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The Molloy Student Literary Magazine Volume 10

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The Molloy Student Literary Magazine

Volume 10 (Fall 2013)

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Letter from the Editor

The Molloy Student Literary Magazine, sponsored by Molloy College's Office of Student Affairs, is devoted to publishing the best previously unpublished works of prose, poetry, drama, literary review, criticism, and other literary genres, that the Molloy student community has to offer. The journal welcomes submissions, for possible publication, from currently enrolled Molloy students at all levels.

All submitted work will undergo a review process initiated by the Managing Editor prior to a decision being made regarding publication of said work. Given sufficient content, *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine* is published twice annually in Spring and Fall.

Interested contributors from the currently enrolled Molloy student community should send work via e-mail attachment and brief cover letter (including a two-sentence biographical statement) to:
Dr. Damian Ward Hey, Managing Editor, *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine*: dhey@molloy.edu.

Enrolled students who are interested in becoming members of *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine* staff may e-mail letters of inquiry.

Excelsior!

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Due to reasons of space, not all accepted pieces may appear together in the same issue of the magazine. If, for example, a contributor submits multiple pieces and more than one piece is accepted, the Managing Editor reserves the right to choose which piece is included in the current issue. Accepted items that do not appear in the current issue may appear in an upcoming issue.

All decisions made by the Managing Editor regarding publication or non-publication of any particular piece or pieces are final.

The Molloy Student Literary Magazine

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Operation Black Night

Stefanie Melling

1st Place Prize Winner of Inspired Works Contest

Prelude

I woke up to silence. The sound of my own breathing echoing off the bare walls. Nothing surrounded me but darkness and within the darkness was something watching me. Material things were not necessary anymore. Technology took over, replaced everything that once was and made it into intangible things. The only things that could be touched were people and even with that, there was something different than before. Being social didn't have the same definition anymore. What was once a "hello, hi, how are you" is now a quick glance upward and then a quick dart of the eyes to the ground. Technology changed us in more ways than one. Resources became scarce, dwindling down to almost nothing. This caused civil war, panic, and destruction. What were once tall, shining buildings in the city are now graffitied, dull structures full of overgrown weeds. What was once a blossoming country full of people wanting the American Dream is now a barren land full of hopelessness. People can't leave their homes without the worry that war will enter their lives more than it already has. War has entered my life and consumed it. I fight for the people, trying to get back what we once had.

I am a soldier. I do not fight for our country anymore, I fight for the people in it. The people are voiceless and I am their advocate.

Chapter 1

Cameras shift, following me as I walk down the sidewalks. The sidewalks are full of cracks and full of shadows of the memories they once held. Rusted bikes sit on the lawns of crumbled down houses. The rusted chains of swings creak as they are pushed by the invisible ghosts of the children that once were. I move my gaze to the one swing that decides to stand still, as if saying, I will not be forced to do something that I do not want to do. I walk over to it and run my hand down the chain turning my hand brown from the rust. Memories are filled in my head. I am one of the last people that remember what life was like before T. T is what we call Technology Day. T is what we call the government. T is what we call the end of our society. T is what we call a monster. T ruined our lives. In the end, I am the only one who can bring T down.

Imagine the perfect scene. Green grass on every lawn. Children running up and down the sidewalks. Adults talking on the stoops, coffee or tea in their hands. Dogs sitting next to their families, tongues hanging out of their mouths.

Now imagine the opposite. Brown weeds filling plots of land. The wind howling, replacing the sounds of children laughing. Doors swinging open and close on the stoops of barren houses. Malnourished dogs limping down the street, ribs showing as they breathe.

Imagine that change happening in one day. That is T.

The irony of all this is that we humans made T happen. We thought we were smart enough to avoid it. Scientists calculated every risk and made another plan to avoid it; thinking that taking another path would escape the fate. Every path leads to the same end, though. It's like walking in a forest. You can't avoid the hungry bear at the end of the path no matter how hard you try.

The date was October 21st, 2037. The air was crisp, the smell of pine trees lingering. The wind nipped at people's necks, but still they chose to be outside.

The world was still in a struggle. Some people attached to the hip to technology, others using what they needed while the rest used absolutely nothing of it. Scientists were on the verge of a new design. A device so useful that even the people who refused to have technology in their lives would cave. This device was known as T-02. The first prototype failed. It just couldn't take all the things it needed to do. It was too much at once and just

exploded on the spot. But T-02, they promised, would be new and improved and would change lives forever. Little did we know that the change would lead to this. T-02 was basically a modified robot. It could transform into whatever the user thought of, could do anything the user wanted and could act just like a human. This human like quality is what made T-02 so desirable. It was as if it hypnotized the buyer into needing it instead of wanting it.

T-02 was presented at 14:00 at the conference in Washington, D.C. The robot shook President Rancliff's hand on live news and all of a sudden everything went blank. Silence filled the air and the only thing that anyone could focus on was the blackness on the walls where the live picture of T-02 and the president once was. Static filled the silence, making people cover their ears. Then an explosion followed. It could be heard throughout the whole country. The explosion was like no other. It sent out a sonic boom. It spread throughout the entire country, destroying everything in its path. The only place that actually suffered the immediate impact of the explosion was the White House. The explosion instantly killed the president and whomever was near it. The rest of the country faced different fates, but still the same end. Whoever was outside was either knocked down or the only thing left of them was their shadow, forever imprinted into the ground.

No one understood why the explosion did what it did. Destroying buildings, but not causing fires. Killing people, but only hurting some. Annihilation in just a small area, but damage in the whole country. Scientists say every reason in the book to explain what happened. That there had to be an explanation to what happened. But most knew it was because we weren't meant to have this technology in our hands. This was a warning, the final outcome would come soon.

People were outraged. Families were torn apart. Fathers became rebels. Mothers became spies. Children became bandits. Others chose to live as if T never happened; trying to move on and live as normal a life as they possibly could. Most became so afraid of the outside world that they resorted to living out their days as hermits, either dying of starvation or of thirst. If they didn't die, they went mad and only caused more things to be afraid of in this world.

What was left of the government decided to put a start to a new plan of action: Operation T. Cameras were installed in every home, on every street, in every crevice of every alley. The government wanted to keep a close eye on the civilians to make sure no one would ever try to do something to cause more damage than what was already done. The funny part was that this was all the government's fault. They funded the money for T-01 and T-02. They gave the scientists the go to start the project.

They gave the materials and the time for this project to be completed. The government thought that Operation T would help win the people back. The people were already lost. The United States of America was no longer "united."

Chapter 2

The world turned their backs on us. No matter how many times we were there for them, they decided to have no part in helping us. The countless times that we risked the lives of our men and women, the countless times that we gave them resources for their dying country, the countless times that we overspent money to get them back on their feet did not matter. The world was a selfish place. If we saw that earlier, maybe we would have something left. A little money, a little food, a little bit of resource just to get ourselves back up. A starting step back to learning how to walk on our own again. But, we were left with nothing. Hope left us. Pride left us. The American spirit left us. We were just hollow bodies, pale and dead inside. The actual living dead. It was as if every video game based on apocalypses came true. Every color gone and replaced with shades of grey. Every sound deafened and replaced with shrills of the wind. Every movement stopped and replaced with scattering objects. Everything changed, not one thing remained the same. Someone just couldn't look at the

object and look at it the same way as it once was. Everything had a new definition.

My knife was the only possession I had left. The clothes on my back were full of tears, dirt, and fades of color. My hair tickled at my eyelashes. It grew since the start of this all. What started as a buzz cut was now a shaggy hair style, dirty and full of grease. A good shower was hard to come by. A haircutter was even harder. So many times I wished that I could just cut it all off, get new clothes, see my family again. But then I was reminded that that was all in the past. No longer could I look into my mother's eyes and see the love she had for me. No longer could I shake my father's hand when I came back from school every day. No longer could I pick up my little sister and spin her around, and hear her giggles fill the air. They were all gone. Shadows on the ground. The outlines of those shadows lay forever on the sidewalk in front of 48 Starlight Avenue. The house where every adult wanted to be and every kid never wanted to leave. Twenty seven shadows lay outside that house. Twenty seven people that are forever lost. Twenty seven people that will never see this world again. But, twenty seven people who are in a better place now. Sometimes I wish I made that number twenty eight. Sometimes I wish I was home that day. But then I wouldn't be able to fight for the others. I wouldn't be able to fight with my new brothers and sisters. I wouldn't be a Trebel.

"Trey, why are you so late?"

I jumped into our hideout: a shed that sunk into the ground.

"Sorry man, saw a kid outside. Had to get him to shelter. I didn't want him out when our plan goes down."

The man nodded at me.

"Good thinking, kid."

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and nodded at the rest of the eighteen guys to come around. This man was like a father to me. He found me when I was lost and gave me a purpose to live on. He believed in a cause and helped me believe in it too.

"So we all remember the plan, right?"

We all nodded. The plan was called Operation Black Night. We wanted to cut off all the cameras in the country and make our way to the government's office. We wanted to take over and take back what we once had. We wanted to give this country a new start. No more technology and no more hiding. Rename the country and replace everything. Start over just like our ancestors once did. If they could do it, so could we. Their blood was in us.

We all departed to gather our weapons. The sound of reloading guns and sharpening knives filled the air.

"Hey, Austin?"

The man who wrapped his arm around me turned around.

"Hm?"

"Think we can do it?"

A smirk appeared on Austin's face.

"Oorah."

Not every battlefield is the same. Each is at a different location. Each filled with different scenery. Each has its own purpose behind it. Every plan, every action is thought out. Every move, every whisper has a plan behind it. The only thing that remains the same in every war is that the people fighting are family. And no one gets left behind.

This was a one sided battle. The only thing the government had to protect them was their view from the cameras. They had a look on the inside, without those cameras they would be blind. The main access to the

camera wiring was in a cable box right outside the office building. It was still old school, not updated with the times. Whatever technology was left was from 2013, a time where things were simpler.

Austin sat on top of the building adjacent to the cable box. He lined his scope up with it and pulled the trigger. The box exploded and inside the government's office building shouting could be heard. Austin gave a head nod to say that Operation Black Night was now a go.

Nineteen men headed towards the building. Nineteen men stormed inside it and killed whoever crossed their path. Seventeen men made it to the control room. Fifteen men made it past that into the room where the so-called leader was. Ten men made it past those guards. I was part of that ten.

Austin followed soon behind us.

"Good work, men."

He looked past him at the dead bodies. Bodies of the men he thought of as his family. And then there were the bodies of the men who tried to keep this world the same. He took off his hat to the bodies he thought of as family. He spat on the ones who didn't do anything but watch.

The leader of our land was a senator who survived the explosion. He was the only one out of all the government who had the guts to try to lead. All his hair was gone from the aftermath of the explosion. He wore a suit that was faded, but barely had any holes. He looked decent compared to the rest of the world. He lived his life safe and sound while the rest suffered. The leader called himself Richard Hengry.

Two of our men held Richard down. He struggled, but then I reloaded my gun. Once he heard that sound, he was still. He looked like he just saw a ghost. Austin walked up to him and thrust his gun point into Richard's chest.

"You sir, have a lot on your plate. You call yourself a leader? Watching behind closed doors on cameras is not leading. Living life like nothing ever happened is not leading. Doing nothing for your people is not leading. You were the one who brought upon this mess. Bringing T-02 into our lives. You were responsible for this all. Why let the people suffer when all they did was live?"

Richard stuttered.

"No, no it wasn't my idea! I swear! I was just doing my job!"

"And we are just doing ours."

And with that Austin pulled the trigger, firing into his chest. Richard went limp, the two men dropping him to the ground.

"Want to do the honor, kid?" Austin said, handing me the microphone to the PA system.

I grabbed the microphone from him and held it firm within my hand. I nodded and he flipped the switch so the whole land could hear what I had to say.

"Hello, my name is Trey Robbins. Today we start anew."

The Astraea

Joseph Ostapiuk

2nd Place Prize Winner in Inspired Works Contest

The clamor had ceased with the deafening roar of the engines. Millions of spectators silenced with the scream of the *Astraea's* turbines blazing and rumbling the Earth with a tremor that could rouse the dead. From inside the *Astraea's* hull, Mr. Midas looked down upon the observers with a silent disdain and a sense of relief of what he had to endure for these last few months. There were hundreds of beggars and pleaders, wanderers and invalids; each serf wishing to continue their insignificant lives on another planet.

The exhaust began with an intense and violent screech and the engines began to rumble. In awe, François Angelus and his family, along with the totality of the crowd, ceased their infernal cries as they watched the rocket lay an orange tint across the land. For a brief moment, the *Astraea* became their second sun. Soon, the silver hull was piercing the sky like a bullet as they watched in silent, dead-sky reveries for minutes until the last orange glow departed from their sight. Their crying lifted like sounds from hell as François took his wife and child by the hand, leading them through the maelstrom.

It had been some months ago, that Mr. Midas' team of scientific and political giants had begun their search for another planet. As soon as Earth's destruction

became known and imminent, construction began on the *Astraea*. For months, the *Astraea* had been under immense and elaborate assembly within the eyes of those doomed to withstand the fury of the months to come. Desperately, many acted out of violence and dismay towards the hull of the massive craft, frantically trying to doom those leaving to the same fate that awaited themselves, but without result. With every failed attempt, so too did hope diminish among those condemned to suffer. They all glanced at its metallic shell, which shone like the sun off of the once blue ocean, which has since been plagued opaque and dead. But all could have been avoided; the carelessness of a thousand years had run its course. The wrath of Earth's dying days had become impossible to overthrow as those leaving, and those who stayed, witnessed the effects of the pestilence they had given to their own home.

François and his family had returned to their bunker on the outskirts of town. It was a ragged, and in the face of true disaster; useless contraption. It served as a mental safety net for François and his family as he sat in his usual seat in the corner of the room; head in hands wondering what he could possibly do to alter this seemingly unalterable course. There was a stagnant smell within the room that reeked of death and decay stemming from the animals freshly killed by François outside of his home. His daughter began to cry as night fell outside. "Shh, shh, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay," he whispered to her ear. "It's okay, it's okay" the words

rumbled through his head as the mantra became one of pleading and hopelessness rather than reassurance. His eyes met those of his wife as he broke down into her lap. After some time, he had resumed his hopeful inducements, setting an example of endurance to his family as thoughts swirled through his head like a Midwestern tornado. Thoughts he had, but without avail, for there was nothing that could suspend, or change his course; the irrevocable force of nature was one no man could change. He wondered, day by day, how it would look. Soon the horror became melted into his subconscious as he rather wished for his wildest and most terrifying dreams to become reality. Each day melted into the next as the Persistence of Memory began to diminish as a collective whole. His attitude was met with those of many others, who wished that the petty pace that crept from day to day sped up its steps into the final dusty death.

The emptiness of space was one of triumph for the *Astraea* crew, a delightful time at last! “Fantastic,” eager and awe-struck members of the crew often spurted out of pure joy and exhilaration as they finally had shaken the remainder of the Earth’s gravitational pull. The blackness they had seen for years as children had now become reality; they now dwelt intermixed with the stars that so flooded their childhood dreams. The eyes of Mr. Midas remained fixated on the coordinates of their destination as the ship hurdled through space. He slowly raised his eyes out of one of the small windows of the

Astraea. From where he stood, a dying glimpse of Earth could be seen in the distance – a sight which he relished within his mind. “To escape,” he thought, “in the eyes of such ungodly terror.” His countenance gleamed with a sense of uncontainable pride as he gazed fiercely upon the planet with utter indignation and repulsion. Earth was but the size of a marble from his perception as he jokingly held out his hand to hold the shrinking image within his palm. The scene within the window began to take the form of gold as he raised his hand, and immediately, all he touched turned into gilded brilliance. The light from his fingers radiated feverously as his visage was all but blinded from the intense light that burned like a star scorching through space. “Such unequivocal power I do but possess” he thought; “at my mere fingertips!” The Earth shone like a massive sphere of fire as his eyes glowed with satisfaction. What Midas beheld seemed to last for an eternity though he had been standing there for only a moment as the vision ceased, and the dead of space was once again within his view. For the remainder of the night, Midas gloated of the success of his intentions and the fruitful prospects before them all, and wished them all “good night, and many wondrous dreams” as he retired to his quarters, and dreamt dreams of triumph.

In the dying hours of dusk, François left his family in his usual routine to find materials for burning in the night. He stepped out from his dusty shack and began to walk down what used to be Main Street. On

either side of him there were men, women, and children of all ages lying huddled and still on the disease ridden road, where each of his steps were met with the eyes of some seemingly decayed corpse; but not dead, surely not dead were those intermingled bodies slowly watching his doomed steps. He walked further down the way and observed the eyes, the ridges of the forehead, the frail bony hands and the dry cracked lips of those who surrounded him. “Is this but a mirror?” François thought to himself as he raised his hands to touch his own face. It had not rained in some time, and he had not seen his own reflection in what seemed like years.

He felt his deep, sunken eyes, which reminded him of those two black, and dead oceans that surrounded him, and ran his fingers across the ridges at his skull, and he seemed to be touching the bottom of the Earth’s dry valleys that had since been lifeless and uninhabitable. He had never stopped walking as he ran his tongue across his dry, cracked lips that felt like fragments of the desert ground, while he continued to walk upon the Earth that so felt like his withered frame. Never did he realize how thin he had become! He had entirely wrapped his fingers around his forearm as if he had never seen his own body before. Yet, in those dead, sunken eyes, it didn’t matter. He stepped into the dusk further and walked to the end of the street where he found the books and papers collected for burning. Little by little, the pile had diminished but he never knew why. “Why burn these books?” he thought. “Why burn them when the future is

known?” Somewhere in his mind, as he lifted the books into a small crate of his, François still held onto the hope that sheltered itself from the cruel outside world. No matter what was told to him, François still believed somewhere in his heart that “it was going to be okay.” “How foolish,” he thought day by day. But he was not alone. Those huddled on the street, dying, felt such small hope emanating in their cores, burning like the small fire François was looking to cultivate. So he kept coming to gather paper to burn, to keep his small fire burning within his soul that somehow allowed him exist in such obvious dismay and hopelessness. The same fire that has burned since the beginning of time.

Their day had finally come. The *Astraea* crew gleamed with anticipation as the announcement that they had been so desperately waiting for echoed throughout the metallic hull. “Please fasten your harnesses, we shall be entering the atmosphere in t-10 minutes.” They had now come within radar range of their target, which currently looked like a small green marble in this distance. From his small window, Mr. Midas grinned with an inexhaustible pride that seemed to spread like contagion throughout all of the passengers. Its small image slowly came into view from the same window in which Earth slowly died away from some time ago. What seemed to be hours were only mere minutes as they approached the planet which looked not so dissimilar to that of Earth. Its image increased as the radar beeped more intensely with every sweep of the

sensor that circled the small digital screen. Mr. Midas seemed to grow prouder at every intensified beep as suddenly, the cadence had been broken by some unknown, discordant sound. Mr. Midas' eyes grew furious and distorted as he turned his glance to the small screen as he observed with an utter sense of intense curiosity, a much smaller dot upon the radar. He drew his eyes closer and closer, as to assure himself of what he was gazing upon.

A bewildered and unorganized chatter began to commence as a look of perplexed anxiety overcame the entirety of the crew. Mr. Midas demanded answers aggressively and assertively, but the crew had no response, until, within his small window, Mr. Midas beheld a small metallic object in the distance. He grew silent as he could not believe what his eyes were so clearly seeing. As it grew closer, Mr. Midas grew intensely troubled and concerned. "What's this?" he thought immediately, as star-struck members of the *Astraea's* crew all fixated their eyes on the same object which has so grabbed their captain's attention. "A satellite," Mr. Midas spoke between deep and troubled breaths.

At first, he knew not what to do as its image became more discernable from the blackness that surrounded it, but, eventually directed his bewildered countenance to that of the *Astraea's* pilot, and said, in a hushed, and dark tone; "cease the engines; no one is to move." With slight hesitation, the *Astraea's* engines

ceased as it stopped before what seemed to be an artificial satellite. It was adorned with small rectangular panels that stretched across its two rectangular wings, and a predominant, metallic section which looked to the casual observer to be that of a command center. “But how?” Midas thought intensely as he headed towards the shuttle bay alone and unattended.

Soon, one of the *Astraea*'s small ports opened and Mr. Midas departed from the *Astraea* in a small craft. His vessel intercepted the satellite and Mr. Midas boarded the ominous, foreign object. Its halls dimensions and breadth were suitable for that of any human to pass through. Symbols resembling ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics spanned the halls metallic surface. He stepped further down the dim hall as he turned closer to the large centerpiece of the vessel. “Where did this come from?” he thought as his heart fell like an anchor in his chest. Shock and wonder overcame his senses as his mind looked for answers. “Who created this, why is this here?”

A thousand questions without answers ravaged his mind inexorably with each confused and uncertain step. He turned down the final section of the tunnel and looked upon a vast array of computers and technology which seemed to be taken straight from the *Astraea* itself. The advanced, yet long since abandoned and *ancient* technology spanned around him in every direction. As he approached its controls, a center, massive console drew his attention. He knew not why he

was drawn to its controls, but as he placed his hands upon its surface, suddenly the entire ship lit up with an intensity that he had never seen before. His eyes grew wide and overwhelmed, as before him, massive screens turned on at his mere touch. Fixated upon the screen were coordinates which seemed vaguely familiar and horrifying. Along with these coordinates, small images of a planet orbiting a yellow sun were centered upon the screen. The horror filled his core as his heart raced within his chest. “Can this be?” he asked himself. With every glance seemed to behold a scene which he had seen before.

His mind struggled desperately to relinquish such a thought, but its reality, its agonizing reality had already crept into every inhabitable crevice within his thoughts. Mr. Midas drew back from where he stood in shock as he frantically moved his eyes from the room around him to the illuminated screen as he let out a groan of wonder and terror. “How could it be?” He spoke aloud in a tone of anguish and despair. The unfathomable realization crept into his mind immediately as the word materialized in his head. The coordinates, the all-too-human technology had all been pointed into a single destination—Earth. As he regained himself, Mr. Midas marched towards the exit of the satellite, unwilling to search any further into its details as he returned to his craft. When he entered back into the *Astraea*, the glances of every individual turned their bewildered gazes upon him, in search of an answer. Without hesitation, or a mere

tremor in his voice, Mr. Midas spoke aloud: “It is nothing.” Mr. Midas stepped up to the command bridge as he spoke assertively to the piloting crew, “Destroy it.” His eyes seemed to breathe fire as the order was commenced. As it was destroyed, so too did the memory begin to decay in the mind of Mr. Midas.

Their day had finally come. Francois sat departed, crouched and still against the wall of his home. He stared blankly and dimly at the wall across from where he sat, which like his stale and blank mind, offered no words or thoughts; for nothing was to be said. His eyes, half-vacantly, seemed to pass right through the wall and into the world that surrounded him, where not a voice could be heard. It was a stagnant and soundless day, where the streets were silenced and lay settled. Every soul laid motionless – like those frozen in Pompeii under Vesuvius. The dim and dusty streets were quieted with the absence of a single wanderer. Sound and fury had relinquished like a great beast that had drawn and held its final breath. The world seemed to stop, and for a moment, peace reigned. What wonder it beheld, for after the chaos of millennia all had been as it should, in eternal serenity. For in that long slumber which would soon overtake them, all knew, for a brief moment, how insignificant their every word and action truly was.

Not a soul struggled or pleaded as the Wall of Darkness began to be seen in the distance. There was no moan among those wishing to retain what life they had left, and no crying from those who silently wished it had

all turned out differently. There was a solemn surrender, as the sun seemed to be blotted out by a thick and black pitch from hell. The Darkness came over like a deep, black veil that smothered all within its arms. The wall towered high above the Earth and then descended, and so came eternal sleep. The clamor had ceased.

Following the destruction of the satellite, the *Astraea* and its crew proceeded on their course to conclude their journey to the New World. They began their life anew, at first relying on the resources and technology of the *Astraea*, but soon began to develop and utilize primitive tools to cultivate the land as their ancestors had done millennia before them. The new inhabitants began to grow in population as civilization slowly redeveloped and reconvened, all the while under the scrutinizing and weary eye of Mr. Midas. The source of Mr. Midas' need for perfection was not wholly understood by his contemporaries, and to an extent, not even understood by Mr. Midas himself. For deep within his ever-suppressed conscience, the repressed image beheld within the artificial satellite slowly crept into his ailing mind, as a constant reminder of his repressed fear. For he knew, under the ground they cultivated and under the ground in which he tread wearily, the remnants of that ailment that plagued his mind lay buried far below. "To escape...in the sight of such ungodly terror. Gilded tombs do worms enfold! The Prodigal Son returns." And so humanity blossomed once more, with winter close behind.

For once, then something ...

Mental Illness in the Time of OASIS

Kaitlin Duignan

3rd Place Prize Winner in Inspired Works Contest

Ernest Cline, in his novel *Ready Player One*, depicts a future world that is deteriorating rapidly. War, poverty, and overpopulation are only just a few of the problems this society is facing. In a setting such as this, a rise in mental illness would be expected. Societal stressors, as well as other factors like genetic predisposition, aid in the development of a variety of mental illnesses. There is an escape from the deterioration and stress, which comes in the form of a video game called OASIS. However, what once was a game became a way of life for the characters. The refuge of OASIS may only be adding to the increase in mental illness. Cline's future world, during this time of OASIS, is faced with the challenge of the increasing prevalence of mental illness. *Ready Player One* shows how a world in chaos correlates to a rise in mental disorders, which is made evident by the characters in the novel, specifically Wade and James Halliday.

The world in 2044, as depicted in Cline's novel, is in a period of decline and recession, which inversely relates to a rise in mental illness. History has shown time after time that certain world events correlate with an increased prevalence of mental illness. War, poverty, and unemployment give rise to suicides, depression, and

drug abuse. These events cause feelings of fear, worthlessness, and hopelessness that may be at the heart of diseases like depression and addiction (Kleinman and Patal 609). Another factor that plays a role in increased rate of mental illness is that with lack of economic stability there are fewer available resources to treat mental diseases. Without these resources the plague of these diseases continues to spread and torment individuals. “The direct and indirect costs of mental ill-health worsen the economic condition, setting up a vicious cycle of poverty and mental disorder” (Kleinman and Patel 609).

Another aspect to consider is the influence OASIS will have on diseases like attention deficit disorder, or ADD. OASIS is a video game providing a virtual reality with constant stimulation and action. No definitive link has yet to be made of video games causing ADD, but it has been shown to make the symptoms of ADD worse. “Viewing television and playing video games each are associated with increased subsequent attention problems in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood” (Anderson et al. 214).

The character Wade is part of a generation that knows no way of life without OASIS, and like most of that generation Wade is at risk for suffering from mental illness. School, work, and play are taking place in a virtual reality for these individuals. It has come to the point that a person needs to use OASIS to be successful. Better schools, better jobs, and social gatherings are

taking place in this alternative life. Wade describes this by saying, “It had been an integral part of our lives for as far back as we could remember. We’d been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our happy refuge” (34). Having a happy refuge during a time of chaos may seem beneficial to having mental stability, however, the use of this refuge has gone to the extreme. Like most things, OASIS can be good if used in moderation.

In reality Wade is an orphaned, socially isolated, and anxious teenage boy. This young man is dealing with poverty, mal-nutrition, lack of physical activity, neglect, and violence, which are all enormous stressors on a person's mind. He uses OASIS to mask these stressors. His avatar, Parzival, doesn't have to deal with these stressors or even acknowledge they exist. Unfortunately, Wade cannot be Parzival forever. Once he takes off his visor and gloves he is back to his sad reality, which he is ill prepared for. Without skills and support, Wade will crash eventually. This is evident by looking at his anxiety levels throughout the novel. As Parzival, he never seems to be struck with the physical and mental symptoms associated with anxiety that he faces as Wade. The moments in the book where Wade is not inside the OASIS there is the theme of him being anxious and depressed. At one point when Wade is outside of the OASIS it is described, “I suddenly felt ill, and I was also having a difficult time breathing. I realized I must be having some sort of panic attack” (Cline 237). Wade's generation is ill prepared to handle

life stressor, which unfortunately is high in their world. OASIS is being used as an unsustainable coping mechanism. Like coke for an addict, alcohol for an alcoholic, or even purging for a bulimic these coping mechanisms will ultimately cause harm.

Poverty and world suffering are not the only factors to play into the rise of mental illness during the time of OASIS, as made evident by the character, James Halliday. Halliday is perhaps the wealthiest character in Cline's book, but throughout the novel there are details that have readers questioning his mental stability. There is no doubt that Halliday is an incredibly intelligent man; however, intelligence and genius do not reflex an individual's mental health. Throughout history there are example of great minds suffering from suspected mental illnesses, including Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Sir Isaac Newton, and Vincent van Gogh (McGrath 1). When referencing Halliday at one point it is said, "he'd gone completely insane" (Cline 2). Insanity and mental illness are often confused. Insanity implies a break with reality or psychosis, which is only one aspect of a certain few mental diseases (Howes 3). There is no significant evidence to support that Halliday was suffering from insanity, however there is evidence that he was suffering from mental illness. When Halliday is first introduced it is learned that he is the creator of OASIS, extremely wealthy, and he died after fifteen years in self-imposed isolation. Social isolation, although not diagnosis criteria by itself for any one specific mental illness, is a

significant part of diseases including depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and schizophrenia.

Other clues later on in the novel help support a more definitive diagnosis for Halliday's mental illness. The creation of his Easter egg hunt took a great deal of time, thought, and energy, as well as a preoccupation with his death. The whole game is an effort to establish an heir to his fortune and a life legacy, both aspects dependent upon his death. It is normal for individuals to write wills, but it takes an intense preoccupation with one's death to create such an intricate contest. Preoccupation with death is often seen in depression. Halliday also had a genetic predisposition to mental illness. Both of his parents suffered from diseases of the mind. Describing a picture of Halliday's family it is said, "the stoic man in the brown leisure suit was an abusive alcoholic, that the smiling woman in the floral pantsuit was bipolar," (103). Alcoholism and bipolar are both diseases that tend to run in families, and Halliday had a mother and father with these diseases. Although, there is no evidence that Halliday had problems with alcohol, there is evidence that he had manic behaviors. He is said to have periods where he was "hyperkinetic," "speaking so rapidly that his words were often unintelligible," and "often going without food, sleep, or human contact for days or even weeks." (Cline 55). With these manic episodes and suspected depression it appears James Halliday was suffering from bipolar disorder.

Mental illness is a trend throughout Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*. Cline creates a future riddled with war, poverty, unemployment, and overpopulation, which is a breeding ground for mental illness. Even the main characters like Halliday and Wade are shown to have possible mental illnesses. OASIS was created to be the perfect escape from the real world, but there is no escaping one's mind whether it be healthy or diseased.

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Victoria's Story

Vicky

This is my story...

It all seems like a blur now, a blip on the radar of my life. You never think it could happen to you, and if it did happen you would tell yourself you'd never stay. I remember thinking that before I met Jim. Once when friends told me about their unhealthy relationships, I remember giving them advice: "Just leave! You'll find better, you deserve better." But what did I know? That advice always seemed to fall on deaf ears. Some of those friends did leave their significant others; some months or years later they would come back and apologize for not listening. Never in my life did I think that I would be one of them.

I had started dating him my freshman year of college, and everything was wonderful. I felt like I had found someone who really loved me, regardless of my mother's pleas to not move in with him so soon; because, after all, I felt like I knew better. Of course, my mother had seen warning signs. "He seems a little controlling," she'd say (it echoes in my head now) or "he doesn't seem to like any of your friends." But I had dismissed those worries because I was in love and because I felt like my mother was being over-protective and over-analytical. These would be some of the many excuses that would build up over the next three years.

It had all started with the little things: jealousy over a new friend I had met in school, wanting to keep me in the apartment because we didn't "spend enough time together," etc. I remember the feeling of being trapped, even then, but never seeing a way out. Early on, I came up with every excuse in the book for him; it was my fault he felt jealous because I had a lot of guy friends, or he always says sorry after he yells or throws something, so it's really just an accident; more of an "in the heat of the moment" kind of thing. My friends were skeptical, and I remember hiding things from them just to avoid the "we really think you should leave" confrontation again and again. After all, what did they know? I told them about all the bad things but never the good. They didn't know how much Jim really did care about me. He just got angry sometimes, that's all. Who were they to judge?

Soon, I began feeling like I lived a double life. In order to see any of my best friends, I'd have to lie to Jim about being at school and doing homework, but the backlash that came back from him when he found out I had lied was terrifying, so it didn't happen often. He was in complete control of my life.

One time, I had went to Barnes and Noble with my best friends Gina and Lisa to read magazines. I told Jim I had been at school when I received a call from him saying he saw me walking down the street. I left them abruptly without saying a word and ran back to my apartment. When I arrived he had locked me out of our

apartment and I sat in the hallway for what seemed like an eternity feeling embarrassed and ashamed. When he finally opened the door, he dragged me in by my hair and sat me at the table. I apologized and apologized but he just continued to yell at me. Eventually, he finished his argument by spitting in my face and retreating to another corner of the small studio apartment. I was trapped in with him. A knock on the door came, and he ordered me to the door to answer it. In tears, I opened it and there were my two friends from Barnes and Noble looking frightened. “You didn’t answer any of our calls, we were worried, and we waited outside for 30 minutes for someone to buzz us in to check on you.” Jim stood beside me. “She’s fine,” he said and slammed the door.

There were numerous incidents similar to this: he’d get home first after a fight and lock me out; he wouldn’t let me go home to my family for the holidays because he didn’t like being left alone for more than two days; he wouldn’t let my sister stay when she came to visit; he wouldn’t let me answer my phone; I missed school days because he thought I had lied about my schedule; I lost friends because he wouldn’t let me contact them, etc. I lived in constant fear, my body and mind in constant fight or flight mode, but with no option of flight around.

Then came the night that really broke my mother’s patience. After three years of my covering for him and my living life afraid, he had seen a picture of me smoking a cigarette. He had hacked into one of my

friend's photo account. I was asleep on the couch when he saw the picture; I was woken up by the tugging and pulling of my hair and being thrown onto the floor. While I knew I shouldn't have smoked, (it has been a year and a half since I last smoked, just as an aside) he wanted to make a point of getting his opinion across. He picked up my purse and found a hidden pack of cigarettes he then opened and threw at me while I was on the floor while he screamed at me. While holding the back of my head, he shoved a handful of cigarettes into my mouth making me chew them while holding my mouth shut so I couldn't spit them out or let the vomit out. He then proceeded to put my head through our hallway wall. I was crying hysterically, dizzy and bleeding, when he brought me to the bathroom to flush my head in the toilet until I was unconscious. I woke up to him smacking my face and spitting on me, "CALL YOUR MOTHER AND TELL HER WHAT A TERRIBLE PERSON YOU ARE" he screamed.

"Mom," hysterically crying and barely being able to get any words out, "I started smoking cigarettes and I'm really sorry" My mother in the truest sense of herself "That's okay hunny -- I'm not mad. What's wrong? what is he doing? Are you okay?" "I am, and I love you" and I hung up the phone; he ordered me not pick up her persistent calls. Later, I woke up when he was sleeping and found my phone where he had hidden it, and I secretly texted my mom saying sorry and that I was okay.

I felt like a shadow of a person; I felt I had no identity without Jim. I had built my life around him and while it wasn't anything great it was all I had (so I thought). It was embedded in my brain from him – I couldn't leave; I wouldn't find anyone who loved me the way he did. I was embarrassed by what I thought was weakness, and I was ashamed of what I had become. Years before, my mother had left our father for similar reasons, and I felt I wasn't strong like she. I was depressed and felt trapped. I was lost; what could I do? I had alienated myself from people who loved me. I didn't think I had anywhere to go. I had become complacent with staying because I couldn't imagine leaving. After everything, I still felt like I loved Jim; he was just troubled, and I seemed to be there at all the wrong times.

Then one random day (that would forever change my life) I was getting coffee before going to the studio at school, and I received a call. My mother and aunt had driven all the way from New York to Philadelphia. Jim was at work, and they were there to move me out. I cried, pleading, "he'll find me" and "I love him." My mother and my aunt had enlisted worried friends who came without delay to my aid and moved all of my belongings in two hours into our small car. My mom decided that I was moving to ANYWHERE away so I wouldn't be put through this anymore.

My mother and aunt left later that day, but they made sure to cover all of our bases. We had gotten my phone number changed (which I was unaware of at the

time, but this can be done in cases like by most phone carriers for free) and I was off the lease at the apartment thanks to my mother's ability to persuade. I was free at last and suddenly I was even more distraught. I thought I would've felt better – I was my own person again. But I was so beaten down I wasn't sure how I would go on without him; I was preoccupied, confused, and once again lost. After all mom's hard work, I just wanted to retreat back to him, and a few weeks later I did. I kept this secret from my mother as I spent the next couple weeks with him before he moved away. Without him moving and without my mother's work, I'm almost 100% sure I would still be in an unhealthy relationship.

This is not a story of how I heroically came out of this standing on my own, or how I saw some light at the end of the tunnel and knew I'd make it out of all of this a better person. This is a story of how I defaulted more than once, couldn't believe in myself and needed the help of people who loved me. While some people can help themselves in these situations, a lot of us cannot and you have to know that that is okay and doesn't make you weak. The people who abuse us are manipulative and brainwashing and will make you feel helpless. It's okay to ask for help, and to accept a way out. Without the people who loved me and never gave up on me there was no way out of that jail cell I called an apartment with the horrible man that I continued to love, in spite of myself. Sometimes you have to depend on others to be strong for you, and there is always someone out there who will do

that for you. There is always someone who cares about you. You are never alone even when you feel that you are.

Unfortunately, a few years after I left Jim, my mother unexpectedly passed away. I think about all the time I could've had with her if it wasn't for him, and how I am mad at myself for not asking for help sooner and trusting the opinions of others around me that I would be okay. Time is all you have with the people you love, and it should never be wasted on people like Jim.

I am now in my senior year of nursing at Molloy, with great grades and great friends. I live with the aunt who came to my rescue almost five years ago and saved me with my mother from that life. I have a wonderful boyfriend, who cares more for me than I could have ever imagined and has all the patience in the world for someone who needs to gain more patience for herself. Years ago I never thought I would be where I am today. However, I am -- and it feels amazing.

You can always leave whenever you want, and there are always people who will help you. Don't ever forget that and don't ever feel hopeless.

Bridges Burnt
Sarah Bipath

Life is what you make of it
Everything is a give and take
You can't burn bridges you keep trying to cross
Quit dwelling on the loss
Stop!
Shots constantly fired
Don't reciprocate
Eliminate the hate, don't reiterate
Karma saves us all
Why do you still have that wall?
A figment of imagination
Protects us from nothing
Only does it isolate us from reality
Might as well be blind if we don't want to see
Lying to ourselves
Where is the honesty?
The world isn't a perfect place to be
Accept
The great and the evil
Pacifism causes no upheaval
Weakness is defined by perception
Your views might be seen as a misconception
Live
You can't burn bridges you keep trying to cross
Your sanity will be your loss

Summer Sang Then
Kenneth Bornholdt

Summer sang then, those many years ago
Croaking frogs and insects buzzing
Birds chirping, dogs barking
Sunlight and blue skies wheeling above us
Fields of wildflowers waving in the breeze
The smell of honeysuckle and mountain laurel
Mixed with the smell of muddy stream banks and wet
earth
We lived our youth in those woods and meadows
A childhood lived so long ago
Then, as the days laughter faded
And night began to fall, dancing shadows in the woods
We'd head home. To dinner waiting and loving embrace
Now, as my white hair falls like dead autumn leaves
I remember fondly, how...
Summer sang then

Haiku

John Bruno

Pumpkins on the ground
The November chill bites down
Falling leaves surround

Cracked Screen

Shenequa Bucknor

It was love at first sight
And you couldn't keep your hands off of me.
It was new and smooth
And our relationship was more than hand holding.

Everywhere you went, I was by your side.
Whatever you needed, I could somehow provide.
Attached at the hip some have said
It was flashing light, tweets, Facebook, apps galore.

Until I slipped from your fingers.

Damaged, my light dimmed,
Scarred, by your careless action,
Broken, because you never protected me,
And dented your finances because my cuts weren't
covered by insurance.

Am I not enough?
The surface can always be replaced
A fast and an easy fix
All I need was a case.
But I knew things were more complicated when
deductibles came into the mix.

You even checked for an upgrade.
So I'm guessing loyalty wasn't a part of the contract.
Refurbished, just know I will move on.

To Have Loved and Lost

Kristin Cardino

So is this how it ends?
Because I still remember this past July,
And how your eyes matched the daytime sky.
What about yesterday?
Or better yet a year ago to the day.
The feeling still lingers,
never-ending throughout my fingers.
What about the peak of September?
God, I'll always remember,
the boat trip we took,
and the time you taught me how to cook.
The truth of December,
and the never-ending cold.
That's something I'll never be able to forget.
And then we had that disaster in May.
Afterwards we were still somewhat okay.
And in the middle of June,
you gave me that I'm sorry balloon.
I thought we were better.
But then came that shocking July afternoon,
our last goodbye that came to soon.
But a few days later, you came back.
And it was the one time I promised myself,
to never forget.
But once August was over you disappeared,
just how summer does when fall is near.

Where the demons run

Ashley Geyer

What if I were to tell you,
Who you wanted me to be
Was killing me?
Tell me is my face cracking
Will you see what I hide?
Under the inside?
Can you see where the demons run
up my bones?
Until they settle home,
In the corners of my mind?
Or would you say I still need to be reigned?
Have a chance at being tamed.
“You’ll see my child;
the heart of a corpse is never too wild”

Untitled

Ugoma Konkwo

Some say love is not a sprint,
But it is a marathon.
Of course my response would be
I never had the stamina anyway.

And there are those who feel
The same rule applies to life.
And unfortunately for some,
They too do not have the stamina.

Memories

Ryan Roberts

Memories, what have you done to me?
Brought a smirk of new on my face,
yet tears from what seem like decades ago?
Damned memories, like an etch a sketch
that won't erase in the back of your skull.
They're like marriage; for better or for worse.
"Like a broken record" is the saying
because they sure do go back and forth through your
mind.

The thing about a memory
is that you never forget it.
You can only repress them, and even then they're still
there.

Go bash your skull open if you want amnesia
'Cause that's the only cure for memories.

It's sad to hear a mother remember her 1st born son
and smile and the next second start to lose it all once she
remembers when he died. Memorial whispers like
flames that either warm you or burn your entire world to
ashes.

The E to the 6

Marilena Rocco

Manhattan - city of lights, of beauty, of art, of everything.

I feel disconnected.

I cannot hear the people's footsteps.

I cannot hear their chatter - the rustle and bustle.

My earphones keep me at bay, keep me disconnected.

I thought I would like the ear phones, yet here I am.

Humans surrounding me and I'm disconnected.

Yet the music rejuvenates me: Is this what it means to be a New Yorker?

Everyone around me looks ahead, ear phones in; perhaps they want to be disconnected.

My mind begins to think of their life story and where they are going, where they have been.

I stop my music and take out my earphones.

It is wrong to want to smile on the Subway?

As I walk to the 6, I can't help but want to escape,

I can't help but want to run to the fresh air and breathe in Manhattan.

It is the only place where you can smell flowers and then poop in two swift sniffs.

Yet, I love it.

I want to embrace the beauty of Manhattan, but I'm underground.

Perhaps this is Manhattan, this underground sub culture-

Where humans interact with glances and distant, vacant smiles.

No, Manhattan is more than that - we are more than that.

As I walk up the Subway steps, a cool breeze rushes through me.

It's dark and the clouds look like they're about to break open.

I'm refreshed, renewed.

These city streets.

It is still dark, so early the sun hasn't said hello.

Feels like I'm out for a night of adventure.

I Embrace it.

Feel the wind, feel the power, and move.

Two Years Later

Roger Smith

As New York and the Jersey shore
rebound from the aquatic disaster
of one year ago,
mind for focusing on plasma,
that surrounded node
and abnormally grew and decimated
land and structural portions
of a man, two years ago.
I can't sit with thoughts of those
fortunate enough to afford ocean front view
and beaches as backyard,
that were temporary displaced and had
to replace car and memories,
I was at the one year point of remembering radiation,
bald, dark, scathed skin,
the itching irritation
of temporary displaced hair,
to replace libido and drown memories.
As Bob Villa
lays new foundation and insurance checks flow in,
my old infrastructure pools and stagnates the rebuilding
process.
Every ounce of rain is not a storm,
and every storm is not Sandy,
however, every cough, every pain, every lump,
is the break of remission, and mind

can't help but realize
material things don't metastasize.
So as you choose to produce larger cells, pardon my lack
of ovation,
clasped hands can't clap.
The prayers you reiterate for the calm outside,
echo my insides, what for some is
merely one year later.

Our Elevator

Lauren Spotkov

An elevator is much like our lives.
Different stages, times, and levels.
A new level,
Is a new time.
A new year,
Is a new beginning.
A new height can change everything

Weapon

Alexa Sussman

Black, everlasting.
Stagnant in its clear casing
Waiting to scorch a page:
Nouns, names, prepositions, prose,
Love and loss of magnitude unknown.
Ammunition tucked inside
My weapon of choice.
Catharsis through my fingertips.
 My innermost now exposed,
 My dark night's dawn,
 My company in solitude,
My weapon of choice.
My pen.

Farewell

Caitlin Breen

Lisa stood in the kitchen, over the pile of dishes on the counter, staring out at the desperate storm making its way towards the small farm town of Ashland, Kansas. She used to think she would leave this town without taking a glance back; it was the town of her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and family continued all the way back to the 1840's when everyone started migrating west. Lisa's ancestors' sights set on Oregon, but settled for the flat, fertile Kansas. And ever since then her family had sprouted up like the wheat they grew, planting more and more roots in that forgotten sea of grass. Including now her baby. A swinging Welcome sign groaned with the fervor of the wind, while the fields of wheat bowed and prayed to an unseen god. The white linens stood in stark contrast against the tumultuous sky, bruised with severe grays and troublesome blues.

Although Lisa was worried about the baby - every sneeze and cough led them to Doctor Kent's waiting room - this storm, despite the newsman's crackled warning, did not agitate her so much. She felt the storm awakened a sort of restlessness within her. Lisa wanted nothing more than to watch the destruction of the storm—let Mother Nature exact her price for the land, the wheat, the people she gave life to. But the baby cried out as the windowpanes rattled in protest. Lisa chewed

her lip as she looked over the white crib, looking at the infant, small, and vulnerable.

The howling of the wind undermined the cries of the baby, yet Lisa felt sure of herself more in a tornado than in the nursery. The baby - face red and tear streaked - expected something from Lisa. Lisa felt guilty never knowing what the baby needed; she never seemed to grasp the grace of motherhood. Instead, she flustered through the motions until her mother or a female relative quieted the infant with some soothing words, a warm bottle, and a gentle sway. *"It takes a while to get the hang of it," "It gets easier,"* all her friends told her. Six months later, it hadn't. Her mother told her, after Lisa rushed the baby to the ER for a cough, *"No mother knows what they are doing in the beginning. I didn't know what I was doing when I first had you, but I learned along the way. You don't need a handbook to be a mother; it's natural."* Something didn't feel right, though. Lisa wondered what was wrong with her.

Reaching down, she went to pick up the baby and then decided better of it. She was close to getting one of her "moments" as her mother referred to it. It was as though the world were shrinking into that tiny yellow painted nursery. She walked with urgency to the back screen door and pressed against the wiring, like the embrace of lover gone too long. Her eyes closed. Her dark lashes clung to her senses, but they seemed to slip along the soft curve of her face and plummet from her

chin violently, leaving a water paint streak of mascara behind.

The tornado recklessly twisted to a wild symphony off in the distance. And in that spiral, the whole power of the sky came funneling down, ripping and tearing at the land without reason. The clean linens on the line, after being tormented from strong winds, were set free, flying far away from those wheat fields. Lisa felt nothing...but envy. Watching the chaos ensue, she thought of John. He never got to see the baby or say goodbye to Lisa. He was gone, but Lisa was haunted by him every time she looked at the baby. *“John got out of this place,”* she had more than once or twice thought, *“and look where I am: stuck in nowhere Kansas with a baby.”*

Usually the thoughts that followed made her feel guilty, and she would light up a cigarette in the darkness of her room to ease the nerves. A mother wouldn't think such things, but Lisa did when she was left alone at night. John promised to take her away from this place after the baby was born. Lisa dreamed of moving west...to the coast. She would see the ocean for the first time. The radio interrupted her thoughts insisting that all residents of Ashland report to their cellars. Lisa knew the drill; she had been born in Ashland, after all, and this wasn't her first tornado. She grabbed the diaper bag filled it with the baby's bottle, clothes, and she scribbled on a note and stuffed that in as well. For the first time she walked into that nursery with a sense of purpose.

Lisa leaned over the crib and lifted the crying baby out. Those eyes. Nothing about the baby looked like her, she mused, as she walked through the kitchen and out onto the porch. The rage and the fury of the storm hung heavy in the air, as the winds tore at the two.

As the tornado drew near, the sky blackened and Lisa's heart lightened. She went to open one of the cellar doors, but the wind threw it open like an overeager suitor. Lisa clambered down with the baby and settled the baby in a bed of blankets. The baby had stopped crying as if knowing what she was about to do. Lisa kissed the baby's forehead and inhaled the warm, soft smell of Johnson's soap. She unlaced her shoes and climbed out of the cellar.

The wind lashed at her, but Lisa didn't mind. She continued to walk straight towards the wheat fields, leaving that little house behind. Leaving the little baby behind. The wheat was bending towards one another as if to whisper some secret, their tops brushing against one another. Lisa stood barefooted in the wheat with her old, worn floral dress flying in the wind. With her eyes closed, she could hear the whisper of the wheat. She opened her eyes, and Lisa looked up. She was encircled by the tornado, under the watchful, protective eye. Lisa felt at peace – finally, she would be leaving the little town of Ashland.

After the tornado had passed, Lisa's mother rushed in distress among the debris to her daughter's house. Not much remained except the porch. She ran

across to the cellar and opened the doors; there was her grandson, Johnny, all alone except for the diaper bag beside him. She clutched him as she clutched onto hope that Lisa could be safe somewhere else. That delusion was shattered when Lisa's mother found a crumbled note in the diaper bag with only the word,

“Farewell.”

The Lady in the Cab

Crystal Cruz

I never stop to think about other people when I'm hailing a cab; it's an every man for himself sort of thing. So on this particular day when the wind shifted and I knew I was in for some rain, I extended my arm and waved my hand in the hopes of catching any one of the bright yellow taxis that barreled down the street in my direction, but none ever stopped. Afraid I'd get stuck in a downpour, I began to walk in the direction I was headed, all the while signaling to yellow flashes as they zoomed past me.

Just then, I noticed a cab turning down a side street and I could see that it had no passenger so I doubled my pace hoping nobody would beat me to it and as I rounded the corner I saw her. Not old but definitely past her prime, she had a mismatched suit and hat and dark blonde hair that stopped just at her shoulders, hanging in bouncy curls and resting just at the collar of her jacket. Her hands were noticeably full, the left lifted slightly so the weight of her package rested on her wrist as she grabbed the door of the cab to steady herself and leaned in to say something. Hoping that she wasn't soliciting a ride but perhaps just asking the driver for directions, I continued walking toward the car and, as I neared, she opened the door.

I was about to walk away and try my luck with another taxi when I noticed that the cardboard box in her

right hand slipped from her grip. As she turned to reach for it, I could see how pink and swollen her nose was and how her eyes were slightly puffy. I thought she might just have allergies but something made me think there was more to it.

For whatever reason compassion overtook me, and I bent quickly to grasp the box before it could soak up much of the muddy water that filled the small pothole near the rear left tire of the cab. She thanked me as I went to hand it to her and said something in a weak voice that I couldn't quite make out because at that very moment thunder rumbled overhead and the first in a series of fat raindrops hit the back of my neck, the ground at my feet and the box between our hands. Before I knew it, the skies had opened and she'd offered to share the cab.

It turned out that our destinations were within blocks of each other but, as it usually does, the abrupt change in weather resulted in that loathsome form of temporary amnesia that specifically makes people forget how to drive. In short, there was an accident, and we were stuck behind it so what should have been a relatively short ride was extended.

When you're stuck in a car with a stranger and they're trying to hide the fact that they're crying, you can do one of two things: you can either look away and pretend not to notice their occasional snuffle and stutter-breathing, or you can remove your emotional hazmat suit and risk being exposed to human vulnerability and

suffering by asking if they're all right. I chose the latter, reached into my pocket for the unused napkin I'd tucked away that morning at my favorite coffee shop and offered it to her. She thanked me and wiped her cheek self-consciously while sheepishly explaining that she'd just lost her mother and the box I'd rescued from saturation contained the outfit she would be laid to rest in.

It was a soft pink dress with long lace sleeves that her mother had worn to a wedding once. At that moment, her lips curled into a frail smile, her eyes grew glassy, and a tiny pool gathered and spilled over the lower lashes of her right eye. She caught the tear with the napkin just as it was about to roll past her right cheekbone; as she did this, I noticed a wedding ring on her left hand and wondered if the wedding she was referring to was her own.

Rather than revert to awkward silence, I asked her how her mother had passed and she told me that it was a severe asthma attack. I probably wouldn't have been so surprised if she'd said it was a heart attack, cancer, or even a stroke but I guess I never think of asthma as a cause of death. She must have noticed that her answer caught me off guard because in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood she held the napkin up and asked if I always carry around napkins for the saps I share cabs with.

The kind attempt to relieve the tension in the car soothed me and my relief must have crossed my face

because she smiled sweetly at me as the driver stopped, having finally reached her destination. Then, as she handed the cabby his fare, she paused to face me and thanked me for not telling her that her mother was in a better place now.

“That’s every one's go-to line when something like this happens,” she said. “As if there are any words that could fill the void you feel when you imagine your life without this person who loved you infinitely more than anyone else.” Her breath hitched, “There are no words for that, you know; anything you say to fill the silence is a lie because there are just no words...” she hesitated briefly then added, “There was more honesty in your silent reaction, just now, than in anything else I’ll hear today, so thank you for that.”

With that, she stepped onto the street and the driver pulled away. As we turned the corner I glanced behind me and caught a glimpse of the brown box as the door to the funeral home closed behind her. Without a thought, I reached into my pocket and dialed in a daze only snapping out of my reverie when I heard the voice on the other end greet me warmly while asking if I were free today and if I’d like to meet for lunch.

At that moment it dawned on me just how frequently I’d declined these spontaneous requests. There were countless occasions where she’d asked to spend time with me over the years and I’d nearly always been busy or too preoccupied with my own life to make time for her. Without hesitation, I

decided that whatever else I'd planned to do that day could wait and I accepted my mother's invitation, grateful that I had this time with her and feeling indebted to the lady in the cab who helped me realize what I still had and how I'd been taking it for granted.

Awakening

Katie Killman

My eyelids meekly open to beaming light. It takes a moment to fully adjust to the new world around me. To my immediate right, I notice a rusty, grey table on wheels decorated with a minute portion of breakfast; it looks almost edible. With a brief yawn, my head rolls toward the window. The city seems heavenly from this height, almost like it is floating beneath me. In the distance, the highway is overflowing with the busy Buffalo residents breezing to work. The parking lot below is mildly filled; visiting hours have yet to begin.

Directly across from me, a worn out television hangs miserably alone, a sea of asylum white surrounding it. The room is a miniscule box shape that encases me. The incredible quietness of my surroundings is strangely piercing. The only noise inside the room is the humming and rhythmic beating of the heart monitor connected to my elbow through an IV. An occasional ring from the nurse's station telephone is the only sound that jolts my trance. My mind is consumed with the previous night's endeavors and drastic mistakes. Just as I am beginning to wander into the land of self-pity, a nurse enters.

She is a short, plum-shaped woman with a smile that is too wide for this early hour. She speaks, her voice raspy, but confident, "Hello. My name is Maria, and I'm the head nurse of this floor and will be

overseeing your care for the duration of your stay.” She does not wait for my reply - which gladdens me. My mind is too exhausted for a conversation. Maria moves quickly around the room, her feet gliding, collecting the tray next to my bed and pushing it into the hallway. She hurries back to my bed and begins to examine my bruised arms.

Her hands are overworked and her skin is too wrinkled for her age. Her fingers are frigid and her touch sends chills down my spine. Maria continues to conjure topics to discuss as she tries to find a plump vein to insert her needle. But, she soon notices that I am too distracted to be polite and continues with her work quietly.

It takes her only a few seconds to find the proper place; this was obviously not her first time. As she slowly forces the needle into my beat up skin, she smiles, gloating at her inner victory; I am shocked that this never gets old. When the needle enters me, I wince and shift a little. Maria smiles at me, trying to relax my nerves. I force a smile back. When the tube is a thick red, she pulls the needle out and applies a Band-Aid. This whole process is so rehearsed that it feels like a dance. Maria stands up and informs me that she will be coming back every few hours to perform this same dance. “Finally,” I say to myself, with scorn, “I’ll get to be a ballerina.”

After that, I am completely alone again. I reach for the remote control attached to the bed and I am

instantly consumed with pain. The IV in my elbow is numbing. My hand feels like a bowling ball and I can barely lift it an inch off the bed. I finally manage enough strength to turn the TV on. I flip aimlessly through the channels and stop at some random Lifetime movie filled with characters whose lives are worse than mine. Just as I am managing comfort, Maria disturbs my world again.

Followed by the portly nurse is a middle-aged, pleasant looking woman dressed in street clothes. She is the first person I notice not wearing a marshmallow coat. Maria leads our introduction. Her name is Karen and she is to be my designated “observer.” I am on suicide watch.

Karen sits down next to me, and I immediately notice the dark circles under her eyes; she is just as worn out as I am. Only a few seconds go by without speaking (although it feels like a few years) and Karen finally breaks the silence. She asks me how I am feeling and if I need anything. To both questions, a simple shake of my head from left to right is a satisfactory answer. She understands now that I am not yet ready to speak, despite the racing of my thoughts.

Karen takes out her book, *A Message in a Bottle*, and I turn back to the assortment of crazies on Lifetime. I am pleased for a moment. It is nice to have company, even a stranger’s. Throughout the day, new “observers” relieve the old ones and, each time, my world is invaded

by yet another stranger. This whole procession has been leading to the grand finale. My mother is coming.

Time creaks along, and the moment I have been dreading since the light hit my face this morning is finally here. My mother and I have been different since I took my first steps. She is a hardworking, dedicated optimist, and I am a lethargic cynic. I remember growing up desperately wanting to pour my soul out to her, but I was always too terrified that she wouldn't comprehend my innermost feelings; I could never have survived such a crushing defeat. But today was different. Today, I had to make her understand.

My mother creeps into the room. I immediately recognize her waddle and my stomach swallows my heart. This is it. The second our eyes meet for the first time in days, a tsunami of emotion crashes over me and I am instantly deluged with tears. My mom envelops my hands and without uttering a word; she provides me with all the support I need. We sit for hours in a peaceful silence. She never inquires about the IV, the bruises, or Maria. All of these answers will come with time. But as we sit here, in this bleak, empty room, hands and hearts entwined, I have never felt more alive.

The Colliding Elevator

Lauren Trogele

Sometimes in life, people are put into situations where they aren't really sure how to act. Some major event happens out of nowhere, with no warning, and they don't know how they should respond. Some more than others, are thrown in situations they plead won't happen again, or wish they could go back in time to prevent it. Some events in life leave people feeling as if they either got a second chance at life, or a sudden harsh realization of reality.

John and David are brief acquaintances. They were forced into meeting each other in an elevator that magically stopped out of nowhere. The men are complete opposites of each other. John seems like that kind of guy you would find working on a construction site. He seems like he has no problem getting paint or dirt on his shirt, or within the crevices of his palm, without being in a rush to clean it. He has a strong build, which means his body is easily impacted by the work in which he does. He seems like he is hands-on in life, more active rather than passive. John has worked on elevators before, and doesn't seem to understand why an elevator this new and advanced could possibly break down. David, on the other hand, seems like he is the kind of man who just has things handed over to him, rather than him getting up and getting them himself.

These two kind of men, with two different composesures, probably wouldn't flock together if living in nature.

Both David and John have been trapped in this elevator for hours, although to them, it seems like days. David remembers he got on the elevator at ten after nine, while John is convinced it was like 8:30ish. David feels he is the one who is right, after all-he does feel like he is the one educated to know things accurately. John doesn't seem to care about David, or what he thinks about anything, let alone the situation. Both the men want to get out of the predicament they are in, but John has already given up on trying to make it happen themselves. The men have been arguing about this and that since it broke down, and any little thing could cause the men to snap at each other at any second. David keeps getting anxiety and feels like if he doesn't do something then and there, they will forever be trapped. John finds David annoying and irritating, while David thinks John is a good for nothing, worthless bum. The men just want to get out of the situation and away from each other altogether. The tension in the condensed area keeps rising and the men are both easily getting heated. John: "A person like you saving us? Ha-ha good joke. You couldn't get us out of here even if your life did depend on it!" David: "You better watch yourself." John: "Why what are you going to do tough guy?" David: "I don't think you know what I am capable of; I am a very powerful person."

Now John finally gets up and he looks bigger than David remembers from when he first entered the elevator.

John: “Oh yeah? How powerful?”

David: “Ok, John, let’s relax now. Let’s both take a seat.”

The little dispute eventually leads to a large heated argument. John goes in to punch David when all of a sudden the elevator door opens with an abrupt jolt and their first sight is a bright white blinding light. The men, at first, are completely blinded and lost as to what is going on. They lose track completely of the altercation that was just about to occur between them. (Although, secretly, David is surely grateful.) John seems to forget what he was just about to do and puts David down and walks towards the intriguing light he sees in front of him. David, hesitant at first, follows. They hear a loud noise and David automatically turns around to go back into the elevator, but it’s gone. He calls for John to tell him what has happened, but John is too occupied with what is in front of him rather than behind him. John recognizes the scenario in front of him, but he doesn’t know why. “David, just be quiet. I know this, I know this, but why?” John says.

David, who is still in shock as to what is happening and now feels trapped, looks a little to the left and sees a door with his name on it in quotation marks. He opens the door to see a young woman hunched over, out of breath. He moves around to see her face, and now sees the woman is struggling. She can’t seem to breathe,

let alone hold herself up. David goes to help her, but his hand goes right through hers, as if he is a ghost. He stares at the woman a little longer to realize it is his mother, although he is not present in the room. He remembers the dress, for it was one of her favorites. She is complaining out loud about the pain and decides to drive herself to the Emergency Room, claiming something isn't right.

John finally recognizes why his surroundings look so familiar. It's a house in the middle of a desert, with no one living in it and nothing around it. Some of the glass in the window is broken with the curtain flowing because of the wind. There is a storm with rain coming down the size of footballs. The sky is a shade of dark gray John only remembers from one point in his life.

John walks closer, up the narrow walkway and into the house. Once inside, he remembers it all too vividly. He remembers it like it was yesterday. He walks into a kitchen, where he sees a married couple around the age of forty arguing and screaming at each other at the top of their lungs. The woman was complaining how her husband was some "drunk dumb slob," which now allows John to come a sudden realization.

As John watches, he hears the man scream in his wife's face and says that he is "the man of the house and he can do whatever he wants, whenever he wants." He sees the male throw a beer bottle onto the floor and hears footsteps running down the hall. He walks into a room,

and sees a little boy about the age of 6 years old, hiding in his closet, rocking back and forth crying.

John tries to touch the little boy's arm but he can't. Although the little boy can't see him, he looks directly at John as if he does. John now sees the big picture more clearly. That little boy, crying over his parents arguing, is himself. John has gone back into the past, back into one of the darkest days of his life—back to the day he has tried to forget the most. John always looked up to his dad and liked when he said he was the man of the house because his dad was his role model. He remembers being scared of what was happening. He then remembers his dad getting so angry that he walked into their bedroom and packed all of his belongings.

When his dad was walking out, there was little six-year-old John blocking his path. John's father looked down quickly and sighed, as if he forgot his healthy, loving son even existed. He tapped John on the head twice, and scooted him out of the way. John could never forget the smell of his father, for he smelt it every time he was in the room with him. Later in life, he discovered that that smell was the stench of pure alcohol.

He then walked past little John, stumbling from all the alcohol in his system. Adult John, the one from the elevator, is overlooking this with tears building up in his eyes. Six-year-old John runs out the door after him, stopping before the porch steps to watch him go. Adult John screams to get his attention instead of what he is about to see, although his voice goes unheard. Adult

John knows what is about to come, and wishes nothing more than to distract the little boy. John watches on as his drunken father trips over his own two feet into the car. John can barely see through the massive amounts of rain. He cannot even see his own fingers in front of him. John's father turns the key and starts the ignition, ready to pull out of the driveway. He starts to back out, excelling more and more as the long driveway draws to an end. Adult John remembers seeing lights through the rain all the way out in front of the house smashing down the dirt road. Once again, he can't help but yelp.

David, although he cannot be seen, tags along for the ride. His mother is breathing heavily, struggling and gasping for air. She cannot seem to catch herself and get her breathing back on track as her face quickly loses its color. She clearly isn't getting the circulation she needs, and it is obvious to see she needs to get to her destination faster, before death comes to her sooner.

He doesn't remember why his mother looks so sick from his childhood, but he knows for sure that this lady with him is his mother. It's pouring rain and she is struggling to see through the windshield wipers. She decides it is probably best to call her husband, who is with their son at an outing for the day. She pulls the phone out of her purse but drops it on the floor by the passenger seat. She now hears it ring, assuming it is her husband, and thinks what perfect timing. She leans over to get the phone, not paying attention to the road. David screams and begs for her to leave it and pay attention.

David sees lights coming at them from the side. He closes his eyes.

The scenario that both men were in suddenly disappears and both men are back in the elevator, with a newspaper in their hands. The date of the paper is the day after John remembers his dad leaving. The front cover read: One Female, 38 and One Male, 41 DIE in Same Crash, Different Cars. As both men read on they concluded John's drunken father backed out of the driveway so fast, he collided with an oncoming car, whose female driver wasn't paying attention. The woman was David's mother. Both were killed instantly upon impact. The men can't help but look at each other with disbelief with the newspaper from over 20 years ago still in their hands. The elevator door now opens on the 89th floor, where businessmen are casually walking around with their suitcases, running amuck, waiting for the next big thing...

J.K. Rowling is Not a Genius

Kristy Petrizzo

It is not uncommon for modern works of literature to mirror the successful works of the past. This classical inheritance can be seen with an “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it” point of view, but it can also be reminiscent of the plagiarism that most modern college students are taught to beware of. However, if you search deep enough through the archives for this so called “inspiration,” you might just find a forgotten masterpiece to rip off, making your claim to fame that much easier. In her novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, J.K. Rowling clearly and unabashedly, is not just influenced by Greek mythology, but creates a modern replica of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, paving her way to success.

J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter is an orphan sent off to a magical school of witchcraft and wizardry known as Hogwarts. However, before his education is discussed, it is important to point out the similarities between Harry and one of the fallen warriors whose tragic end is mentioned in *The Odyssey*. Both Harry and Achilles possess a supernatural invincibility in battle. Achilles’ protection comes from his mother. When he was just a child she bathed him in the river Styx, holding him by his ankle, protecting him from harm, but also making him invulnerable. Comparably, Harry Potter becomes untouchable to evil-doers after his mother makes her own sacrifice and dies trying to protect him. This leaves

a lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead that often becomes his weak point throughout the series, causing him intolerable pain. In the final scenes of *The Sorcerer's Stone*, this is displayed as Harry is fighting Voldemort and his accomplice in the dungeons. "Harry's scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony" from his touch (Rowling 294).

Hogwarts itself can be compared to Olympus. Olympus is home to the gods and goddesses, high out of the human's reach. Similarly, Hogwarts calls itself home to some of the most powerful witches and wizards history has ever seen, all while carefully concealing itself from the humans nearby. On Mount Olympus, Zeus ranks supreme. Odysseus is fighting his way home after the Trojan War, and after reading the opening lines of this epic, it becomes clear it won't be an easy journey. "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns" (Homer 77). When Athena wishes to aid Odysseus on his journey home, Zeus denies her request, resulting in an ever winding and treacherous trip spanning almost an entire decade. Rowling borrows this sort of laissez faire attitude and lends it to her own creative counterpart to Zeus; Dumbledore. Dumbledore, widely regarded as the greatest wizard in history, is the headmaster at Hogwarts, and has an all knowing-all seeing quality to him reminiscent of divinity. Towards the end of the novel, it is made clear that Dumbledore was well aware of the suspicious activity occurring in

the castle all along, however, he chose to not intervene until the very last second when Harry's life was at stake.

Nevertheless, Harry is not alone. Throughout all of his adventures, no matter how reckless, one professor in particular maintains a soft spot for him, and jumps to defend him even in the roughest of times. Professor Minerva McGonagall is a fiercely strong witch, and although she may not always come across as affectionate, she always has Harry's best interests at heart. This is a parallel to the relationship between Athena and Odysseus. Many of the gods and goddesses on Olympus have claimed a favorite "pet" human of sorts, and Athena has always been fond of Odysseus. She protects him in times of war and always tries to guide him in the right direction. Not so coincidentally, the Roman interpretation of Athena is named Minerva, but the similarities between Athena and Professor McGonagall do not stop with names. Athena is known to be the goddess of wisdom, justice, and war. Professor McGonagall assumes almost identical personality traits. She is a powerful woman, intensely protective of her students, and known to have the ability to "spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school" (Rowling 145). She possesses knowledge of not only her craft, but of battle as well. It's easy to agree, both women are forces to be reckoned with.

One major mythological trope found in both *The Odyssey* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, is the main character's journey to the underworld. Known

as nekuaia, according to the Greeks, this trip is often for the purpose of gaining knowledge in defeating the enemy and moving forward with the help of your past, not to mention solidifying your superhuman status. Although Harry seems to have more in common with Achilles, he shares the bond of nekuaia with Odysseus. The descent into the underworld followed by safe return is a classic heroic formula used throughout mythology as well as modern works today. The character is seen as possessing the ultimate power; the power to defy death. Odysseus visits the land of the dead, where “the eye of the Sun can never flash his rays” (Homer 250) to find the prophet Tiresias, and get instructions on getting home safely. He emerges with more knowledge than before, better equipped for his journey. Harry’s trip to the underworld is more metaphorical. It is seen as he goes through the trapdoor, descending into the dungeons of the school to confront the enemy. All odds are against him surviving as he goes off to fight full grown wizards much more powerful than himself, but nevertheless he defies those odds, and death as he returns a hero in the eyes of his classmates (Rowling).

Evidently, plagiarism is a serious offense in the academic world, often resulting in punishment and expulsion from school. However, in the world of literature one only needs to look far enough to classical works that have long since been forgotten by the public, and add a modern twist of their own to disguise the theft in order to be successful. While this may be an easy path

to success, it is also an insult to the original author, as well as to the intelligence of the present reader. As writers we should strive for excellence and popularity in our own right, and as readers we should expect something better than a regurgitated classic topped with a pointed hat. After careful analysis, it becomes clear that current authors such as J.K. Rowling have found much more than a little inspiration in the history of literature. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, despite worldwide acclaim, is merely a magician's knockoff of Homer's *The Odyssey*, proving once and for all, with finality, that J.K. Rowling is *not* a genius.

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Saying Goodbye

Amanda Ammirati

Elementary school was essentially endless repetition, nothing more. Feeling like you're older than the way parents and teachers treat you, not being respected as the all-knowing adult that you feel that you are.

Each day, for me, was a countdown to finally moving on and going to high school.

High school was much of the same, only more pressure to be something you're not. More repetition, day in and day out. No one took you seriously; you're still just a kid after all.

Each day, for me, was a countdown to finally moving on and going to college.

My entire school career has been spent looking forward to something else because the present was crippling and debilitating. Until now.

I cringe at the thought of having to leave Molloy. I feel at home here. Rather than feeling that I have to change myself in order to fit in, Molloy has helped me realize who I really am and made me into the adult I've always thought I could be. So for the first time, I don't want to say goodbye.

I want to stay right where I am.