as loud as I can  
when the world can't see;  
the mouth that speaks for the people  
and ideas  
others tread upon;  
the hands that sketch  
worlds others have never  
seen,  
and the body  
that is shattered  
and only ever adds into  
the sum of a broken person.

The body that is constantly falling,  
breaking,  
tripping,  
landing flat on courage  
and hope.

I am stuck in the  
past and all the things  
I thought wrong:  
mistakes I made,  
people I hurt.

I am stuck in the future and  
what it has in store for me:  
fear of the unknown,  
fear of where I will  
let my feet take me.

But the sum of future things  
and past is indefinite,  
so why can I not stand rooted in this one spot?

## SONNET 45: A DIFFERENT WORLD

Jayda Haywood

I like to think of a place far away.  
A world with no hate, not like ours.  
Seeds of compassion that bloom like flowers.  
How easy it would be, such is child's play.

I like to think of a place with no pain.  
Where days are clear and skies are a soft blue.  
Though ours are so grey, what an awful view.  
How troublesome, no wonder we complain.

I like to think of a place where we're free.  
No prejudice, no violence, no grief, no war.  
The world's hearts playing a sweet symphony.

I like to believe my dream has begun.  
The world and its people have started to unite.  
A place like that should be for everyone.

## DANDELIONS

Emily Hazen

What children dreamed were flowers,  
adults reduced to weeds  
They were not grown on purpose,  
thriving in cracks hidden far away.  
Small petals reached for the world  
Spanning yellow like proof  
“This is a flower,” the children insisted  
Believing naming would keep them safe.  
Adults walked by without a glance  
To look at them would bring shame;  
nothing important was there.  
Nobody cared.  
The soil was packed down by careless steps.  
Rain came abruptly,  
the sun always arrived too late;  
dependence was not provided.  
All they needed was care.  
The flower grew battered and crooked,  
Desperate to be picked and admired,  
Yet remained low to the ground,  
close enough to be reached,  
close enough to be stepped on.  
No garden enclosed them,  
no signs told others to leave them alone.  
They were unguarded, labeled as invasive,  
“A waste of resources,”

mistaken for something that did not matter,  
Innocent and unplucked.  
The wind took advantage,  
pulling at the forming petals, scattering seeds too early.  
The flower wanted to be picked.  
The hands arrived,  
not to tend, not to protect,  
but to open what should have bloomed later.  
Something was taken before the flowers learned their own  
shape.  
The desire to be picked was mistaken for permission.  
Blooming too early  
Deflowering.  
The soil felt bitter afterward,  
every sunbeam too sudden, too bright,  
every shadow lurking too close.  
The dandelions grew crooked, not because they were  
wrong.  
Bent under the weight of the past,  
the stem felt decayed,  
Forever lingering.  
Adults brushed it off as natural,  
ignoring the flowers' pleas  
Not all hands are helpful  
A lesson learned far too early.  
But the flower continued to grow.  
Some petals never grew back;  
leaves learned to curl inward.  
The soil would never understand.  
If they remained silent, they "wanted it."  
If they bent, they were "weak."  
If they survived, they were "fine."  
The flower didn't feel fine.

The flower didn't know what was right anymore.  
The dandelions learned to guard themselves.  
The dandelions hid their broken petals behind blades of  
grass.  
Nobody asked if they needed guarding.  
They were a weed anyway,  
not something to be loved.  
The flower matured slowly,  
forever turned towards the past,  
Hesitant to lean towards the sun.  
While some rays helped,  
most burned.  
No two flowers originate in the same way.  
One blossoms late,  
while other blossoms far too early.  
All flowers are beautiful,  
Broken petals or not.

## LETTER FOR THE FIRST DOOR

Olivia Witten

Each one hurt more than cold breeze in winter  
Harsh stinging when I opened the new door  
Summer is soon so don't be such a bore  
But the thought of it still makes me shiver

I don't really miss summer anymore  
No more splashing in water by the shore  
I knew it was wrong not to be cared for  
While I drowned in tears you were no savior

While I went down deep into the water  
I saw a new door so hard to ignore  
I swear I learned, I know I've gotten smarter!

But there he was where I opened the door  
Replaced with gills, my lungs gone to slaughter  
Splinters hurt my lungs, while gills gave me armor

## ENVIIOUS

Hannah Pankratz

Oh, how I envy  
The girl in front of me.  
She has blue eyes,  
And blonde hair,  
And perfect white teeth.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl to the left of me.  
She has a perfect smile,  
A perfect body,  
And sense is curiosity.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl behind me.  
She has guys lining up  
Just to date for a week.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl to the right of me.  
She has lots of friends  
And doesn't seem  
To care what others think.

Why do I envy  
All the girls around me?  
Can't I look in the mirror

And see who I want to be?

Why does society  
Have such high standards?  
Can't they see  
That not all girls  
Want to carry insecurities.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl behind me.  
She has everything  
And is who I want to be.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl to the right of me.  
She has everything  
And is who I want to be.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl in front of me.  
She has everything  
And is who I want to be.

Oh, how I envy  
The girl to the left of me.  
She has everything  
And is who I want to be.

## PAGES WITH EYES

Adrianna Driscoll

Within the pages the world folds with grace  
What could come next is all so very new  
In every chapter, new adventure blooms  
A symphony of words in an embrace  
With every turn a new journey to face  
The ink-stained letters whisper tales all new  
Of heroes brave and villains stark and bold  
Through realms of fantasy both light and space  
No Distance is too far to go and roam  
Through words or cities made of gold  
Within these bindings I have found a home  
And stories that will never quite grow as old  
Through real life fades as my books glow  
I'll make the journey into the book's soul

## WILLOWBOUND

Emmi Benson

You and me,  
Hanging from a willow tree,  
Quietly,  
We drift with the leaves.  
Suddenly,  
The wind blows you away from me,  
But it only makes me see:  
We were never meant to be.

I can hear you in the breeze,  
I see your shadows in the trees,  
I hold onto your memory,  
hoping it will never change.

I'm not a soldier,  
But I'm fighting.  
Can you hear me through the silence?  
I won't give up.  
I know we will meet again.

## MIRRORS

Katlynn Kyllonen

She measures her worth with mirrors,  
Never telling the truth,  
Every reflection lying politely,  
Whispering “too much” when there’s already so little left.

Her stomach grumbles loudly even when it’s empty,  
A constant reminder.  
Hunger isn’t a signal—it’s a failure,  
A weakness that she invented.

She learned to be proud of the ache,  
To embrace the emptiness,  
To call the absence discipline,  
To mistake the vanishing for control.

She doesn’t despise her body—she’s scared of it,  
Scared to live in a world of comparison,  
Scared that she’ll take up too much space  
In a society that says only the thinnest of girls are allowed  
to be loved.

## THE WHISPERING SNAKE

Colin Owen

Now, half my life has gone to stone,  
And still I linger, left alone.  
Days are gone by, but not forgotten,  
While my body rests here, old and rotten.

Wind wisps by the snake on a tree,  
A sight untold, no one could foresee.  
My mind wept slowly, shunned from sight,  
So, I clung to darkness, absent of light.

Beyond a doubt, it called my name.  
I could see it now, all in frame.  
It beckoned stillness, shallow yet deep,  
And, with my arrival, time feel asleep.

Now that I'm gone, the whispers grow stronger,  
A promise I made, that I wish no longer.  
Still, the snake rests upon that hanging limb,  
With me right beside it, eyes and soul gone dim.

## GOOD & FAITHFUL

Rowan Cora Ashmore

Up in the sky  
Above the clouds  
Lives a heavenly God,  
Awed by all who follow Him,  
Faithful and devoted,  
Their hearts glowing with light,  
Forever guided by His wisdom and might.  
Their love: a quiet flame  
That never fades,  
A bond unbroken,  
Through all life's shades.

# SUNSETS

Dakkota Ottley

I think sunsets  
are like books  
in the sky.

## A SONG OF MYSELF

Hadlee Anderson

Loves to work,  
but never to hurt others.

Enjoys the outdoors,  
always wandering, always exploring,  
listening to the wind move through the trees.

Not very fast,  
but steady enough to finish the task,  
even when the day grows long.

## SCHOOL DAYS

Kayden Simmons

I sit in a chair that's a little too hard  
Feet swinging free, reaching not very far  
The clock ticking on the classroom wall  
The teachers voice hums like a steady song  
I try to listen, but not for long

And before I knew it  
I was sitting in the same old classroom  
But my feet don't swing  
They touch the floor  
The clock still ticks  
The walls the same  
Yet everything feels  
Different than before

I remember when time moved slow  
When recess felt like everything  
When homework was the biggest weight  
And tomorrow was an endless thing  
But now caps and gowns  
Are no longer whispered plans  
What once felt so far is now right here  
And the clock I used to watch has carried me here

And before I know it  
I'm back in that same old classroom

Standing where my teacher once stood  
While small feet swing from chairs too tall  
The clock still ticks on the classroom wall  
But this time it's my voice that hums like a steady song

## CROSS COUNTRY

Shaun Jewell

The rain falls hard;  
The doubts fall fast.  
Every step asks:  
How long will I last?  
The world leans in  
And says I'm done.  
I lift my head,  
And still I run.

## A NEW CHAPTER IN LIFE

Quinton Anderson

Life, how unexpected and interesting,  
Everyone watching your move, witnessing.  
Everything you do feels like a step back,  
Your thoughts rushing,  
It feels like you will crack.  
Until that faithful moment,  
Your thoughts are potent.  
But when that switch flipped,  
A flicker of hope blipped.  
Your mentality changed,  
And you realize that lethal drip has been defanged.  
Now that you have a different outlook,  
You realize this is your book.  
Writing a new chapter,  
It's now full of laughter.  
Each day a new page,  
Happiness is your new wage.

# RESILIENCE

Rachel Walter

Resilience, it fights for me.  
Waves of burdens come before me.  
A wall of doubts stands between –  
Not close to reach.

Resilience, it fights for me.  
A glimmer of hope comes to me.  
A wall of doubts breaks –  
Closer to reach.

## ONCE UPON BROKEN HEART

Johanna Shellito

A girl with rose-gold hair,  
Yearning for happily ever after,  
Steps out into open air,  
Hoping for joy and laughter.

Instead, meeting curses and bites,  
And a seemingly young man,  
Brings her destruction during nights,  
Yet love prevails over the story's ban.

# EMOTION FROM THE HEART

Ryan Budig

Hi, my name is Ryan  
When I say this, I am not lyin'  
I do be cryin'  
Alone in my room, I do be rhymin'  
Even after I am done  
I will still be Ryan

## REMEMBERING DAD

Hailey Carder

I changed my hair in eighth grade  
To look more like him.  
I remembered all the things he taught me,  
So, I could show people what he was like.

When I left my home,  
No one knew my background.  
I didn't share my story a lot,  
Because it's weird to bring up in conversation.

Peers say I look like my mom  
Because none have ever seen my dad.  
Every accomplishment I do for him.  
He was my role model.

## I REMEMBER WHAT THE MOON TOLD ME

MaryAnne Christian

I buzzed above a garden,  
Scouting for untouched pollen under the skies.  
I found myself captivated by gorgeous butterflies.

I watched as people hounded them,  
Laughing and enjoying their presence, one by one,  
Exclaiming, "Come back, I'm not done!"

I flew near, but how the people scampered,  
What does it take for one to be pampered?  
Swatting at me and screaming,  
"Watch out!" and "Oh my!"  
Oh, how I yearn to be a butterfly.

Then I saw myself in the pond's pristine reflection,  
Where were my long antennas?  
No luminous wings were found in my detection.

Despite this, I still tried my best to be a butterfly,  
Interacting and flying about,  
Because the love for them is especially high.

Being swatted again, I felt quite the shake,  
And there I lay until I felt the moon awake.

It spoke, "Why do you lie so still in this bed of flowers?"

“I am no butterfly.” The tears came as showers.

“So, you cry for what? You have a wonderful duty.”  
But I uttered, “What does that matter if I am no beauty?  
I long to feel the love,  
I want what’s given to those who are above.”

But the moon spoke, “No, no, you have it all wrong, little  
bee.

You may not have the big wings of vibrancy,  
You may not have the slenderness or the antennae,  
And though certainly by the end of the day,  
You are no butterfly,  
You are a honeybee and have a purpose; you mustn’t die.”

“And that is...” I tried to smooth out my crumbled wings.  
The moon’s tone softened, “If everything and everyone  
were the same beings,  
Oh, how boring this world would be!  
I am the moon, and my reflection shines for the earth  
when it needs.  
I cause tides to keep the oceans in motion,  
And you are a bee, for this planet, you have quite the  
devotion  
Comparison is the biggest thief of your joy,  
You are perfectly made, little bee, much more than a  
decoy.”

And so, in the morning,  
When the moon was no longer there,  
I remembered what she told me and realized my share.  
I help preserve the blossoming beauties of the world,  
This realization made my mind swirl

Voices of Kansas

I may be no butterfly, but I will always be a bee.  
I do have a purpose after all, a magnificent one indeed.

# I AM AS A BIRD CONDEMNED TO ITS CAGE

MaryAnne Christian

I am as a bird condemned to its cage.  
I am to perform, please leave me backstage.  
Why do I dwindle, but my body grows in age?  
I want to explore. I want to engage.

To see outside, but never to go.  
Why must I stay? How will I know?  
Supposed to be friend, but treated as foe;  
The freedom I felt was not long ago.

They must hunt hard, but at least they are free.  
I get good treatment, but this is not me.  
I am confined, rooted like a tree.  
Just to stay alive, but I'll never truly be.

They fly in the sky, while I sit on this perch.  
I long to feel oak. I long to feel birch.  
I have no control; I feel a great lurch.  
This is no home, not even a church.

To have great wings, just never to use.  
What can I gain? It is more that I lose?  
I want to taste water; I'm ill of this juice.  
How can I escape? How can I break loose?

Voices of Kansas

I see between bars, not between trees.  
I have a stiff collar, a harness, a leash.  
Why do I feel as small as a bee?  
But cannot slip through what holds me?

Tired for long hours and tired for long days,  
I sit and I cry. I sit and I pray.  
Even if I were obliged to eat hay,  
If I were free, I'd have it no other way.

## THE KILLER OF ALL IS A BLESSING TO ALL

MaryAnne Christian

Without it, we would have no memories.  
Without it, we would have no history.  
Without it, we would have no change.  
Without it, we would have no past and no future,  
But would there be a “present” if that were the only tense?

But without it, we would have no death.  
We would have no worries.  
We would have no disease.  
But without it comes no “We.”

For as time goes by, all of this develops.  
Without it,  
No life, but no death,  
A tick-less clock,  
Not even a breath.

A mute tranquility.  
With no fear but no hope.  
No worry, but no joy.  
For if there was no bad,  
How could there be a good?

Everything grows in it,  
Yet everything wilts in it.

Voices of Kansas

We wish for more but can never receive.  
We can waste it, but we cannot control it.  
We can spend it but never get it back.

So, what is time?  
Could it be just a measure?  
Could it be more valuable than any currency?  
Or could it be everything?

For with time, everything is created.  
With time, everything is halted.

## A TRIP TO A HOMETOWN

Megan Carder

A trip to a hometown  
A trip with regular gas station stops  
A long, long drive spent with many, many cousins  
A time full of lots and lots of food  
A groaning table full of multiple people  
A pool full of warm, warm water  
A screaming, splashing family  
A long, long trip to my hometown.

## WHERE I'M FROM (BARBIES AND TOYS)

Selah Henderson

I am from Barbies and toys,  
from stuffed animals and blocks.  
Life was better back then,  
no worries, no stress, no expectations,  
just have fun and relax.

But now relax isn't in our vocabulary.  
It's changed out from "calm down" to "due tomorrow,"  
from "don't worry about it," to "time to do it again."  
It's changed from small words we barely understand  
to big words we're expected to know.

Sometimes I miss coloring and cutting  
while I'm stuck dividing and reading.  
It was more fun back then,  
jumping and playing without caring about what people  
think.  
But now we wonder if our shirt's too long or ugly.  
Now we wonder if anyone saw us being ourselves.

I wish I was young again.  
People say it's better to be older because there's more  
responsibility,  
but watching my siblings is crushing me.

Kansas Association of Teachers of English

I wish I could be young again when nothing mattered,  
but now the smallest thing could ruin my whole life.  
I hate getting angry over small things and being shy  
and worrying how people see me and if I messed up.

I come from Barbies and toys,  
and I come from no cares and no worries.  
I wish I could be young again.

## WHERE I'M FROM (FROM CHICAGO)

Amy Holmes

I'm from Chicago ... a city I  
do not know what has changed  
I do not know ... all I  
remember is the metal  
people carry ... it's like leaf fall  
beside a tree ... a tree to not be  
seen ... I'm in a state of denial  
of what is true ... of what is  
a lie ... like glistening a berry  
never turns out in the right  
way ...

## FOR THE STARS

Dalevontrey J. Thomas

Stars  
from night  
creates light  
embrace the sky  
follow the light  
create dreams  
through the  
Stars

## DECEMBER

Angel Burkholder

December isn't the same  
Spending time with friends and family  
Sipping hot cocoa and watching the Grinch  
As the days passed and it got closer to Christmas  
I could feel her presence, the void being filled  
My mind is always playing tricks on me  
I could hear her voice and laughter  
I could smell her perfume and the faint whiff of her  
peppermint candies  
Knowing she's underground  
It's been six years since I saw her eyes light up when you  
open a gift  
Six years since I gave her a hug  
Every day in December goes by slowly  
Because I know the one person who loved it the most is  
gone  
I visit her headstone every Christmas Eve  
I sit and talk with her, knowing she can hear me  
I see her in the monarchs when they fly high  
She turns the sky pretty every night  
My grandma was a warrior put to rest  
When will that warrior come get me

# CYBERPUNK

Chase Robinson

What do you mean, *cyber* punk?  
Drop the cyber  
punk is more accurate  
Just ignore the H-board under my feet  
Just ignore the digipaint balls at my waist  
Just ignore my arm  
my leg  
a chunk of my torso  
Heck, just ignore the half human hostel I helplessly inhabit  
here  
everyone is cyber  
these days  
most people don't even notice  
the android amalgamation  
everyone notices  
(is) me  
17 leading seven teens  
rampaging rummaging running ruining  
the ruined roads we run  
into trouble all the time  
Just ignore that we created it  
Just ignore that we are kids  
Just ignore that we are slum poor  
knocking on death's door  
trying to start war

so Death can just take more  
cause at the core  
that's what punk is  
being the farthest away from the machines that rule us  
and as a rule  
Death is fallen  
but at least he was an angel once  
we are different  
they say we don't think  
I say we think different  
and its them who don't think  
can't think  
can't think  
can't think  
and yet look how much I think on a simple  
maglev Hall effect six bow thruster carbon fiber-  
reinforced polymer H-board  
that somebody pitched this morning  
on the street  
cause that's where all the trash goes  
H-boards (H because hover took too much work to say,  
trash because there's too much friction)  
VARs (V because we want to Virtually replace a Reality  
that isn't Augmented enough, trash because the 32K res is  
fuzzy)  
me and my seven friends (me because if I'm going to  
break rules grammar can't be ignored, trash because we're  
not machines and we break rules)  
there is so much unwanted  
trash on the street  
trash off the street  
trash is the street  
trash is the world

so much metal trash in the world  
my maglev H-board works anywhere  
especially as I grind down a downed 5g tower  
that is just as obsolete  
as I am  
in the end  
at the end  
I'm back on the street  
art on the ave  
pick up a pen and paint pixels picture  
perfect  
poster  
he says  
they're all here  
William Nikki Frost Walter Poe Manuel Emily  
paint past projection propos  
propos propel punk promos  
teen transformers  
not optimal  
inter-nozzles primed  
now 100% less robot  
than even an ancient Anthropocene meter  
that gives an hour per cent  
time is money  
and since we don't have either  
we have to spend it all  
or else it burns a hole in our pocket  
or else we become  
more cyber less punk  
punk  
defies 'or else' a few lines up  
defiles the line up  
punk

it says  
rounding the corner  
what we become  
when all the human is gone  
versus ourselves  
the odds are 8 to 8 billion  
ever in our favor  
like the myth goes  
pulse guns drawn  
and drawn on  
the immaterial material of computerized creativity  
reclaimed; our one word  
punk

## ICE IS MELTING

Keaton Rupp

ICE occupies the streets.  
No school, I cheer,  
Yet far too near.  
ICE causes fear.  
No school; they fear.  
ICE is near.  
My skin, like snow,  
With luck, I do not have to know.  
*ICE means fear.*

## LEARNING THE TIDE

Zoe Chan

Waves leave, waves come back.  
My heart learns the ocean's rule:  
nothing stays or goes.

## WATCH AND SEE ME BE ME

Aiden Henry

I am the youngest of the three, that's me,  
With strong older brother and sister fair;  
I love the beach, the climb, and thrills I see,  
Adventure, mountains, ocean, open air;  
I started sports when I was only four,  
And over time I learned to do much more;  
Baseball, Basketball, and running soar,  
With friends beside me, I enjoy them more;  
I am energetic, talk a lot each day,  
But I can still be quiet, watch and see;  
I dream I'll play pro baseball someday,  
And build a life where family waits for me;  
I'll live by God, make others laugh and smile,  
And leave good memories that last a while.

# CHESS

Valeny Wong

Game of Tragedy  
Stimulation of bloodshed  
War is amusement

## MOTION

Lylah Covey

My brain will not stop;  
My thoughts won't drop.  
My brain keeps moving;  
My thoughts are zooming.

Darkness swallows my soul.  
It's an endless black hole.  
Darkness suffocates me,  
I can't resist; it keeps pulling me in.

Staying still drives me insane.  
What could I possibly gain?  
Stillness isn't productive.  
Why do I feel so destructive?

Motion keeps me going—  
like footsteps pacing, doors opening.  
My achievements start to show  
in every place I choose to go.  
Motion challenges me,  
pushes me past who I used to be.  
I feel it in my breathing, in my stride,  
and finally I feel free inside.

## PULSE

Malica Webb

i don't always trust my own body  
some days it feels like a shaky ladder  
i keep climbing because i  
have no choice.

my heart likes to run marathons  
even when i'm just standing still,  
and i wish i could tell it  
to calm down, just breathe,  
stop acting like the world is ending  
over something as simple as gravity.

i've learned to stand up slowly.  
to pretend the black spots in my vision  
are just dust,  
and not the warning signs  
that my body is seconds away.  
from letting go of consciousness.  
i laugh it off—  
“Sorry, I’m fine, it just happens”—  
as if fainting is a hobby  
and not something i'm terrified of.

i hate how invisible this all is.  
how people look at me  
like i'm exaggerating,

because my symptoms don't leave bruises.  
no one sees the dizziness  
that stirs behind my eyes  
or how my pulse jumps  
like it's trying to escape.

i've been told i'm "Too young to be this tired,"  
and i wish they knew  
that exhaustion doesn't check birthdays.  
that weakness isn't a choice.  
that i'm fighting a battle  
my outside never shows.

but here's the truth i seem to forget;  
i've survived every bad day  
my body has thrown at me.  
every wobble, every collapse,  
every moment i thought i wouldn't make it  
to the next breath.  
i've learned to build strength  
out of all the times I had none.

this is my honest poem;  
I am scared.  
I am stubborn.  
I am tired in ways I can't explain,  
and strong in ways I never wanted to be.  
And even on the days when standing  
feels like falling—  
I keep getting back up.

Not because it's easy,  
but because it's mine.

My life.  
My body.  
My fight.  
And I'm still here.

## THE RADIO

Abigail Perez, *Editor's Choice Award*

Pry your ears, silence any non-cheers, and listen to the radio—

Listen to the soothing voice of a charming host

The pure cadence clear

Nod along as they speak of world affairs

Yes, you—

Your country

Is *winning*—!

Don't question the *how*

Or what they are precisely against or *for*

Salute to the anthem as it plays

Smile at the inspiring stories of assisting the poor

Sing along to your favorite radio-curated tune

Occasionally

A static may ring—

you may think you hear things

Desperation—

Cries—

Words that carry a raw verity that almost pulls back a partition in your mind—

*"So sorry about the interference! We'll be right back after the anthem!"*

The jolly tone rings through the air even after it ceases

You shake your head

Shake off the thoughts that almost surfaced

Such an odd interruption

Voices of Kansas

You let it pass you by  
Ignoring the churning in your stomach  
It was not affecting you—  
Do not concern yourself with matters you are not involved  
in—  
Instead—  
Pry your ears, drown out the non-cheers, and listen to the  
radio—

# LESSON PLAN: POETRY, PROPAGANDA, AND CONFORMITY

## GRADE LEVEL

9–12 English Language Arts

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS (ELA)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 – Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4 – Analyze the impact of figurative language, repetition, tone, and word choice on meaning and mood.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6 – Analyze how point of view and irony shape meaning.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 – Write narratives and creative pieces using effective technique and vivid language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 – Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5 – Develop and strengthen writing through revision and editing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 – Participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Analyze how poets use repetition, irony, and tone to critique society.
2. Identify themes of propaganda, conformity, and manipulation in poetry.
3. Compare themes and techniques across multiple texts.
4. Write an original poem that critiques a social issue using symbolism, repetition, or irony.
5. Revise writing for clarity, imagery, and emotional impact.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can poetry challenge systems of control?
- What role does media play in shaping public thought?
- Why do societies ignore uncomfortable truths?
- How can repetition and tone influence a reader?

Mentor Texts

Primary Mentor Text

Use Abigail Perez’s poem beginning with “Pry your ears, silence any non cheers, and listen to the radio...” Focus

students on repetition, propaganda language, irony, unsettling tone, command-based phrasing, and hidden truth beneath surface optimism.

### Outside Mentor Text

“The Unknown Citizen” by W. H. Auden.

Students analyze bureaucratic tone, irony, repetition, commentary on obedience, and how society values conformity over individuality.

### Optional Supplemental Text

*1984* by George Orwell.

Use excerpts discussing propaganda, manipulation of truth, censorship, and media control.

## MATERIALS

- Copies of mentor poems
- Annotation tools/highlighters
- Writer’s notebooks or laptops
- Poetry analysis graphic organizer
- Revision checklist

## LESSON DURATION

2 class periods (50 minutes each)

## LESSON PROCEDURE

### DAY 1

Bell Ringer (5 minutes)

Prompt: “What messages do people hear repeatedly from media, society, or authority figures?”

Read & Analyze Mentor Texts (20 minutes)

Read Abigail Perez’s poem and excerpts from “The Unknown Citizen.” Discuss mood, repetition, irony, and social criticism.

Mini-Lesson: Repetition & Irony in Poetry (10 minutes)

Teach how repetition reinforces ideas and creates emotional tension while irony reveals deeper meaning.

Poetry Analysis Activity (10 minutes)

Students annotate repeated phrases, imagery, symbolism, tone shifts, and moments of irony.

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Prompt: “What warning or criticism do you think the poem is communicating?”

## DAY 2

### Warm-Up Discussion (5 minutes)

Discuss modern forms of propaganda and social influence such as social media, algorithms, advertising, and misinformation.

### Creative Writing Mini-Lesson (10 minutes)

Teach students how to use repetition, symbolism, commands, irony, and fragmented structure in social commentary poetry.

### Writing Workshop (25 minutes)

Students write original poems critiquing a social issue, system, or cultural pressure.

### Reflection & Sharing (10 minutes)

Students share poems and discuss how poetry can reveal truths people often ignore.

### Writing Prompt

Write an original poem critiquing a social issue, system, or cultural pressure. Use repetition, tone, imagery, and symbolism to reveal a deeper message beneath the surface.

### Requirements:

- Repeated phrase or motif
- Strong tone
- Imagery or symbolism
- Implied social commentary
- At least one use of irony or contrast

## ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessments:

- Annotations
- Discussion participation
- Exit tickets
- Peer feedback

Summative Assessment:

Original social commentary poem.

## SAMPLE RUBRIC CATEGORIES

Category	Points
Theme & Social Commentary	25
Use of Literary Devices	25
Tone & Emotional Impact	20
Creativity & Voice	15
Grammar & Conventions	15

## DIFFERENTIATION

Support:

- Poetry structure templates
- Sentence starters

- Guided annotation
- Teacher conferencing

Extension:

- Compare additional dystopian texts
- Perform spoken word versions
- Pair poems with visual art
- Create multimedia propaganda projects

Optional Extension Activities

- Create a propaganda poster inspired by the poem
- Record spoken word performances
- Compare poems to modern media campaigns
- Analyze propaganda techniques in advertisements or political speeches

## TEACHER NOTES

This lesson works especially well in dystopian literature units, poetry units, media literacy studies, and social commentary writing. Pairing Abigail Perez’s poem with “The Unknown Citizen” helps students analyze how poetry critiques conformity and manipulation across historical periods.

## SPARKS

Lauralye Boor

The candle's light is more radiant  
than I could ever be

For it is taller  
Older  
Lighter

She is taller  
Bolder  
Brighter

Each new spark could only hope  
to be just as great as the remarkable flame before it  
Hoping to burn sharper and louder  
But they never seem to be able to

My flame is just as brief and sluggish  
as these poor sparks have always has been  
For the dusty flame runs low on oxygen and struggles to  
last  
Like a young girl trying to keep her spark alive as life  
continues to mute her little light

Eventually, the small flame will burn out  
at no fault of its own  
Leaving a burnt copper color

and a rustic scent in the air

And the prosperous light before it  
will burn a vibrant crimson and coral  
as it accomplishes everything it was ever meant to  
without the incompetent candle  
slowing it down

## I PROMISE YOU

Peyton McMillon

I promise you are not fat  
Or too skinny  
I promise you that you are not a bad person deep down  
And that others may just misunderstand you  
I promise you that no one will notice that one zit  
Because they have better things to do  
I promise you that there is someone that always needs you  
Even if you feel like no one does  
I promise you that dirty looks  
Aren't always meant for you  
I promise you that your story continues on  
Though it might feel like there will be a bad ending  
But if there is one thing I can't promise is  
A change of mindset will get better if you don't change

## INFINITE LIES

Hailey Low

You cried tearful, melancholy goodbyes,  
The stars laughed at you, cruelly above;  
Not so different from a thousand knives,  
And you wondered if I was your love.

Everlasting time marked your heart with scars  
As you stared into a bottomless pit;  
Your eyes, like heavenly, unblinking stars,  
Still remembered all my remarkable wit.

That love for me was all badly wasted;  
I remembered what you truthfully hid.  
Faithfully, since the pathway was stated,  
Now I close my heavy, distraught eyelids.

The sun melts the sky a bloody dark red,  
Filling your head with absolute dark dread.

## A GOLFER'S SONNET

Griffin Hand

Each early morn I walk onto the green,  
My clubs in hand, my worries left behind,  
The quiet course feels calm and rarely seen,  
A place where I can clear my busy mind.

I take my swing and hope the ball flies true  
Across the grass toward the waiting hole;  
Sometimes I miss, but then begin anew,  
Still chasing after that same steady goal.

The sun beats down, my patience starts to fade,  
Yet still I swing with focus, heart, and might,  
For every loss makes victory feel made,  
And even rough rounds settle into light.

So long as golf remains a part of me,  
I'll walk these greens and learn through constancy.

## THE DIMINISHING OF NATURE

William Mirakian

For long, the earth has lost its majesty.  
Bastion of life holds back time's endless march.  
Rejuvenate our broken sanity.  
White trees wither atop man's hallowed arch.  
Their cities scar the slopes of gladden fields,  
Forgive the cancer earth has long endured.  
The hands of gods, these men forever wield.  
Through these, I long to forge an earthly cure.  
Preserve the shards of wild kingdoms of old,  
Their golden leaves would never fall again.  
Reclaim the ancient land from the threshold,  
And halt time's flow, postpone the age of men.  
    From men and time, the earth recedes to dust.  
    In men, the fate of life we have to trust.

# SOCCKER

Ty Brown

We run on grass and feel the sun.  
The game begins; the race is on.  
We pass the ball and run so fast.  
Each moment fades, but dreams will last.

Our teammates yell; we hear their voices.  
In every play, we make our choices.  
We fall, get up, and try once more.  
We push ourselves to get a score.

One good strike can change the game,  
bringing joy and pride, and a little fame.

With a racing heart and drained legs,  
we still give all we have from start to finish.

This sport we love—win or lose—  
it shapes our lives and what we choose.

## GOLDEN DAYS

Makenzie Kiefer

Summer days arrive with golden light,  
slowly spilling onto my skin as I sit on the porch step,  
smelling of fresh-cut grass and chlorine drifting from the  
pool down the street.  
Laughter and joy filling the air,  
as the days stretch long,  
because time forgets its job.

Then the sky shifts into a gentle pink,  
sunset lingering longer than it should,  
and the crickets begin humming through the evening heat.

As night settles in, the sky filling with stars above the dark  
rooftops,  
summer teaches me how to love something fully,  
knowing it can't stay.

## TO THE ONE I WAS

Zoe Chan

I write to you, the self I left behind.  
The past belief our worth was not enough.  
Harsh words you talked to yourself, so unkind.  
You bore those thoughts when times were far too rough.

You learned to stand alone with shaking knees,  
And hid your fears so others would not see.  
You chased approval, longing just to please;  
I judged you then for what you could not be.

Yet now I thank you for each careful step.  
Through nights you held the dark and carried on.  
The strength I own is strength you somehow kept  
From every tear you wiped, and fear outgrown.

So, take my hand; I promise you are safe.  
I live because you stayed, and I am here.

## THE WINDS

Jason Zheng

Dry winds flow by me  
I feel them tickle my ear  
I sing with the breeze

## THE BIRDS SING

Amanda Stumpe

The Birds sing as the sun rises.  
The Birds sing as the car drives by.  
The Birds sing as workers do their work.  
The Birds sing as children are born.  
The Birds sing as grief and anger  
consume the world.  
The Birds sing as tears wash down the river.  
The Birds sing as war breaks  
and cracks the earth.  
The Birds sing as death welcomes souls to its home.  
The Birds keep singing even when  
no one else can hear them.  
The Birds sing.

## BEAUTY NEVER PARTS

Carson Payne

I walked beside the Seine in golden light  
Where towers kissed the clouds above the street  
The summer breeze made moments feel so bright  
With café songs and laughter warm and sweet  
I saw the sun behind the Eiffel's frame  
It painted skies in shades of rose and gold  
Each quiet walk felt like a whispered flame  
A memory I knew I'd always hold  
I tasted dreams in bread and melting cheese  
While artists brushed the day in colored lines  
The city danced beneath the evening breeze  
As bells rang out in soft and golden chimes  
Though summer fades, that trip still warms my heart  
For Paris taught me beauty never parts