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Little Men: Manhood in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

James Mueller

Alexander Pope's notorious masterpiece, *The Rape of the Lock*, is perhaps the most well-known and most studied mock epic in undergraduate academia. Both informative as a critical satire, and entertaining as a humorous poem, Pope's classic presents a wide range of subject matter replete with thematic elements ripe for exposition and analysis. Beyond the simple tale of a girl who loses her favorite lock of hair to a scandalous admirer, there are deeper subtexts waiting to be explored. It is the purpose of this essay to examine one of these illusive undertones, namely, the concept of manhood. Using only the source material, I intend to shed light on an emergent portrait of manhood as it exists in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, as well as demonstrate that this portrait, though deplorable, is intentionally farcical.

To give a brief summary of the mock epic, *The Rape of the Lock* tells the story of Belinda, an adolescent girl of the aristocracy, who suffers a hazardous encounter while attending a court ball. She is, as a matter of course, constantly attended to by a host of small invisible fairies who serve as her intuitive notions, her inconspicuous servants, and her guardian angels. On this fateful day, her chief fairy is made aware of an unknown, yet dire threat to her, and so gathers an army of fairies to watch over her while she attends the ball. Belinda arrives at the court, where she engages in harmless diversions such as gossiping, coffee and tea drinking, and card-playing. She catches the eye of a young baron, whose infatuation with her prompts him to discreetly cut off a lock of her hair. She discovers the theft, and demands he return the trophy,

which he refuses. She then implores a nearby gentleman, a Sir Plume, to retrieve it for her, yet his entreaties to the baron are likewise met with refusal. At this, Belinda becomes enraged, thereby calling her celestial hosts to arms, physically attacking the baron with a hairpin. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, the lock is lost, never to be found.

Despite a relatively sparse aggregate of male characters in the poem, there are sufficient references and allusions to the male demographic in general; to derive a latent, yet coherent, concept of manhood. This derivation is achieved by analyzing and incorporating not only the descriptions and behaviors of the baron and Sir Plume characters, but also the frequent instances in which Pope casually and implicitly conflates manhood with definitive traits, by way of correlation. This essay intends to show that Pope's conception of manhood in *The Rape of the Lock* is a conception restricted to caricature: a caricature that is dim-witted, easily controlled, expendable, and a threat to female virtue.

The first aspect of Pope's concept of manhood is dim-wittedness. Both the baron and Sir Plume exhibit meager intelligence and thoughtfulness despite their social standing. The reader learns very early of the baron's sad collection of cheap romance novels and his acquired trophies from past flings, "three garters, half a pair of gloves" (50), which serve to illustrate both his obsession with fake love; and his failure at the real thing. Clearly, the baron is not well-informed in the ways of romance or women. This does not bother him though, and he passes up his opportunity to behave gentlemanly towards Belinda by returning her lock, preferring instead to "burn in Cupid's flames - but burn alive" (69). The manner in which the baron rejoices when his juvenile scheme is successful, while triumphantly displaying his stolen trophy, is still further evidence exposing him as a fool. Sir Plume, who by all accounts imagines himself a distinguished gentleman, is equally foolish. Not only is he preoccupied with his fancy snuffbox while sporting the "nice conduct of a clouded cane" (64), but he is even described by Pope as

having a “round unthinking face” (64). His speech leaves even more to be desired; when compared to the eloquent speeches of previous characters, his entreaty to the baron is filled with slang and coarse language including “what the devil, zounds, damn, ’fore Gad, plague on’t, and prithee pox”, making him sound more like a slum-roaming schoolboy than a royal court guest (64). Pope further increases this irony when, following said speech, the baron remarks on how Sir Plume “speaks so well” (64). This unthinking nature can be found in the baron as well, when after Belinda’s lament at her loss, “the pitying audience melt[s] in tears but fate and Jove had stopp’d the Baron’s ears” (64). But perhaps even more damning to male wit than the baron’s or Sir Plume’s conduct are two isolated verses which cast an intentionally dim light on manhood. In the first, the god Jupiter, in proper epic form, lowers a scale into the heat of battle to determine the outcome. But instead of weighing resolve, or faith, or strength of force, Pope makes a joke at the expense of the two men, when their combined wit is outweighed by Belinda’s hairs:

Now Jove suspends his golden scales in air,
Weighs the Men's wits against the Lady's hair;
The doubtful beam long nods from side to side;
At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside. (68)

The second instance can be found near the very end of the poem, where it is suggested that Belinda’s lost lock may have mounted to that place where all lost things reside. Among the apparent oddities found in this strange place, one finds the wits of heroes kept in vases so that these rare curiosities might be pondered, as well as the wits of young men in love, which are so small as to be kept in snuffboxes and tweezer-cases (69). Using the baron and Sir Plume characters, as well as these other references, Pope depicts men as dim-witted and manifestly foolish creatures.

The second factor in the poem's notion of manhood, is that men are easily controlled, the obvious implication being that men are easily controlled by women. Both the baron and Sir Plume are examples of men utterly at the mercy of feminine charm. The baron veritably worships his idea of women and has even built an altar to this effect before which he "prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes" (51). This image of a slave at the feet of a master is used once more in the epic; when mankind is described as being enslaved by female beauty to their own destruction:

Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.

.....

Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair. (50)

But it is not only that men are swayed by feminine beauty, according to the mock epic, they are also controllable by women in a more general sense. When Belinda springs at the baron, the contrast of apparent to actual control is highlighted, when "this bold Lord with manly strength endu'd, she with one finger and a thumb subdu[es]" (68). This marionette caricature of men is illustrated perfectly by Sir Plume during the altercation:

When bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
Chloe stepp'd in, and kill'd him with a frown;
She smil'd to see the doughty hero slain,
But, at her smile, the Beau reviv'd again. (68)

Once again, the boldness of these men is no match for their weak and controllable nature pitted against a woman. Belinda is herself the archetypal feminine beauty, and it is against this archetype that mankind—and manhood—are juxtaposed in *The Rape of the Lock*. She is all but addressed as such, and her power over the male gender is openly referenced: “thus address'd the pow'r: "Hail, wayward Queen! Who rule the sex to fifty from fifteen” (62), leaving men, as the baron poetically puts it, to “submit to fate” (60). Pope is not shy about this piece of the puzzle. According to the epic, men may be bold and adventurous, but in the end, they are little more than slaves and oblivious puppets in the hands of women.

The third element in the story's depiction of men is their expendability. On two separate occasions men are reduced to being on equal footing with pets: “Not louder shrieks to pitying heav'n are cast, when husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last” (59), “Sooner let earth, air, sea, to Chaos fall, men, monkeys, lap-dogs, parrots, perish all” (64). Just like the small dogs that serve as living accessories for wealthy women of status, so too are men expendable items of décor. But Pope's conception of man's inferiority is not limited to his function as female arm candy. The intrinsic worth of men is questioned on two other occasions in the story. The first is implicated when it is revealed that an ornament cherished by Belinda's great-great-grandfather had been melted down and repurposed, first as a whistle for her grandmother, then as a hairpin for her mother (68-69). The second instance of low evaluation of male worth occurs towards the end of the poem and is one of the peculiarities included in the list of lost items. In this case, it is the prayers of sick men (69). It would seem from a close reading of *The Rape of the Lock*, that men are mere objects of fashion, expendable, and at best repurposed, who are of so little worth, that their very dying prayers are overlooked, and lost to oblivion.

The final, and perhaps most important element of Pope's theory of manhood, as read from *The Rape of the Lock*, is that of man as a threat to female virtue. On several occasions in the

story, Belinda is not only instructed to be wary of men for her heart's sake, her piety is suggested as being at stake as well: "Warn'd by the Sylph, oh pious maid, beware! This to disclose is all thy guardian can: Beware of all, but most beware of Man"(48). Even Belinda draws the conclusion that men run in opposition to the pious life: "What mov'd my mind with youthful Lords to roam? Oh had I stay'd, and said my pray'rs at home" (65). Men are repeatedly painted as evil tempters, contrasted against the virtuous and chaste woman, whose honorable duty it is to reject them: "What tender maid but must a victim fall to one man's treat, but for another's ball?" (47), "Know further yet; whoever fair and chaste rejects mankind, is by some Sylph embrac'd" (46). This juxtaposition can likewise be inferred from the descriptors used. On one side, the maid is described as tender, pious, fair, chaste, and a victim, while conversely, the male is described as a foe who resorts to roaming, lurking, rapaciousness, cruelty, and sacrilege (46, 48, 58, 59, 64, 65). The baron, therefore, is not merely a devious young male looking for affection and intimacy, he is, in fact, an enemy of Christian virtue, reminiscent of the serpent in Genesis. In fact, it is not the perseverance of the baron that succeeds in overpowering Belinda's heavenly host, but her sin of secretly harboring feelings for a man, which strips her protector, Ariel, of his power.

[Ariel] watch'd th' Ideas rising in her mind,
 Sudden he view'd, in spite of all her art,
 An earthly Lover lurking at her heart.
 Amaz'd, confus'd, he found his pow'r expir'd,
 Resign'd to fate, and with a sigh retir'd. (59)

In this way, the entire tragedy that befalls Belinda, is more akin to a fall from grace, than to a theft of innocence. She is a portrait of feminine beauty and piety who falls victim to the temptations of male wickedness. An analysis of Pope's conception of manhood, therefore, would

not be complete without acknowledging the intrinsic role that mankind plays as a threat to female virtue.

Manhood is a complex idea, but in *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope draws it rather simply; and provides reasonable evidence to support an implicit concept of manhood that can be reduced to a dim-witted fool who is both easily manipulated and expendable, but who is, nevertheless, a dire threat to womanly virtue. As deplorable as this characterization is, it is important to remember that Pope does not use it to condemn men or manhood outright. On several occasions he refers to men in general as heroes, a term of highest praise, and counts those men as wise whose passions are the deeper qualities of women (66). It should also be noted that several of Belinda's fairies are described as male, including her chief guardian, whose gentle kindness inspires him to manifest for her in a dream "a Youth more glitt'ring than a Birth-night Beau, (That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)" (45). These elements, scarce though they are, discourage a misandrist reading of Pope's epic. In fact, to ignore these positive representations of men would be to miss the hidden counterweight against which Pope's entire characterization is set. It is this very inclusion that suggests a more judicious view than is apparent, namely, that men are not intrinsically corrupt, and that manhood is not a vice as such. Taken together with the overall comedic nature of the poem, Pope's concept of manhood, therefore, must be understood not as a condemnation, but as a farcical caricature, a comedic element that serves its function in the mock epic rather brilliantly.

The Rape of the Lock is foremostly a criticism of the trivialities of aristocratic life. But, in a more subtle way, it is also a criticism of manhood. The portrait of man that Alexander Pope uses in his mock epic; is a caricature intended to draw attention to what are perhaps some of the worst elements of manhood in society, such as thoughtlessness, self-importance, the pursuit of grandeur, and the idolization of women. The satirical concept of mankind that he uses in the

poem is a humorous, albeit deeply honest criticism of faulty social conventions and behavior. Pope's man, therefore, is not every man, but a man poor in character, albeit rich in breeding. The most appropriate title for Pope's man, then, is perhaps the title that Pope employs himself at the very beginning of his mock epic: "In tasks so bold, can little men engage" (44), and the men described in *The Rape of the Lock* are just that: little men.

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1st Place Literary Analysis 2021

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**Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America*
And Creating Social Peace**

Timberly Wilkerson

What would it take to achieve civility among a polarized nation? Many people, most likely, think that this is an unobtainable goal. However, a careful reading of Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* offers hope. It is an account of civil discourse between two markedly different cultures, the Indians and the early settlers of America. While reading Franklin's work, one may glean some information on how it can be possible for someone to be at peace while conversing with others who are from different cultures and political backgrounds Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* provides insight into how to achieve respectful social conduct in a nation marked by adversity.

One of the first things that a reader can glean from this literary work, that can help improve peace within a social setting, is the Indian's outlook on making decisions. On the matter of making decisions, Franklin reports that "[i]t is of the Indian rules of politeness not to answer a public proposition the same day that it is made; they think it would be resting it as a light matter, and that they show it respect by taking time to consider it, as of a matter important" (Franklin 216). Most people make decisions rapidly. While some decisions are not worthy of a lot of thought, sometimes a person is met with a choice that affects not only them, but others as well. In these cases, it is better to spend some time considering the different outcomes from the options presented to them. This allows both options, or parties if more than one person is involved, to receive the respect they need. This way, even if people do not receive the answer

they want to hear, they can still know that their choice and thoughts were respected. If people treated these important crossroads with as much respect as the Indians did, there may be fewer bad choices and negative outcomes.

Taking this idea further, our diverse nation can also learn from the way that the Indians replied to the offer they received to send their children to school with the early American settlers. In Franklin's account, the chosen Indian speaker told the commissioner the following;

We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours (Franklin 217).

Even though the Indians refused the white man's offer, they were kind and respectful in their rejection and requested that the commissioner understand that their opinions on education differed. The majority of current news stories focus on arguments among people unable to respect views other than their own. Perhaps the news stories would be much less volatile if people followed the ways of the Indians. In rejecting a different opinion, one can politely and respectfully indicate disagreement and then ask for the same respect in return.

Specifically, our nation's leaders can learn respect from the Indians' ways described in Franklin's work. When it comes to the Indians' councils, Franklin reports that the meeting happens in this manner: "He that would speak, rises. The rest observe a profound silence. When he has finished and sits down, they leave him five or six minutes to recollect, that, if he has omitted anything he intended to say, or has anything to add, he may rise again and deliver it" (Franklin 217). The Indians behaved with civility. They respected everyone's opinion and gave everyone a chance to speak and be heard. If our leaders today applied these same courtesies, then

it would likely decrease the frustration of people because they feel unheard. Leaders could make the best decision for the people they are leading through calm deliberation. The Indians presented in Franklin's work have taken measures to ensure that each choice is given proper weight and each voice is given a place within the decision-making process.

Leaders are not the only ones who need to learn to listen. Everyone does. The Indians not only listened intently to each other within the council setting, but they also carried this skill into their everyday lives. Franklin states that to the Indians, "[t]o interrupt another, even in common conversation, is reckoned highly indecent" (Franklin 217). People tend to pick up the habits of the leaders and broadcasters on television, in that they interrupt each other in order to insert their own opinion.

Franklin also points to the fact that the Indians were able to accept other people's differences. Franklin mentions that "[t]he politeness of these savages in conversation is indeed carried to excess, since it does not permit them to contradict or deny the truth of what is asserted in their presence" (Franklin 217). This statement holds a lot of weight. While it could be viewed that the Indians did not allow themselves to have an opinion on what other people said, it does not explicitly deny their option to disagree. This quote just says that Indians knew how to accept one another's differences. For example, Franklin describes how a missionary came to spread the gospel to an Indian tribe. After the missionary finished, the Indians told the missionary one of their beliefs in return. The missionary immediately rejected the Indian's story as false. The Indian replied to the missionary, after the man's remark on the Indian's story, "[m]y brother, it seems your friends have not done you justice in your education; they have not well instructed you in the rules of common civility. You saw that we, who understand and practise those rules, believed all your stories; why do you refuse to believe ours?" (Franklin 218). The Indians considered it rude to say that someone else's beliefs were wrong. If we used this concept today,

then it would allow diversity to thrive with fewer conflicts. While we may not all agree, unless a statement can be proven untrue by facts, then it would be respectful to accept others' opinions. Everyone can have their own truths; that is what makes each person unique. Peace comes from learning to accept that everyone has different truths, letting people believe their truths, and listening to their truths without disputing the fact they believe that truth.

The final point from Franklin's work that can be used to create social civility and respect within a country is in the way the Indians treated strangers. Franklin points out that "[t]here is in every village a vacant dwelling, called the stranger's house. Here they are placed, . . . and everyone sends them what he can spare of victuals, and skins to repose on" (Franklin 218). When a stranger arrives within a town the Indians rush to do everything they can to improve that stranger's situation as soon as they can. It is also worth noting that they "send what they can spare" (Franklin 218). After being put in the stranger's house, Franklin goes on to say that "[w]hen the strangers are refreshed...then, and not before, conversation begins" (Franklin 218). The Indians took care of the stranger's needs before moving on to the reason he came. Franklin also notes that when ready to leave the stranger's house, the meeting "usually ends with offers of service, if the strangers have occasion of guides, or any necessaries for continuing their journey, and nothing is exacted for the entertainment" (Franklin 218-219). The Indians showed true concern for those outside their tribe and cared for their practical needs at their own expense. . . . Furthermore, Franklin recalls what one of the Indians said of their treatment of strangers: "[y]ou know our practice. If a white man, in traveling through our country, enters one of our cabins, we all treat him as I treat you" (Franklin 219-220). The Indians treated people who were different than them as if they were not different at all. They saw each human as a human, and they treated everyone with the same kindness and respect. The difference between the Indians in Franklin's

story and the world today is that what we view as kindness the Indians viewed as normal behavior.

Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America by Benjamin Franklin can be used to help achieve peace within a country with a diverse population by teaching proper manners when it comes to conversing with others. Far from being savages, the Indians illustrate by their behavior how to courteously treat strangers and people of differing beliefs by listening with respect before rushing to conclusion, as well as by meeting practical needs. The current tension and unrest in our nation could improve if we read *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* as an instruction manual of sorts and applied the social civilities of the Indians. Franklin's report of the Indian's civility and respect offers a tremendous example for making the idea of social peace across the nation a reality.

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2nd Place Literary Analysis 2021
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Innocence in Hills Like White Elephants

Abby Carroll

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is about the rising contention between two characters as they face an unnamed operation, most likely an abortion. The story takes place at a railroad station; two tracks stretch before these characters. One rail symbolizes the choice that would mean death to the unborn child and guilt to the mother. The other track represents the choice of life and a consequent maintaining of innocence. Throughout the tale, Hemingway skillfully weaves this theme of innocence. One character tries to cling to lost purity; another, although still in the womb, already possesses blamelessness. Even the narrator is innocent because of his detachment from the story that he tells. In Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," the author portrays the theme of innocence with the use of three literary tools—characterization, symbolism, and point of view—to achieve the story's dramatic effect.

The characterization of Jig helps to communicate the theme of innocence. The story's narrator, for example, simply refers to her as "the girl" (Hemingway 119) rather than by her actual name, and her name is only mentioned twice in the dialogue. In referring to her as a girl, the narrator marks her as more similar to a child than a woman, and an age difference between Jig and her American lover is implied. Thus, Jig has been, perhaps, sexually innocent before her relationship with this man. Now Jig is apparently pregnant and faces the weighty choice of abortion, yet with this title of "girl" comes a youthful purity, even though the character no longer seems to possess it. However, in losing her chastity, Jig creates another innocence in the baby.

Another example of innocence in the characterization of Jig is found in her dialogue. She often makes seemingly fanciful remarks such as “white elephant hills” (120). She also states that a particular alcoholic drink reminds her of “licorice” (120), again suggesting a childlike view. However, Jig obviously regards the situation more seriously than the American does. She realizes that, regardless of her decision, their relationship will never be the same. Thus, Jig attempts to cling to her lost innocence through her speech.

Finally, Jig’s reliance upon the American displays innocence. An obvious example of this reliance is seen in Jig’s inability to speak Spanish. Throughout the story, she must depend on the American to translate what the woman at the train station bar says to them. However, Jig’s reliance runs more deeply than the literal language barrier. She requires assurance and approval from the American, and this need for his love drives her, presumably, to an abortion. She considers undergoing the operation so that the American will “be happy and things will be like they were and [he]’ll love [her]” (121). Moreover, she allows the American to make the decisions for her, symbolized as “he picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks” (122). Although two tracks and the options they represent exist, the American determines the path that Jig will follow.

The use of symbolism additionally contributes to the story’s theme of innocence. Throughout the tale, the narrator often refers to the hills on the other side of the valley where the train station sits. Jig remarks that these hills “look like white elephants” (120); clearly, she is referring not to the animals themselves but to the phrase’s use as an idiom, meaning an unwanted possession that is difficult to discard. Thus, the hills symbolize Jig’s unborn baby and, more importantly, its innocence.

Innocence is also symbolized in the whiteness of the hills. In many cultures, the color white communicates purity and blamelessness. In the same way, the child can be viewed as innocent of any action that would justify its abortion. The baby is also blameless because of its distance to the situation. The hills are described as “far away beyond the river” (121), symbolizing how the baby is set apart from the characters. The baby, being unborn, cannot participate in the conversation or in the decisions in which Jig and the American are involved. Finally, though Jig understands the symbol that the hills present, the American simply states, “I’ve never seen [a white elephant]” (120), then continues to drink his beer as if he has not even looked at the hills. In the same way, the American cannot see the baby’s blamelessness and does not seem to try. Although the baby is innocent, its purity and importance are unnoticed by the one man who should display sympathy.

Hemingway also uses point of view to shape the short story’s theme of innocence by using a third-person narrator rather than a first-person narrator. This type of narrator is often either a character or an observer. Because of this view, a first-person narrator cannot remain impartial to the events that happen around him. However, the third-person narrator in “Hills Like White Elephants” is completely detached from the story’s unfolding almost as if he were hovering above the scene. Thus, the narrator seems to have no hold on the story that he tells; he is simply relaying information without a reaction to the events. Because of his impartiality, the narrator can remain innocent.

Moreover, the narrator is objective, meaning that he never enters Jig or the American’s thoughts, leaving the reader to decipher the characters’ motives and struggles for himself or herself. The narrator communicates none of his own emotions; in fact, he hardly conveys the emotions of the characters, creating an indifferent, cold tone in the short story. The last example of the narrator’s innocence and detachment is displayed in how he ends the storyline with a

cliffhanger: Jig claims, “There’s nothing wrong with me” (123), but, clearly, she does not feel this way. Moreover, no definite decision is reached, and the reader is left assuming that she will have the abortion. Nevertheless, the narrator does not seem concerned with closure and washes his hands of the story to maintain his innocence.

Hemingway deftly presents a theme of innocence throughout his short story by using characterization, symbolism, and point of view. Characterization is used to signify the innocence that Jig has lost and now desperately tries to regain; the white hills symbolize the unborn baby who, though blameless, has nothing to gain by its possession of innocence; and, because the narrator is third-person objective, he too is innocent of the events in the story due to his indifference. Through the use of these literary tools, Hemingway successfully creates a dramatic, thought-provoking tale that forces readers to confront the ideals between both life and death and between guilt and innocence, “two lines of rails in the sun” (119).

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3rd Place Literary Analysis 2021
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Pink Hair and Blue Swords

James Mueller

This past weekend I went to Concerts on the Dock to read (I know it's weird, but I'm trying to blend in with the local community). Anyway, I'm perched atop a stool, sipping ginger ale and enjoying my book, when this kid (probably eight or nine) waltzes up and unhesitatingly plants herself on the stool next to mine...and starts spinning. It bears mentioning that although my stool is also capable of spinning, I am not spinning.

Now, as a frequent "public reader", I am used to being interrupted, so it's really no big deal. Being the warm gentleman that I am, I take a moment to glance up from my book...and deliver a deliberate one-second cold stare across the top edge of the page before dropping my eyes and finding my place again. This communications burst catches her mid-spin, and I'm worried she's missed it and won't understand that even though I'm ignoring her, I really wish she would just leave.

"What book are you reading?"

Dammit. As I insert my bookmark (slowly, for emphasis), I begin to describe the thesis in as few and simple terms as possible.

What follows is a conversation about Harry Potter, someone named Percy Jackson, mythological heroes wielding magic swords, video games, toy swords, real swords and at this

point I'm wondering if maybe I should try my stare again. My new friend (her words - not mine) explains that much like many others at Lowe Mill, she too is an aspiring artist. She runs off, but before I even have a chance to sneak a longing look towards my book, she returns with her art supplies. It's a large kit containing oil pastels, watercolors, colored pencils, felt markers... in short: the works.

Apparently, it's a hand-me-down from her older brother, and upon close inspection, it's obvious this kit has seen better days. Several of the colored pencils are worn down to short nubs. The eraser is missing. And what's left of the watercolors is cracked and crumbling. My new artist friend informs me that she is currently putting together her portfolio and hopes to share studio space with an established artist once she has enough work to put on display. She has apparently already sold drawings to her friends at 25 cents apiece.

You might say I have a soft spot for struggling artists, so when she asks if I'd like to buy art from her, I smile, and say: "I don't have any cash, sorry."

Turns out this one's pro bono, and I get to choose what she draws me. What a kid. I suggest she draw me something from that dumb fantasy novel she wouldn't shut up about earlier (I didn't use those words exactly), and she gets right to work. While she labors over a new creation, I step aside to acquire some cash.

As a new art investor, and her first sponsor, I figure I can do better than 25 cents - after all, it's important to support local artists, and she really needs new supplies (it's for her portfolio after all).

After overcoming some minor obstacles along the way (that missing eraser turned out to be a real problem), I am presented with a stunning still-life pencil drawing of a sword with blue

sharpie flames. As she removes her newly minted masterpiece from its college-ruled spiral-bound canvas, I surprise her with not one, but three crisp one-dollar bills.

"This is for new art supplies",

I tell her with a smile, but just sternly enough to let her know I'm counting on her to work hard, apply herself, and make her dream of becoming an artist a reality (of course it went without saying that I had purchased her work at twelve times the going rate and expected some return on investment). Well... someday.

"Someday this will be worth lots of money," I tell her. We grin at each other. She's happy. I steal an anticipatory glance towards my book. I'm happy too. We shake hands as up-and-coming professionals, and their altruistic supporters often do and bid one another farewell.

Fast-forward ten minutes.

I'm roused from my book by the swirling of pink hair above a spinning stool. It's none other than my young artist friend.

"Hey, you're back", I say, but before I can ask her how her portfolio is coming along, she holds up a small zip-lock bag for me to inspect.

"This one's amethyst, and this one's rose quartz" she says excitedly, and I do my best to match her enthusiasm. A true polymath, this one. She tells me the story of how she just got them from a vendor down the hall. How they sell all different kinds. How they only cost three dollars.

The word "crestfallen" gets thrown around a lot these days.

I hide my disappointment by nodding silently to everything she's telling me, but I don't really hear what she's saying anymore. I'm a fool. This is what I get for thinking with my heart. For doing something kind. This is why you don't give kids money. Because they don't understand the value of saving and just end up blowing it on the first shiny piece of junk that catches—

"Want to buy more of my art?"

I look at her expectant face. We both laugh. It's a strange mix: the mirthless chuckling of a man who's just been hoodwinked by childhood innocence, and the cautious giggling of a four-and-a-half-foot mineralogist who isn't sure why we're laughing.

I'm suddenly aware of the odd sight this kid and I are no doubt presenting to bystanders. I tell her that it was nice meeting her, that someone is probably looking for her, and send her on her merry way.

The future is still open to this kid, with all the occupations she would no doubt excel at, from artist... to con artist. All I know for sure is that my cold stare needs work. And if anyone is interested in original, local art, I can point you in the right direction.

1st Place Personal Essay 2021

James Mueller

Calhoun Community College

Theta Beta Chapter



Blood is Thicker Than Water

Mattie Knox

As someone who is adopted, I quickly became used to people stereotyping me as Asian, but I was surprised to run into a different kind of stereotyping later, when I admitted that I find the idea of pregnancy to be disturbing. Even though I started out life as an unlucky orphan, I am proud of my past and the first to tell you that I was adopted from an orphanage in China when I was two years old. I am an Asian girl adopted into a white family. Obviously, people ask me questions.

At first, the questions were purely curiosity. Where was I from? Was my family Asian? How did I get to America? Did I speak Chinese? Read or write it? However, as I got older, the questions started to change and evolve. Did I eat everything with chopsticks? Did I play the violin? If I didn't play the violin, did I play the piano, flute, or another instrument instead? There was no possible way an Asian like me wasn't a genius at math, right? Throughout the years, the questions slowly became more invasive. By the time I was in middle school, I learned that middle school questions were the worst. They weren't just questionably rude. They were downright rude and sometimes borderline racist. Why could I not speak Chinese? Wasn't I

betraying my nation by not knowing the language? Did I own a rice picking hat? Could I see out of my eyes like everyone else? What about when I smiled?

All of these types of questions have become common for me. Honestly, I believe I have mastered the art of keeping a straight face. I have always answered the questions as politely as possible and from an early age I was raised to not take them to heart and learn to laugh about them later. But one day, I was asked a question that I struggled with internally for years after.

“Do your parents love you just as much as they love your brothers and sister?”

Let me preface this startling question by saying that this was asked in middle school. The same middle school that I lovingly refer to as, “Hell in a concrete building.” I hated middle school and spent the beginning of high school removing the experience from my mind. Dealing with puberty sucked. Dealing with hormones sucked. Being around maybe three hundred other girls and boys also dealing with puberty and hormones sucked. Middle school just sucked, ok? Yes, I knew the boy who asked that question was just being an insensitive jerk. I knew that even at the time. We were in the lunch line while he was asking me the normal questions about my family and where I was from. When he discovered that my family had other children before me, he then started asking me questions I had never been asked before. Why did my parents want to adopt a child? Were three not enough? Could my mom no longer get pregnant? Was I angry at my parents for taking me away from China? Would I not rather be with my birth parents? To say I was shocked would be a major understatement. I was truly offended by this boy, and somewhat infuriated. I angrily told him off as discreetly as I could in a cafeteria. Adopting kids wasn't a weird new concept that my parents invented. People were perfectly capable of adopting kids even when they had their own. Why on earth was this eleven-year-old worried about my mom's reproductive system? Why wouldn't I want my parents to take me away from China? I was an orphan in China and now I was in a loving middle-class white family. My birth parents couldn't

take care of me and wanted me to have a chance at a good life. I especially wanted to make it clear that yes, of course, my parents loved me just as much as they did my siblings.

I went home that day and immediately told my mom the story. She agreed with me that the boy was being an insensitive jerk. We had a discussion about it that reaffirmed what I already knew. Parents are the people who raise and love you, not just the people you share blood with. I knew without a single doubt that my parents loved me no matter what, and I didn't need to fight my way to the same level as my brothers and sister because I was already there.

“Blood is thicker than water.” This idiom expresses the idea that family and blood relationships should be emphasized more than any other type of relationship. Many learn this at a young age. It is often reinforced through customs, traditions, society, and even sometimes law. Many individuals agree and believe in this idea or, at the very least, understand where it's coming from. I didn't even know that it affected me until I realized that there was a sliver of doubt in the back of my own mind when the middle-school boy asked what he did. He had, in one sentence, made me question my purpose and worth in my own family. As a middle schooler myself, I was already trying to find my way in the world. This had single-handedly caused my sense of self-worth to fester. It didn't matter that hours later my mom, quite strongly, vocalized her denial. The damage was already done. For most of middle school, whenever my insecurities would threaten to control and get the best of me, this idiom would come back full force in the form of a metaphorical raincloud.

As I matured throughout high school, I can say that I underwent a huge personality change that I am now proud of. I transformed from an awkward, meek, doormat-like girl to a confident young woman who isn't afraid to fight for what she believes in. I credit my sister and my best friend for always encouraging me to voice my own opinions even if they were unlike the opinions of people around me. My sister, in particular, promising to always have my back, gave

me the courage to finally declare a strongly held opinion, one that I used to be afraid that people would discover. I don't want to get pregnant.

I feel like most women go through a phase where they don't like the idea of giving birth. It's no secret that it can be a painful moment in life. Despite that, society has made it a norm that most women grow to accept and unconsciously work their life plan around. When people find out about my unpopular opinion that I don't want to experience pregnancy, there are many different reactions. Some just roll their eyes at me and, in a condescending tone, tell me that I will change my mind when I get older. Some tell me that it is my job and privilege as a woman to get married and have children. Many try to reason with me by saying that getting pregnant and having children is, indeed, scary but rewarding in the end, and I will regret it if I don't have the experience.

When my parents realized that I was serious about this very personal opinion, they just smiled and decidedly ignored the statement as if it were an outrageous thought that would go away if they didn't bring attention to it. They, especially, cannot wait until I get out of this "phase" so I can make their grandkid count higher. I'm pretty sure my mom thinks I'm crazy and equates my aversion to pregnancy with wanting to avoid experiencing the joy of children like she does. I think my dad worries that my life won't be fulfilling enough if I don't get married and create a big, happy family like he has and my sister has done as well.

I have struggled with this notion. Today when I think of getting pregnant, bile rises up; my throat and panic starts setting in. For a while, I was worried that there was something wrong with me. Something wrong with my maternal instincts. When my sister assured me that it was totally ok to not want to get pregnant, I visibly relaxed. But then I had another problem. What will I do if I eventually do decide to want children? Will I have to overcome my extreme aversion to getting pregnant? Will I be able to? There is such a high probability that in the future

I will want children, and I will, consequently, eat my words. I know that. What all of the people who question me today don't understand is that I am not saying that I never want children. What I am saying is that I never want to get pregnant. There's a difference. One day my sister reminded me of something:

I don't need to get pregnant to be a mother.

Still to this day, I have no idea how that obvious fact somehow escaped me as an adoptee.

Adoption is an option. Adoption will always be an option. I represent the example of an orphan who is now in a loving home. There are millions of orphans worldwide. There are thousands of children put into the foster system yearly in the United States. The world is in no need of more children. The world is well populated, I promise. I, personally, am forever grateful that my parents understood this. Where would I be right now if that weren't the case? If there comes a day when pregnancy doesn't give me anxiety attacks, and I give birth to a child, I will still adopt. I might even want to become a foster parent. In my eyes, being able to show a child who is already on this earth that they are loved is more magical than the feeling of a kick in my stomach will ever be.

My family gave me a sense of belonging long before I could even walk or talk. My parents fought the battles of paperwork and finances just because they fell in love with a baby on the other side of the world. My siblings called me their sister before I legally was their sister. I want to make that feeling of love possible for someone else. To pay it forward. It would be an honor to teach a child that they are worthy of love, no matter their circumstances. They aren't bound forever to one family or a last name. They get to decide who deserves them. They get to decide who they call family.

Blood is thicker than water? Complete and utter bullshit.

2nd Place Personal Essay 2021

Mattie Knox

Itawamba Community College

Omicron Zeta Chapter



Circus Boy

James Mueller

We stood in line for what felt like hours. It wasn't often that the circus came to our small town, and it seemed like every family in that small town had chosen this particular day to attend. Unfortunately, my family was no exception. I was 12 years old at the time and considered myself far too old and mature to be enjoying something as childish as a circus. My fear of being seen in that line (let alone with my parents and siblings) was an embarrassment that manifested itself both as a surly attitude, and an impatience to get inside.

As we got within a few families of the tent entrance, I could see the ticket-master and a few circus staff members acting as greeters. I had been to circuses before, so this was nothing new. What was different about this greeting party was that one of its members was a small boy, perhaps only two or three years younger than I was.

He was dressed in fancy bright clothes, had a wisp of hair that covered his eyes, and for some reason, in between greeting each guest he would make the weirdest mouth movement I'd ever seen. He would purse his lips and then quickly pinch them over to each side of his mouth. He did this in one smooth back-and-forth motion, almost as if he had a bad itch he was trying to alleviate by crinkling his nose as vigorously and discreetly as possible.

But this odd feature was much less interesting and bothersome than the obvious conundrum at hand: Was this kid part of the staff? A kid with a job? In a circus? Impossible. Not only was this kid shorter than I was, but he was quite obviously younger too, which of course meant that he was indisputably inferior to me.

And yet while I spent most of my time sitting in miserable, friendless classrooms, he got to proudly invite guests into a circus tent! Apparently, he was a celebrity in an authority position who probably got paid money too, which basically made him a grown-up. It wasn't fair, and I felt personally insulted.

This apparent crime against nature, coupled with my deep shame at having to attend a childish circus in the first place (with my parents and siblings no less), made me very sullen, and as we stepped up to get our tickets, I met the boy's timid smile with the sternest, most condescending look I could muster. He cowered instantly, stared at his feet, and did that weird lip thing. At least he knew his place in the pecking order.

I felt a little better.

Inside the tent we found our seats, and the circus performance began. The seating we had procured was such that we could see most of the bleachers that curved around the circus ring, and I marveled that the tent was much larger on the inside than it had appeared from the outside. The show was surprisingly good (for a small circus that is). What it lacked in exotic animals and howling motorcycles, it made up for with hilarious clown acts, fantastic magic shows, and dizzying trapeze performances.

The darkness of the tent made the light effects all the more brilliant, and every so often a spotlight would stray from the center to pan over the audience revealing waves of amused faces.

Despite being unhappy about my attendance, I appreciated the dark interior. That kid door-greeter couldn't see me in the dark, and certainly couldn't tell if I laughed or clapped, and as it turned out, the trapeze artists were so skilled in their acrobatic deceptions that I feared more for their lives than for my precious status in the boy dominance hierarchy.

And so, with thoughts of the despised door-greeter (and his obviously undeserved position) momentarily banished by distraction, I gave myself permission to enjoy the show.

And what a show it was!

Each act was better than the last, and after an action-packed clown act ended in firecrackers and laughter, the lights dimmed in preparation for the next act which was sure to outdo its predecessor. The balmy air hung in anticipation...

*“If it hadn't been for Cotton-Eye Joe
I'd been married a long time ago
Where did you come from, where did you go?
Where did you come from, Cotton-Eye Joe?”*

Suddenly the darkness was jolted to life by the song Cotton Eye Joe by Rednex blasting out of invisible speakers. A golden spotlight cut through the sawdust to reveal a short cowboy with a wisp of hair covering his eyes, expertly wielding a lasso.

I watched in horror as this kid, sporting an over-sized cowboy hat and chaps, began performing increasingly complex rope tricks to an increasingly enthusiastic audience. With a charisma and stage presence that befitted a seasoned actor, he even had the audience clapping

along to the heavy techno beat. My nearly forgotten door-greeting nemesis was no ordinary door-greeter: he was a full-fledged circus performer.

I was mortified.

The circus had betrayed me. I tried to ignore the performance, but conspicuously looking away put me at risk of standing out to the rest of the audience. I decided to turn my judgment on his pathetic performance instead.

I scrutinized his every movement looking for mistakes. I counted the seconds between each swing of the lasso as it looped across his boots for signs of fatigue. But I could find nothing to criticize.

What a show-off.

I rolled my eyes and tried to hide the overwhelming sense of stage fright that should have been his and not mine. I did not join in the crowd's punctuated claps. Hell no! I kept my arms folded and from my distant bleacher seat, refused to reward him with even a smile of appreciation.

But then something strange happened: the music stopped, but the boy didn't.

The cowboy lasso routine was apparently longer than the Cotton Eye Joe track that had been selected as its accompaniment. As the last note of the song faded, so did the energy of the tent. The spell broke, and electricity gave way to sudden and eerie silence.

Time seemed to slow as I turned to look at the audience, rows of glowing profiles, each one a blank mask. Silent. Unmoving. I followed their collective stare to the sandpit in which the

boy danced, held in motion by the glare of the spotlight, surrounded by a perpetually rising cloud of dust. Not a sound from the bleachers, not even a rustle in the air... nothing but the mechanical slapping of the rope against the sand.

For his sake I held my breath. I could feel the dead weight of the audience pressing down on him... feel the moment stretch further and further... reaching for that curtain of volume that had been lifted and now refused to fall.

It was torture.

“If it hadn't been for Cotton-Eye Joe

I'd been married a long time ago

Where did you come from, where did you go?

Where did you come from, Cotton-Eye Joe?”

As quickly as it had stopped, Cotton Eye Joe began playing again. Time returned to its normal pace, and the energy returned to the tent, where it eventually climaxed in applause.

Amidst the ovation, I glared at the young cowboy who bowed awkwardly before jogging off-stage, but I couldn't bring myself to see him as an entitled jerk anymore. Something had changed. I still could not clap for him, but I no longer hated him either.

During what remained of the circus, I contemplated this boy. This rope-tricking cowboy with the wisp of hair covering his eyes. I was filled with a sense of remorse and decided (as a feeble act of penance) to give him something truly valuable for his trouble: a smile from a superior, older boy.

Once again, I found myself waiting in line.

The boy stood at the exit, still dressed in his cowboy costume (minus the hat), with a smile and a thank-you for each departing guest. He saw me coming though, and the smile that was meant for me fell just as it had before, and he covered in the face of a smile that was meant for him.

But exit lines always move faster than entrance lines and leave little time for acts of atonement. I resisted the urge to linger, but for my conscience's sake, I did indulge in one final look back as I trailed behind my parents towards the parking lot.

There he was, smiling timidly and thanking the guests, and in between each thank-you, the same weird lip thing.

On the ride home, I tried to imitate that weird lip motion, but found that I could only successfully do it to the right side of my mouth. With practice I was able to master both sides, and it would take many more months to break the habit all together.

3rd Place Personal Essay 2021

James Mueller

Calhoun Community College

Theta Beta Chapter



Wish You Were Here

Toni Thompson-Morgan

The amount one person evolves throughout his or her lifetime is rarely recognized. One can be raised in a certain environment and grow into a product of quite the opposite. Whether it is the nature or the nurture, the reasoning and intentions behind each individual's actions cannot be estimated or predicted. I have always been the person that parents could be proud of. I was raised to stand up for what was right, and against who was in the wrong. With right and wrong being either black or white, there was no room for grey. Morals were clear and sound, and never swayed by which way the wind blew. I cannot remember how everything had taken a turn. It seems harder and harder every day to recall when I had last let my compass point to a direction that matched my raisings. My surroundings were working against me. My nerves, my health...all vanishing like the ashes flicked out of a car window.

“Are you about ready?” Bree shouted.

“I'm coming, chill,” I grumbled. We have errands to run. It always starts around the same time each night. The beginning of the long nights usually begins with dings from text messages and consumption of our own choice for our own amusement. We have become too good at what we do. Whether it is luck or prayer, we always seem to slide with ease like bandits in the night. Neither of us ever give any thought to remembering how fragile it all is. The danger of even being pulled over, especially in one of our small towns, would wreak havoc-not only upon us, but climb all the way up a ladder that Bree and I stand at the bottom of every day. And what all

for? In the name of “Christian moral values” of course. Oh, give no doubt that the generation above you seems to have all the answers based upon their wisdom they collected from a different age and environment.

“It’s Brett, right? That’s our first stop?” Bree asks.

“Yeah, and I already told him about prices. So, he already knows,” I inform her. Bree gives me that look that does not need any translation. In her eyes, I can see her concern for his behavior for the price change. I nod and shrug my shoulders to let her know in our own language that he had something to say, but I let him know that there was nothing we could do. Bree always leaves the talking up to me. She knows that I am better at it, even though she has been doing this so much longer than I have. She knows her stern voice would only go so far, until the guys would pull on her heartstrings and insecurities to seduce a way for their favor. I think they tried that once with me, and I quickly let them know that I did not come across town to play love games.

That is how it usually went for the most part. The “usuals” do not ask for much, and the new ones will fry every last nerve you have with their high-strung behavior. But overall, they all want the same thing: escape. Every single one of them is running from something. Whether it is their past, their responsibilities, or their own cognition of their deepest, darkest secrets- they need to get away. The wants eventually turn into needs. Even if addiction does not bring them to try for the third time, it usually happens because of curiosity. They never know where to stop until after it is too late.

“Knock! Knock! Knock!” the door rattles. Of course, it is a rattling trailer door. Would you expect anything less? Footsteps across the floor are heard from outside when Brett finally comes to let us in.

“Hey, get in, get in.” He ushers. To the outside eye, it looks like he rushes us in to get out of the cold. However, if you watch him five seconds later, you have a different conclusion when you see the frantic look in his eyes as he looks both ways outside before he shuts and locks the door.

“Everything going okay?” He questions.

“Yeah, it's fine. Starting the work day just like usual,” Bree snickers. She always does have a smug attitude about everything. Sarcasm is her first language. If it ever bothers her conscience about what we do every day, she never lets it show. She has been like that since the first day I met her in high school. She was what the elder people in the town called “fast” when we were growing up.

Without hesitation, money and small, clear bags exchange hands just as usual.

“Umm, I know y'all are busy, “Brett starts, “but if you're not, you can hang around and help me with this. It's just me and my daughter here, and she is asleep in the other room.”

Normally, I am very quick to decline any invitation. I have a lot of stuff to do, and many places to go. The later in the night that we drive, the more suspicious it looks. However, for whatever reason, I look over at Bree and shrug to let her know that it is up to her (for once). After all, you would be an extraordinary type of stupid to turn down an offer to smoke a product you just made a profit on.

“Let me just make a phone call. You can go ahead and start in the kitchen.” I excuse myself. As I walk towards the back of the house where my phone call can be private, I pass a couch with a young child asleep on it. As soon as I see her, my steps immediately pause. I turn to look back into the kitchen to Brett and Bree, but they are completely unfazed. I then look at the child closer. I normally have a rule about children being around. I know Brett said his daughter was here. But the way he made it sound was that she was in her bed, in her bedroom, asleep.

Many people have their limit, and here is mine. I do not like it. I am never one to judge what someone does with their own time, but it is a given to not have any children here. I quickly just swallow my anger and head to the back of the house to delay the next customer.

“I hear you. Alright, I will text you before I pull up,” I confirm. I hang up with him then head back to the kitchen.

By the time I get back, there are many different aromas in the air. Somehow, within the not even ten minutes I had been in the back, Brett must have charmed his way into Bree’s head. She is sitting in his lap and handing me the pipe. I give her a look of disapproval while she flashes back one of carefree and with disregard. I roll my eyes and use the lighter to take my thoughts away from the body I seem to be inflicted by these days.

In my head, I can hear the beginning. The sound of the acoustic guitar, the strings being strummed so carefully. The lyrics saying nothing, while at the same time, saying so many things all at once. “So... so you think you can tell the difference between heaven and hell...” The song plays while visions of my childhood fill my head.

I see my mother, standing on the porch, taking a picture of her two children. It is a flashback by almost two decades. We are in the front yard, my sister and I back to back, a mason jar in each of our hands. We have our mission- catch the most beautiful, yellow butterfly and let our innocence guide us into giving it as a gift to our mom. I am four, and Maria has just entered kindergarten. We both love life at an immense level and allow it to fill us with love. You cannot find anything wrong in our lives if you look for days and nights on end. After the defeat from nature, we give up and race each other to our mother. Her embrace is so warm and calming that the coldest wind nor the strongest wave ever stands a chance against her. The smell of the summer evening air smothers our faces while the powerful sunlight dances on the tops of our shoulders.

I see-I see smoke. It is everywhere. The waves crashing against walls, tables, and everything within its path. It is so thick you can hardly see in front of you. I look to my right and turn white as a sheet. There are eyes staring back at me. A blue so light that has accents of grey. I think to myself *Oh my god. This is it. I finally over did it. I am either hallucinating or dead.* But as I blink harder and lean forward, I notice the face hoisting the head. It is the little girl, Brett's daughter. Her emotionless face with her watery eyes just rips my entire heart into two pieces. *What have I done? How could I have been so negligent?* I know what this means. With the amount of smoke that is in the kitchen alone, she is as lit as we are. My stomach instantly holds the weight of 500 bricks in the bottom of it. The guilt directly eats through my stomach like acid.

I immediately stand up, rush her to the back end of the house, and place her in what I presume to be her room. I lay her in bed and shut the door behind me. I hurry into the kitchen and ruin Brett and Bree's buzz by grabbing her by the arm and announcing our departure.

Bree can always tell when my guilt comes in to play with work. She does not ask why, because there is no need for rhetorical questions. We have had many arguments over it. Of course, she knows why I am upset, but I know that nothing bothers her. While driving us to our next stop, I know the evening will be tainted by my ill mood for the rest of the night. While flushed with shame and anger, my mind struggles between focusing on wet roads and warm memories of my drug-induced illusions. Then is when I have a thought: *my mother. My sweet, kind, caring mother. What would she say? Would there be fury in her voice? Would there be conviction? I just want to hear from her.*

I remember my phone is in my jacket in the back seat.

"Bree, grab the wheel. I need to get my phone," I command.

In one swift move, I twist my spine to reach my jacket in the back and grab my phone.

“Found it.” I declare. I notice Bree’s quietness and immediately look to find her passed out. As soon as I look at the unattended wheel, it is too late. For the first time in my life, I see the end of everything. My fear cripples my vocal cords, and I am too dumbfounded to scream. Before there is a chance, we are head first into a ditch with boulders climbing through the windshield like soldiers climbing a rock wall for a drill. In a flash, I realize the worst consequences of my actions will be direct repercussions my family will face due to my choices in the night. Unconsciousness is whipping me back and forth while I dig to find my religious standpoint in a matter of seconds.

As I fly away from this world, I can hear him- David Gilmour. His cries in the lyrics that are so often overlooked. “What have we found-the same old fears. Wish you were here.” I hear you. I feel you, and now I am gone.

1st Place Short Fiction 2021

Toni Thompson-Morgan

Northeast Alabama Community College

Epsilon Alpha Chapter



Thomas Brown

Felicity Knabenbauer

Thomas sat across the coffee shop, eyeing the thugs standing next to it with eerie suspicion. They seemed to be prowling around, like hungry predators ready to pounce on whatever helpless prey happened to stumble upon their path. Frighteningly, Thomas knew exactly what prey they had come for. Mary Jane, the sweet college student who worked at said little shop on the corner. Being young and kind, she would always bring him a cup of Joe when the weather turned chilly. Thomas only ever had the guts to whisper a grateful thank you before she went back to her daily grind. Most nights she would be working with a friend, but tonight she was alone, and no one knew that more than the men standing not ten feet away from the shop.

Thomas knew he had to do something. He knew he should call someone or try and help, but what could he do? He couldn't stop them himself, not anymore. Neither could he call someone, for he had no phone, nor a single cent he could use for a payphone to call the police. The only thing he could do was scream, but even if anyone did hear him, they would only assume it to be a crazy homeless man and ignore him. Thomas did not panic. He had learned to suppress those types of feelings during the war, but he couldn't stop the sense of dread from crawling up his spine, knowing of what was to happen next.

Mary Jane with her scarlet hair put up in a ponytail busied herself with wiping off some tables. After completion, she scanned the place with squinted eyes, making sure everything was picture perfect before she left. Thomas saw all this through the large window that made up most

of one wall. So did the thugs. Mary Jane soon took off her smock and went into the back. Thomas's fear became more urgent as he saw the men, about four of them, slink into the alley next to the shop. The alley where the back door was placed and where Mary Jane would soon step out and face her fate. Thomas couldn't let that happen. He decided that if he was going to be injured or possibly even worse, die, then his death should mean something. He would risk everything saving this young woman's life rather than expire on the streets because of hunger.

With shaky hands Thomas grabbed his crutch and stood up with it. He hobbled as fast as he could across the street trying his hardest to get there before it was too late. As he turned the corner into the alley he saw a horrendous sight. All four men surrounded Mary Jane, looking at her with malicious intent in their eyes. Mary Jane's eyes were wide with fear. She knew what was about to happen, but hopefully with the small sacrifice of Thomas, she could escape.

The largest of the men, a bald guy looking to be in his mid-thirties started to reach out to her. Without much thinking Thomas bellowed out a loud, "Hey!" All five of them turned to look at him. Mary Jane seemed to be the only one welcoming of his presence. Still, she looked at him with pleading eyes that were not for herself, but for him. She wanted Thomas to leave--to save himself so as to not meet his maker. Thomas wasn't afraid of death; however, only the pain that would ensue before it.

Three of the men scowled at him furiously. Despite that, the bald one, the leader as it seemed, just laughed. Looking Thomas up and down he called out, "Mind your business, old man!" Once the other men got a good look at Thomas through the dark, they as well started laughing. The criminals then started to yell slurs and derogatory terms like, "Hobo" and "cripple." Thomas looked to Mary Jane who had tears streaming down her face. Even after he heard these harmful words Thomas stood his ground. It didn't matter to him that he was useless against them. What mattered was to buy Mary Jane enough time to break free. Thomas, with

stern words stated, "Leave that women alone or there will be dire consequences to yourself." The men started to laugh even harder. One even made a scene as to fall to the ground and hold his sides as if he were in pain. The third companion, a shorter guy, with ugly beady eyes squinted at him and said, "Oh yeah? You and what..." He stopped for a dramatic pause. Instead of the classic "You and what army", he went for a jab at Thomas's disability. "Leg!" He finished with a hefty laugh. Thomas followed their gaze to his left leg, or what would have been his left leg, if it hadn't been blown off thirty years ago. Thomas just smiled and said, "Why don't you come over here so I can show you?" The men stopped laughing after that.

The leader with the crook of his finger singled two of his cronies to come join him. The second largest man stood back to watch and make sure Mary Jane didn't run. It was three against one, or three against three-fourths of a man to be truly descriptive of the situation. Each of the three men steadily made their way towards Thomas, possibly to give him time to run if he chose too. In spite of this, Thomas did not plan to run. He planned to fight. When the little man came running towards him, his fist in the air, Thomas only had seconds to maneuver out of the way. With a quick turn of his body, he just missed the swing of beady eye's clenched hand. This made both him and Thomas stumble. One of his friends in the background laughed at beady eyes' pathetic attempt to harm Thomas. This enraged beady eyes as he went in for another punch. This time Thomas didn't dodge it, but instead let the man come at him with all his little might. Just as the man got close enough to make contact, Thomas swung with his cane as hard as he could and smacked him clear across his head. Thomas heard a promising 'crack' as his cane joined with the man's skull.

Beady eyes fell to the ground and didn't get back up again.

The leader looked at Thomas with something like surprise on his face, but it quickly switched to irritation. The goon next to baldy was the next to make a run for Thomas. Instead of

using his fists as weapons like his confidant, he was going for a more straightforward approach. He pulled from his pocket a switchblade. Nothing impressive, but enough to kill. Thomas took a few steps back, trying to plan his next move. Sadly, not soon enough and the sharp metal of the blade swept across Thomas's forearm. Stupidly he grabbed it in pain, letting go of his crutch and tumbling to the ground. The man with the knife smiled, showing a row of yellow broken teeth. Thomas heard Mary Jane scream a pleading "STOP!" down the alley. The next thing Thomas heard was the obvious slap of skin on skin. Everyone turned to look as Mary Jane fell to the ground with a hard thud, a red mark was already forming on her cheek. At that moment Thomas felt something he had not felt in a very long time. Something he had not had enough willpower to feel since he was young.

Rage.

Thomas, using his one foot, kicked under the ruffian's feet, catching him off guard so that he fell to the ground alongside him. Luckily enough for Thomas, so did the blade. He army crawled his way towards the knife. His arm gushed blood as he started to feel faint. He wasn't going to give up though. Not with this man still alive. He used his bad arm to reach out for the blade. Just as his hand had wrapped around the handle, the man he had just brought down jumped up again and leaped onto Thomas's back. Thomas flattened to the ground, his head hitting the pavement harder than the rest of him. Thomas, even now with a splitting headache, had too much adrenaline coursing through him to dare lose this fight. Thomas flipped over making the man fall right next to him. Thomas wasted no time as he aimed the knife for his throat, and with a skillful thrust the cold steel slid in with ease. The man choked out a gruesome sound for just a moment before going still. Thomas fell back on his back breathing in and out heavily. He knew he didn't have much fight left in him. Although his spirit was strong, his body was weak. After a few seconds Thomas heard the sound of clapping. He turned his head, now

just feeling the max pain that was coming from it. The leader was smiling wide like a little boy who had just found a strange bug to squash. Thomas had nearly forgotten about the other two during the fight.

Nearly.

“Good job old man; you probably just beat up and killed some of the two weakest bone-heads on the planet!” The man bellowed out laughing. Then continued, “Still, it amazes me that even with just one leg AND you being such an old fart, you were able to take down two of my men. You must have had some kind of training. You a veteran or something?” The man stood there waiting for an answer, but when Thomas obviously wasn't going to say anything, his smile dropped. Baldy snapped his fingers at the last one of his men. “He won't talk. Let's make him talk.” Thomas tensed, waiting for them to come over and do something horrible to him. What they did instead was much worse. The man guarding Mary Jane picked her up from the ground by her hair. Mary Jane kicked at him, but her aim was futile. With a fist full of hair, he took his other hand and pulled out a gun, aiming it at her head. Baldy smiled again, this time even more broadly and said, “Alright, now answer my question. If that's what you want to do...” He dragged out his last words--making it evident he had no choice but to. In a small protest, all Thomas did was nod. Baldy just howled in triumph. “Wow! You know, I've always wanted to kill a veteran. War heroes? As if! Just a bunch of whiny people who think they deserve extra rights and acknowledgement just because they sold their lives away to the government? Hah! Just to have the same people use you up and throw you on the streets afterwards.... Irony ain't it?” Thomas didn't say another word. Baldy looked at him with displeasure and said, “Alright then, if you're gonna be that way, I think I'll cut our conversation short...” Next thing Thomas saw was a gun in the man's hand. A silencer was happily placed on it to help with the pesky

sound the weapon would soon make. Thomas closed his eyes preparing for when the trigger would be pulled.

Instead of the sound of a gunshot he heard the sound of a struggle. Through some miracle Mary Jane had found a way to get out of the guard's hold. Considering the way the man was standing, it seemed as if Mary Jane's aim had been a little bit more accurate than the last. She sprang into action, clawing and fighting with all her might. With some luck, Mary Jane's fingernails made contact with the guy's eyes, only seconds before he pulled up the gun and fired. This gun shot was loud, vibrating through the alleyway in a deafening bang that seemed to go for miles. The man had missed Mary Jane by inches and grabbed at his bleeding eyes, yelling out. Mary Jane took this chance to take the gun right out of his grasp. The man tried to reach for it, but Mary Jane wasn't going to risk that. She brought the gun up and fired point blank at the man's shoulder. He flew back into the wall screaming. Nearly half his shoulder seemed to have blown off. Mary Jane looked at the gun in shock. Not believing what she had just done. She shook it off quickly and aimed the gun at Baldy. Her voice shaking, she demanded, "Drop the gu-gun." Baldy just stood there, looking panicked. The scene had just done a 180 on him and he knew it. He kept the gun aimed at Thomas. His weapon was already cocked, unlike the one in Mary Jane's grasp. Baldy still had the upper hand. One move to cock the gun and Thomas would be shot. Mary Jane's hands shook as she took in the situation. Thomas could tell she couldn't risk it. Not when his life was on the line. Knowing what he had to do, Thomas sat up and grabbed at the gun.

Baldy, startled by the sudden move, pulled the trigger. Time seemed to move in slow motion as Thomas felt the bullet pierce his skin and go straight into his abdomen. Mary Jane yelled out a mournful "No!" as she cocked the gun and pulled the trigger. Thomas watched as baldy stumbled back, his hand over his heart. He backed his way into the wall and slid down,

leaving a trail of blood. When his hand fell, the obvious hole in his chest showed Mary Jane's aim had been spot on once again. Thomas laid his head back content to die in peace. The sound of police sirens alongside those of the ambulance could be heard in the background. Thomas could die knowing Mary Jane would be taken care of.

Surprisingly, before the angels could take him away, he felt the wet trickle of water coming down onto his face. Mary Jane was kneeling over him crying, attempting to pull his head up on her lap. She tried to sooth him with calming words saying the ambulance was on its way and that he'd be alright. Thomas grabbed her hand, and the comforting words stopped. "There is no more time," he said solemnly.

Mary Jane's tears came even harder after that. "Please don't say that," She begged. "You'll be okay. You saved my life.... you deserve to live." Thomas laughed a small laugh to himself, as he realized that Mary Jane was an ugly crier. Her face strained in an awkward way as mucus covered most of it. "Mary Jane looked at him confused. "What is it?" she asked. Thomas with a small grin said, "Oh nothing.... It's just a nice thought that I get to spend my last moments in the arms of a beautiful woman." Mary Jane let out a laugh after that--a sad one but a laugh all the same. The sirens were only a couple blocks away now. They would be here soon. Sadly, Thomas would not be. Mary Jane wiping a tear off the old man's face said, "What's your name?" Thomas now slipping into unconsciousness said with his last words "Thomas, Thomas Brown."

2nd Place Short Fiction 2021

Felicity Knabenbauer

University of Wisconsin, Whitewater at Rock County

Gamma Delta Chapter



The Plaza

Justin Wlazlo

Shane and I walked side by side across the bridge discussing our future endeavors. A sturdy, steel and concrete structure supported the insurmountable stress left by our forefathers.

“Aren’t you ever tired? Every time I see you, you look so refreshed and invigorated,” I say to Shane.

“I don’t know what it is to be tired, J. Once I’m called upon, I run to where I’m needed and focus on the task at hand.”

“Sometimes I wish I was programmed that way. Shit, I wake up tired; sick and tired. I’m so sick and tired of this world that we were left. The selfish, uncompassionate monsters that ruined this planet have all died and left us a mess that can’t be cleaned up. All our resources are either gone, hoarded by the government, or in a state of such utter pollution that we’re unable to use them. We have assimilated with machines, ignoring the effects that occur with our natural biology, just so we can barely survive another day.”

“Not all machines are bad,” Shane answered.

“Of course, not buddy. I’m just saying that people have become so reliant on them that we’ve lost touch with what makes us human.”

“I’m sorry J, but I don’t understand.”

“I know...no worries. Let’s just get across this cesspool of sludge and into the plaza.”

Cars moved in both directions in the center of the bridge with no real destination while the Muddy River flowed under us, headed for New York Harbor. Looking down as we passed over it was a frightening reminder of the damage we've done as a species. A river that is now too polluted to fish or swim in, once served as a major trading hub for Native Americans and the early colonists who settled here. Those days have long since passed, and now it was just a flowing reminder of what can result when environmental negligence occurs.

"God, I'm so sick of this shit!" I curse at the sky as we walked.

Each step we took brought us closer to our journey's end. Our destination was the bank plaza where kids in the surrounding areas used to gather and hang out. Back in the old world, adults demonized it and labeled it loitering, but it was much more than that. It was social networking before the internet. Friends would bring friends, and what were once unacquainted people, would connect with each other and further expand their network of souls that all shared at least one common bond; the plaza.

Now, the plaza has changed because of our current situation, but the idea remains the same. It accepts our daily arrivals and holds on to us until the sun begins to set in the outside world. Then she lets us venture out, wishing us safe travels and promising that she'll be there upon our return. This was our safe haven from the outside world, though we weren't immune to pain once we were inside. This was the plaza's plan for us. It was like a cell that we organelles existed within, and the selective permeability allowed for life lessons or the occasional hardship to enter through the pores of the membrane, to prepare us for the hell that we must face in a world controlled by bacteria. Some days were tougher than others, but I always return because I know the plaza only wants what's best for us.

"We've arrived J. Are you ready to enter the plaza?"

"Yes. Thanks for tagging along Shane. I'll see you when I get out."

“Of course, J.”

Stepping into the parking lot, I thought about how great it was to be back at the plaza, where anything could happen. Once I arrived, there were over thirty friends intermingling, prepared for what the day had in store for us. I was received with the usual handshakes and high fives, an ever-evolving tradition that has been passed down since the dawn of man. During the familiar introductions of people I see regularly, I was introduced to a girl I’d never met before. She said her name was Sarah, in a tone so heavenly you’d imagine the sirens would’ve been envious had the sound fell upon their ears. She was visiting family with her boyfriend and was set to leave within the week. I said that it was nice to meet her, playing it as cool as humanly possible, when in all actuality, I was absolutely enamored by her.

Beautiful light brown hair with golden accents that shone in the sunlight fell across her flawless complexion. Her beautiful smile seemed to hold up her dimples in a perfectly symmetrical way. Her blue eyes were like oceans that had yet to be polluted by man. I imagined drowning in them and thought to myself that I’d be okay with that. Her boyfriend said something to us while I was mesmerized, though to me, he sounded like the teacher from the *Peanuts* cartoons. I shook off my trance and nodded with a smile, hoping that was the acceptable response to whatever he was saying. Apparently, it was.

Everyone began to break up into smaller groups and move throughout the property, and after the dust settled, Sarah and I ended up alone in the most serendipitous of ways. I wasn’t going to argue with the plaza’s decision.

“So, how are you liking the area?” I ask.

“It’s really nice here. Everyone I’ve met has been so friendly.”

“That’s why I love this place so much. No matter what’s going on in the outside world, we can always come to the plaza to get away from it all.”

We began to walk around and talk about everything. She told me her last name was Thufferd, but she pronounced it in a way that I had not expected, like a child with a speech impediment who couldn't properly enunciate the "S" sound. She talked about the town she was from, her likes and dislikes, and the music that she listened to while she was drawing or painting. I hung onto her every word, not wanting to forget a single syllable. She continued to envelope me like a comfort blanket, with her words sounding like a choir of angels singing in the sweetest falsetto.

After exchanging pleasantries for a while, I earn a comfortability and trust with Sarah, and she says, "I've been with my boyfriend for two years now. I love him so much. After we graduate, we plan to get married and start a family."

"That's...nice."

I envy the love that he receives from Sarah. Not on a personal level, but the envy of knowing that he possesses something so wonderful and rare. Love with a foundation so solid, that *The House of Usher* sees it as its true counterpart. Love that I'm afraid that I will never know.

A depressing change in my facial expression occurs and Sarah recognizes it. I try to smile. That uncomfortable smile that wants to return to its resting position but continues pressing on to reassure its recipient that everything is okay. Sarah was so selfless and considerate that she smoothly transitioned to a new subject when she noticed my discomfort.

"I know it can be boring to some people, but I'm a huge baseball fan," Sarah says.

A genuine smile returns, and the natural expression once again brings ease to my face.

"I'm a huge Red Sox fan...at least I was. I still have movies of the championships that they won before the outside world became what it is."

“I was born and raised a Mets fan,” Sarah said. “At least we can agree on one thing; the Yankees suck!”

The rest of the day was a whirlwind, and we seemed to connect on so many levels that I continually, and quietly, thanked the plaza for delivering such an amazing experience. It wasn't long after I had arrived at my mental utopia that we met back up with the group, and I was struck from cloud nine. Sarah ran over and hugged her boyfriend and expressed how much she missed him. We were both similar in appearance. We both were charming, and well-liked by others. We both were considerate and loving, at least it seemed that way. What did he have that I didn't...besides her?

In the moment, I was surrounded by thirty or so friends, yet somehow loneliness arrived like a bitter reminder, telling me that there was still a void that needed to be filled. My true love. My better half. The person whom I expect to give my life to and take on the world with. He had that, and I didn't. I felt no ill will towards Sarah's boyfriend, just saddened because he had her.

Everyone sat down and began to talk, and I found a spot at the edge of the loading dock and began to stare off into the plaza's seemingly infinite expanse. The surrounding conversations became more and more distorted the less I paid attention to them. I started to survey the parking lot, in hopes of finding some distraction to take my mind off of her. While scanning the horizon, my eye caught the digital advertisement board that stood at the main entrance of the plaza. I began to watch it systematically cycle through the various deals of the stores that were located within. *Buy two get one free... Fifteen percent off for cardholders...*

My vision became slightly blurred from the lack of effort I put into the continued reading. I was about to move on when something that the board showed caused my crystalline lens to bend, sharpening my view. “Sarah Thufferd 2002-2021.” *That's next year.*

A state of shock and confusion arrived like the opening of a terrible fragrance, which dried down to an appalling feeling of nausea. Trying to harness my sickness and hold back its product, I started looking over the group, searching for Sarah in the crowd. Each person in the plaza was focused on their own situation, except for Sarah, who was staring right at me. Her eyes were sunken, with blackened circles within the orbital sockets. Wounds had appeared on her wrists, and her makeup ran down her face as a result of uncontrollable sobbing.

I was looking at a fallen angel that had been thrown from heaven. A sight so terrifying that I wanted to scream for someone to remove me from this moment, but there was no one there. It was only she and I. I looked around the plaza and everyone had vanished, leaving no evidence of their prior existence. I frightfully look back at the digital display that read like an obituary. It said: “Sarah had spiraled into an extreme depression after her boyfriend broke up with her. She ingested a massive amount of pills and alcohol and proceeded to slit her wrists. She was discovered in a tub, floating in a solution of blood and water.”

“Why did you do this?” I asked her.

She opened her mouth and watered-down blood began flowing out. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I wanted to run over, grab a hold of Sarah, and tell her that it didn’t have to end like this. That I would be her support system in this life...but this wasn’t life at all. This was the plaza. This existence would come to an end the moment I crossed back over the bridge and returned to my reality. I know now, that this is the first, and the last time that I will ever share the same space as Sarah. I close my eyes and rub them hard, trying to wipe the visions of this nightmare away. When I opened them, my blurred vision gradually, refined its focus, and I saw everyone had returned to where they were originally.

I immediately looked at Sarah who was a picture of perfection.

“You knew all al-”

She was slowly nodding with a forced, solemn smile, answering my question before I finished asking it. Sarah knew what the future held for her, but she didn't let it ruin our day together. She knew that her presence was bringing me a happiness that I hadn't felt in a long time, and her selflessness outshone her knowledge of the morbid truth.

In a single moment everyone stood up, and I knew it was time to leave the plaza. I looked at Sarah one last time through welled up eyes and did my best to control the tears that would inevitably fall. Everyone said their goodbyes and started heading in their own direction, preparing for exocytosis. Sarah waved goodbye and turned toward the exit with her boyfriend, their existence flickering the further they walked away. I stood up and started walking towards the river to cross the bridge and return to my reality. The saline solution fell from my tear ducts and pounded the concrete with the force of falling meteors. I knew I shouldn't react this way in situations like this, but sometimes the emotional test is too difficult to endure.

Nearing the end of the bridge, I first glance back at the plaza and watch that world slowly dematerialize, then I tell Shane, "I really appreciated your companionship today. It helped me tremendously with the walk, and I'll ask for your services again in the future."

"Anytime J. I will email you a short survey that you can fill out at your own leisure. It helps me out with future employers."

"Sure thing, buddy. I'll see you again."

He nodded his head as his digital demolecularization began. I walked through the membrane bilayer that separated the simulation from reality and found myself on the edge of town. Buildings blown to bits left piles of rubble scattered throughout the city. Civilians hid where they could, keeping out of sight of the soldiers that had traded their soul for a comfortable life within the walls that the government built. I only have a short walk to my shelter that I've built in the sewer beneath the hell that has taken over the surface. I lifted the manhole cover and

made my way down the ladder, then walked along the path that was built for foot traffic when the sewer was operational. After entering the shelter, I walked over to the couch that I found one night when I was scavenging and put my head into my hands. I wiped away the tears and thought to myself, “I wonder if someone could feel so deeply for me, after only a single encounter?”

Then I got up, opened a can of beans and began planning my route for tonight's scavenging. I am forced to live in this hell, doing what is necessary to survive another day so I can return to the plaza once again.

3rd Place Short Fiction 2021

Justin Wlazlo

State College of Florida – Venice

Kappa Zeta Chapter



Richlands, Virginia

Indalea Coleman

You reach out with your coal-stained fingers,
to drag your children up to pale, chapped lips
And bite down on them with your nicotine yellow teeth.
They taste of decay and you spit them out
only to look upon old faces with no laugh lines.
Colonial streets once white lay cracked
Like the dreams of those who walk them with holey soles.
They said to me:
Will you leave?
And I said no.
Town of broken homes:

From atop the mountain, they look down on you valley people,
So far below that your death throes appear to be the wriggling of worms,
And they wonder: How could anyone sink so low?
They say your children are destined for wickedness and I watch
as your youth blindly trail after fathers with white hoods
or mothers with only orange bottles for comfort.

They tell me that you are choosing not to progress with repulsion wrinkling their features
as you erect a billboard with a number scrawled at the bottom
and the smiling portraits of two high schoolers who will forever lay below the earth.

They walk about with their briefcases, laughing as they call you lazy,
careless of the coal plants closing as the lumber mills are bought out.

The luscious green cut barren and the brown sludge left to run off into you.

They look down with scorn and claim that your dependencies are birthed by choice.

Votes are cast to defund community help and rehabilitation programs
while new eyes watch as opioid induced spasms race through their families to reach them.

They point at you with degree in hand and say you should know better, that times are modern,
yet your children are sent to school with bowed eyes and growling stomachs,
expected to raise their head above the poverty line and pay attention.

To all those on the mountains and beyond who look down upon the Clinch Valley
and see the writhing pain as no more important than the squirming of bugs,

I ask you: Where is your heart?

For surely it cannot be in your chest

if you can look upon a child witnessing an overdose and not feel it stirring,
if you can see an elderly man living in an old truck and not feel a prick of sorrow,
if you can glance past a rail thin child walking the side of the road and not stop to help.

There are no pale hands reaching up from the valley,
for they expect them to be seated away or stepped on.

They do not look up for help and focus instead on the ground.

With track marked forearms, they hold their shovels.

The mines are long closed but they know nothing but digging

and the hole that they collectively work only grows deeper.

Again they asked me:

Will you leave?

And this time I didn't answer.

because I was already climbing away.

1st Place Poetry 2021

Indalea Coleman

Jefferson State Community College

Eta Epsilon Chapter



Callused**
Pilar Garcia

He held my palms
and told me I didn't have "working hands."
And I smiled at him,
With my soft eyes,
And an equally gentle smile.
Taking my hands back,
I stared at them.

Eyebrows furrowed,
Slender fingers curling into fists.
Nails digging into my palms,
Straight into my working hands.
Because of the lack of calluses,
Because of the lotioned skin,
I will always be told the same thing.
"You don't have 'working hands.'"

Because calluses are not formed by tears,
By sleepless nights of studying,

By working overtime whilst being underpaid.
Calluses are not formed by breastfeeding,
Nor teaching our children how to be well behaved.

Calluses are not formed by
enduring years of being treated as lesser--
By gritting teeth while being objectified
By clenching your car keys between your knuckles
On your way home from work.

Calluses are not formed by
The amount of love I've given
In order to raise this generation properly,
By cooking warm meals
By doing the laundry
And by furthering my education.

So I raise my chin,
I unclench my fists
And take his calloused hands in mine.
I run my limber fingers over his,
His calloused hands,
And smile.

“My working hands are different,

As I have learned to care for others

Just as much as myself.

And perhaps

There's a lotion I could lend to you."

2nd Place Poetry 2021

Pilar Garcia

Columbia State Community College

Eta Beta Chapter



A Watch of Black

Keegan Colcleasure

Death wears a watch of all black.

No reason to tell the time

A soul would not dare

To miss their appointment.

So, Death's door waits

Always slightly ajar.

3rd Place Poetry 2021

Keegan Colcleasure

Muskegon Community College

Sigma Zeta Chapter



Are There Still Beautiful Things?

Tinisha Sasso



1st Place Black and White Photography 2021

Tinisha Sasso

Alms Community College, Greeley Campus

Tau Gamma Chapter



Flying Over Mount Hood

Abby Carroll



2nd Place Black and White Photography 2021

Abby Carroll

Northeast Alabama Community College

Epsilon Alpha Chapter



See Beauty in Chaos

Dalia Nolasco



3rd Place Black and White Photography 2021

Dalia Nolasco

Northeast Alabama Community College

Epsilon Alpha