6th Annual
Tempe Writing Contest
Honorable Mentions
## Contents

**ADULT FICTION**

Meg Dobson................................................................. *River to River Chaos*  1

**COLLEGE FICTION**

Brooke Bell................................................................. *No Chaser*  9

**HIGH SCHOOL FICTION**

Norah O’Donnell.......................................................... *Wildflowers*  11

**ADULT POETRY**

Denise DeVries.......................................................... *My Father Reflected in a Table*  14

**COLLEGE POETRY**

Charlie Saifi............................................................. *Never Fall in Love with an English Major*  16

**HIGH SCHOOL POETRY**

Aliyapadi Hariadi....................................................... *To an Old Frenemy*  19

**ADULT NONFICTION**

Carl Patrickson......................................................... *Real Cowboys*  22

**COLLEGE NONFICTION**

Alex Wong................................................................. *To be Average in an American Hot Pot*  25
“Darn it.” Daniel jerks the rope to the right, bumping Gavin. The swinging bicycle tire snags on a passing tree torn by its roots from upriver. Despite his great strength, the Mighty Mo wins. The line rips from Daniel’s hands, scoring them with blood. Adding insult, the bobbling tire waves a farewell as it disappears around the bend.

Beside us, a speeding semi honks and swerves to avoid us. The driver’s baldhead shines in sunlight. Sandy screams as diesel fumes swamp us. Sam pulls her close. The physics of the truck’s path catches my attention—it’s off.

Undistracted Gavin gazes at the flooded Missouri River. “Wasn’t that a Gatorskin tire?” Daniel nods.

Pause. Sandy says, “The tires with the pricey Kevlar inside?”
Double pause. Gavin asks, “Why dunk it in the freaking river anyway?”
Without a word, Daniel’s size 12s stomp off the steel-plated bridge, each step clanging. We join him in the van’s packed interior, discarded Doritos bags crunch under foot. The interior reeks of teen road trip. Racked on the roof are our bikes, Daniel’s sans the front wheel.

Sam explains the tire dunk, “Iowa Ride tradition.”
This is my bike team’s first Ride Across Iowa. And it was going to be the hottest on record, but we were Arizona tough.

Sam continues, “You dip the rear wheel in the Missouri River and, after riding across Iowa, dip the front in the Mississippi. Sargon the Great washed his weapons in the Persian Gulf and then in the Mediterranean after conquering everything in between. Same concept.”

Gavin twists the metaphoric knife. “Bad sign to blow the first dip, huh?”
Sandy speaks fast before Daniel removes Gavin’s head. “I packed two spare tires.”

Snorting, I say, “You packed a 50-gallon water barrel strapped to the roof for showers, lawn chairs, and cases of power bars and energy drinks.”

“Hey! I’m your Support and Gear Driver. You need that stuff.” She says, “Turn up the AC. It’s boiling hot in here!”

Daniel drives onto the highway and, bored, I Google milk hauler physics. With liquid sloshing around at that speed? Why didn’t it tip over?

###

In the middle of the night and sweating inside my pup tent, a Spanish lullaby floats from across the lake. The singing stops and a baby’s cries pierce the night. Sing. Cry. Sing. Cry. Unable
to sleep, I climb out of the tent, following the haunting voice. The moonlit path ends at a state park shelter hidden beneath a swath of pines. A high wire fence separates a highway rest stop from the park ground, but it's cut for illicit access.

A silver-haired woman, stooped with age, sits at a picnic table. Beside her, the singing woman holds a baby. A child peeks out from her skirt. Despite the girl's five-year-old appearance, her thumb is in her mouth. She removes it, points to me, “Moma?”

The adults freeze. “Your lullaby brought me. I'm Kami.”

“I sing to my baby too. I’m Maria.” Her English is good. She grabs her well-loved doll from the table and, unnoticed by Maria, something falls out of its dress pocket.

I pick the thing up and brush off pine needles that prick my fingers. Christmas scent rises from its tiny form wrapped in bright colored threads. I hold it out to her. “Your dolly has a doll too.”

Maria snatches it, enclosing it in her tight fist. “It’s my Muneca quitapena. My Mameta, my grandmother, gave her to me.” Then she giggles.

The aged woman, Mameta I assume, hands me a cinnamon tortilla. As I eat it, granular sugar sticks to my fingers, and I lick the sweetness away.

“And your Daddy?”

Maria ducks her head. “He died. Moma takes us somewhere safe.” Her child’s hand secrets the tiny form back into her doll’s dress pocket.

“What does Muneca quitapena mean?”

“Magic. I tell her my worries. In the morning, my troubles will be gone.”

I lean toward her. She smells of travel and love. “Does it work?”

With breathless hope, she whispers, “Not yet.”

From the highway rest area, an angry voice. “Venga! Venga!”

The family rises, rushing through the wire fence opening. Maria waves before disappearing around a silver tanker trailer.

###

10,000 smiling bikers weave around vendors hawking mouthwatering foods. The county fair atmosphere is infectious. Over a microphone booms, “This is a ride, not a race. Enjoy Iowa. Stay safe!” Bicyclists disgorge from Start Town like corn out of a silo—orderly but efficient. Spinning wheel sounds hum in my ears.

Halfway to Lunch Town, my legs ache and my back kinks in pain. Gavin and Daniel had sprinted ahead. Beside me, Sam is in bad shape. That heat? We didn't count on the humidity.

Passing riders speed up with new vigor. An Air Force Team guy shouts back, “ICE CREAM!” Sure enough, a small farm engine cranking kegs thunks ahead. I imagine cold melting in my mouth.

“Hurry up!” I shout at Sam. Our heads tilt to decrease drag as we race the steep downslope, hoping for good momentum for the ride up Ice Cream Hill.

“HEADS UP!” people scream. Bikers skid to stops. At the valley base, a red semi with a silver tanker trailer guns it through the stream of riders. The semi driver T-bones with a Ford
Focus. The loud impact spins the car 360 degrees, missing bicyclists by micro fractions. Its engine smashed flat.

I scan the ravaged scene. Riders are down, but most cluster at the totaled car. No one's gotten out of it. “The car’s driver is hurt.”
“And that stupid semi driver?”

###

From Ice Cream Hill, we watch EMTs load the deceased Focus driver into an ambulance. “Sam, did you get it on your helmet cam?”
“Yep.”
“Let’s see it.”
In the upper right corner, the bumpy video captures a red semi cab’s front. The trailing tanker is off screen. I rewind and zoom in on the cab’s DOT number. Once more, call 911.

###

At Lunch Town, we eat at the hollering Mr. POOOORK CHOOOOOPS’ stand, finishing it with a slice of apple pie. My butt has no feeling and my calf muscles scream in pain. The Mississippi is days away. Beat, my team heads for the city square’s entertainment while I opt to nap in a hammock.

In my dreams, little Maria sings lullabies to her Muneca quitapena. Behind her, the parked semi’s red cab with its milk trailer shimmers under the rest area’s streetlamp. “VENGA! VENGA!”
“Kami?” A woman dressed like Pantsuit Nation says, “I’m Agent Melissa Crew from ICE.”
Groggy, I seek meaning for the acronym: Immigration Control and Enforcement. An image of Maria’s non-English speaking family flashes. I climb out of the hammock.
Agent Crew hovers in too close, sticks a photo in my face. “You sent in the .jpeg of the tanker trailer?”
“To 911? Yeah.”
The woman jabs her chin up, down. Beside her is an older Hispanic man sporting a bashed-up cowboy hat that shades his eyes. Behind him is my team: Daniel serious, Gavin curious, Sandy and Sam with wide-open eyes. So, Agent Crew found them, and they brought her to me.

“Troopers used the photo’s DOT number and arrested the driver as he crossed Interstate 80 outside Adair. It’s a small-town northeast of here on Interstate 80. Did you see the tanker behind it?”
“ Barely.”
“The driver dumped the tanker truck, and he’s not talking.”
From my memories come disjointed thoughts: illegal immigration, ‘Moma’s taking us somewhere safe,’ an abandoned tanker trailer. Then an old news report.
My mouth gets dry. “A few years ago, traffickers left a train’s tanker car at a farmer’s co-op
here in Iowa, right?"

The Hispanic man says, “Yes. Illegal immigrants locked inside without water in the heat. All died. I was there.”

Trapped bodies. I sweep a shaking hand across my face, fearing for little Maria. “I saw it earlier. The semi.”

“Where?”

“Twice. At a rest stop and on a Missouri toll bridge. It’s a milk hauler.”

I close my eyes, returning to that moment when the semi blasted past us on the bridge. Then I reviewed the darkened and vague glimpse of it at the rest stop. The image I’d not recognized until my dream.

Physics never lies. I’d researched it yesterday. Milk haulers don’t have baffled compartments to offset shifting liquid inside. Like a child carrying a pail of water, the milk sloshes and splashes. That big hauler held thousands of shifting gallons. That sudden swerve on the bridge should have upset the rig. It hadn’t. I’d assumed it was empty.

“There was a folding stepladder off the back beneath the rear access panel.” My stomach rolls thinking of Maria’s family climbing into that tanker’s dark interior. Abandoned. No way out.

The man takes the photo, points to the strange box on the tanker’s front. “Air conditioning unit. No battery. It runs off the cab.”

Milk haulers didn’t have refrigeration. Milk comes warm from cows and stays that way until pasteurized. It didn’t need an auxiliary AC unit.

“Were holes drilled along the tank’s sides? Some sort of crude ventilation system?”

I mentally zoom in on the bridge’s swerving trailer image, angry I’d missed that detail.

“Yes.” The shudder begins in my toes and climbs until I can’t breathe, imagining that without an AC unit how hot it would get inside it. How MUCH TIME does Maria and her family have?

I’d told my team about my early morning hike, and they make the leap too. Sandy gasps.

The guys get angry—fast. I explain about Maria’s family.

Agent Crew—a woman of few words—leaves.

The man’s lips turn up a micro fraction. “I’ll keep you posted from your 911 number.” Then he adds, “These coyotes who do this? They will kill. Stay on ride. Stay safe.”

Then he rushes off into the heart of the investigation where we can’t go.

I ask my team, “Remember when you twist open an Oreo cookie and lick off the creamy frosting inside and then eat the crisp chocolate cookie part? It’s great when you’re a kid. Not a kid anymore. I eat them whole.” Those agents are searching for Maria and her family without me.

###

I yank out the van’s road atlas, flipping to the Iowa map, and circle the four known locations of the semi: the toll bridge, the rest stop, the accident scene, and the Adair arrest.

Somewhere between those final two places, the driver abandoned the trailer. A tanker filled with people—people who will die in the heat, including little Maria.

Hopeful Sandy asks, “The Bald Guy let them out, right? Before he left them?”

Daniel says, “No witnesses.”
I say, “You heard the agent. Like that abandoned train tanker, this guy left his live cargo locked inside.” Every minute counts.

Maria and her family aren’t cargo! I turn to the map, muttering, “Interstates have video cams, but he’d know where they were. And weigh stations where someone might notice the modifications. He jumps on and off the Interstate.”

Sam says, “If he came from the Texas border, he’d come up the center of Iowa. He’s coming from the southwest, maybe Arizona or New Mexico, but why cross at the Plattsmouth bridge? That’s not an east/west highway?”

Sandy brings up her phone’s GPS screen. “Nebraska City bridge closed—flooded!”

I summarize, “That’s it. He diverted north, crossed at Plattsmouth, and spent the night by Lake Manawa like we did.”

Sam nods. “Where he didn’t count on 10,000 bike riders and closed crossings.”

I’m haunted by Maria trapped in rising nuclear heat levels.

Sandy says, “They’ll find Maria and her family. I mean, you can’t hide a giant tanker, even if it’s left in a field. It’s higher than corn stalks.”

“Right.” The town is quiet and void of bike riders now. It closed its doors, forcing riders to the next location. If the hit and run driver waited, he’d have been fine. Find a spot, hunker down, and wait. He hadn’t. “The driver didn’t count on 10,000 riders. He doesn’t have live GPS with current road traffic conditions.”

Sam asks, “He’ll take the direct route kitty-corner across Iowa to Adair.”

Sandy says, “Except the Nishnabotna.”

Daniel, “Huh?”

“The river silly.” She zooms in on the GPS map. “Avoca’s Nishnabotna bridge might be flooded too. He knows the route and doesn’t risk it. Especially if he doesn’t have GPS traffic alerts.” She checks. “It’s not closed! It’s open.”

“That’s where ICE will search.”

I trace my finger up the straight twelve miles, accident site to Interstate 80. “But this jerk isn’t connected. He headed north.” I leave another 911 message.

We stare at the map. Minutes count...

Daniel tosses his lawn chair into the van. “Let’s do this.”

Sandy drives, taking us back along our path to the accident intersection. I point north, and Sandy drives that way. We pass sheriff vehicles turning onto the angled highway 6 at Oakland while we continue north.

I say, “The driver would use a farm lane. Maybe a machine shed to hide the trailer.”

Sandy drops Gavin and me at the first likely lane and takes Daniel and Sam to the next. Then she returns to pick us up and we leapfrog past them. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

An hour later, wilting under the afternoon’s hot sun, we’re still at it. Gavin and I jog along a conifer-lined lane with deep drainage ditches on either side. It ends at a massive century old barn, the house long gone. That sounds romantic, it’s not. It’s a miracle it’s standing. No milk hauler. Thinking of Maria, I scream in frustration. “We’re running out of farm lanes. Not far to Interstate 80.”

Gavin says, “Kami, we’re working a hunch, not a clue.”
“Let’s look behind the barn.”
And there it is: big, silver, abandoned. Gavin yanks out his phone. “No bars.” The rear hatch locked, he grabs the steel ladder railing and climbs to the manhole cover on top.
Gavin yells, “Help me! It’s jammed.” No lock, it’s a crank wheel like on a submarine. Perilously balancing atop it, we twist it free. It dangles on a chain, thunking against the tanker’s side. Inside, it’s dark, but in the tiny cone of sunshine, I see desperate faces. Heat rushes out. “Maria?”
“Kami?” Her weak voice strings out my name in a gasp.
“Are you okay?”
“Yes, but Mameta...” Other voices from inside shout for help, blocking her voice.
Over that, I hear a deep diesel growl coming from the farm lane. “That’s not a tractor.”
My eyes meet Gavin’s. These people won’t stay quiet. “Oh my God, we have to put the lid back.” Gavin gravely nods.
“No!” comes from the trapped people.
I turn on the small flashlight around my neck that overprepared Sandy gave me. Toss it. “Catch!” In the spinning freefall arc of light before it is caught, I see Maria with her mother holding the baby. Beside them, on a metal bunkbed is Mameta, not moving. I whisper, “I’m sorry.”
Sam and I replace the cover, blocking their desperate pleas, and scramble down the ladder.
We rush to the decrepit barn’s corner to see a semi cab on the lane. “Coming to get it.” I check my phone. Still no bars. “We have to warn Agent Crew.”
Sam says. “We take the ditch, slip into the pines, and get to Sandy.”
“No, you go. Find cell coverage. I’m staying here.”
“Kami...”
“Maria and her family are in that tanker. I’m not leaving.”
“Stubborn.” He sprints into the muddy ditch.
As for me, I peer through the barn’s cracks.
Without urgency, the driver with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes drives past the milk hauler and backs into a hitching position. He exits the cab, leaving the door open and the diesel engine idling, crossing to the opposite side. Exhaust fumes waft into the barn.
I assume he needs to hook up things, including the AC unit. With vehicle between us, I climb in the high cab. It reeks of cigarette smoke. The dashboard is a complicated jumble of dials; the gearshift knob shows ten gears. There’s scraping sounds from behind as the driver attaches things. A monitor light labelled AC goes green. Maria has cool air! Overhead to my right is a pull cord for the truck’s horn. I groan at my audacity. What? Drive this thing?
POP. A gun shot!
Gavin dodges, running fast for the sight-blocking conifer trees. Below me, the man levels his handgun in a professional braced stance. No off-the-cuff shot this time.
I yank the cord and the semi’s horn blares loud and deafening—even Sam twists to check. Surprised, the man leaps to the side without firing and looks up from under his baseball cap at me. Great, Dodgers fan.
He races to my side. THUNK! He leaps onto the cab’s lower rail step, raising his gun. I duck, grab the steering wheel as a fulcrum point, and kick fast and hard. One strike to his nose and blood sprays. He falls to the ground as I slam the door closed, locking it.

I shove one foot against the clutch while pressing the other against the gas and jam the stick shift into gear. Amazingly, the vehicle lurches forward. The man blasts bullets through the metal door-shell that exit through the front windshield. Glass bits fly, stinging my skin.

THUNK! He’s back on the first step, climbing fast. I floor it and crank the huge wheel to the left, hoping to scrap him off against the old barn, but the semi turns easier than I imagined. It plows into wood with a BOOM! I madly correct to the right.

There is a bone crunching sound as the man’s capped head disappears. The barn gives an ominous groan that grows toward nuclear. Tons of lumber crush the Giant fan. A tidal wave of dust fills the air.

The semi shudders and dies. Silence follows. In the rearview mirror, I wait for the man to emerge from the rubbish pile. He doesn’t.

###

I killed him. Then I tell myself, Knock it off. Guilt stuff later. Maria needs you!

Removing the keys, I race to the rear door and unlock it. Panicked shouts as it swings open. The weak occupants stumble down the stepladder into the sunlight. They sit wherever shade is found.

Sirens wailed entering the lane. Too early for Gavin. My earlier 911 message worked, because Agent Crew and professionals arrive. I stay by the tanker’s rear door, peering into the sweltering darkness. Maria hasn’t come out.

The Hispanic agent shoves me back, screaming, “Get the baby spot!”

My patience is gone. I grab the door to climb in, but the quiet man blocks me. “This is a crime scene.”

Agent Crew knocks me aside, handing him a portable spotlight and a toolbox marked ‘Evidence.’ Crew retreats with her cell phone to her ear. “I need a transport bus.”

“Maria!” I yell into the tanker. Only the baby’s cries echo back. Helpless, I wait outside.

Later, the EMTs exit with a stretcher. Under a dark plastic sheet is a thin, emaciated body. Her long silver hair slips off the stretcher. It’s Mameta. I’d closed the tanker’s manhole cover. Had it been her last chance, and I’d killed her?

The Hispanic man exits with Maria cradled in his arms. Her mother with her crying sister is on his heels.

Maria sees me and kicks wildly. The man lets her go, and she rushes to me. I lean down and her small arms encircle my neck. Her fragile body is so small, so tiny. Tears flow onto my neck, and I weep as well. Eventually, I release Maria into Agent Crew’s care who ushers the family into her SUV. Then it follows the ICE bus filled with passengers bound for deportation. At the lane’s end, the bus turns south, but SUV turns north.

The quiet man watches it disappear in the distance.

I push. “You aren’t taking them with the others.”
Permanent worry lines surround his dark eyes, hardened by years in the hot sun. “Maria’s father was my informant, and he died getting them here. His family has paid enough. They deserve their freedom.”

“You’re letting them go?”

“No.” Then he waggles his hand. “They have disappeared. It happens.”

He holds out something. “Maria says, ‘It worked!’ There was a price to pay, but it worked.”

“She died before you found them.”

He places the Muneca quitapena into my palm. The satin-thread doll smells of pine needles, travel, and love. It smells of little Maria.
Jenny’s contorted face after downing her shot of whiskey makes my blood boil. She reaches for her ginger-ale, and I want to smash her glass against the bar. I try not to let the anger change my face, taking my own shot and remaining as stoic as a statue. I detest her sign of weakness, sign of saturation, and suddenly this night out seems like a waste of time.

I don’t understand people who need a chaser. Who can’t drink life straight. Who need something to sweeten its sour bite. Their watered down lives, with their watered down dreams assigned to them by someone somewhere whom they looked up to at one point, watered down relationships, watered down experiences. People about as interesting as a piece of white bread.

But maybe I’m projecting. My own life has been pretty cut and dry lately.

Jenny smiles and me and looks around the club. “So, how’s the business going? The app?” She asks, genuinely interested. I soften. There’s no need to be so cruel, I tell myself.

“It’s good, we’re still in seed capital.”

“That’s good,” Jenny says. “I think,” she murmurs. I watch her curl into herself, embarrassed of her own ignorance. I would have just told her what that meant, if she asked. I’ve learned not to shame people by answering the questions I read so plainly on their face. Sometimes people don’t want their questions answered.

Jenny bubbles up again, blond curly hair bouncing along her shoulders. She nods towards a group of people at the corner of the crowded bar. “She keeps trying to catch your eye, Sam.”

I do a lazy maneuver towards the corner of the club, and see a girl with a black bob eyeing me. I look back to Jenny and grin. “You’re right.”

“Ask her to dance!” Jenny says, the alcohol hitting her system. Ugh. Lightweight. That same boil of detest burns up my gut. I push it down. I’m trying to learn to accept people as they are. Not everyone built up a tolerance to liquor due to trauma-induced alcoholism.

“Eh.” I shrug. “Maybe if she comes to me. Let’s go dance, though.”

Jenny and I shimmy towards the dance floor, and sway to the music. It’s some sort of techno beat-lubricated funk, something Gesaffelstein would be ashamed of. I wonder what someone like that is doing tonight, if someone self-actualized is dancing at a shady D.C. bar with a friend who sometimes makes them sick. I see the girl moving towards us, and she begins to dance too. For me, the thrill of it isn’t there. This girl dances in the controlled movements of someone trying to capture an audience. Now, I only want someone who dances for themselves.

Life is pretty boring in this way sometimes.

As I’ve progressed, moved away from the bleak dark pit that created my need to endlessly shoot whiskey shots, I’ve found a nostalgia I wish would end itself. Those days I was like a bull
shark, navigating mindlessly from injury and damage like blood scent to blood scent. I was equally destructive. Jaws had nothing on my capability of leaving despair in my wake. I could decimate a town faster than anything out of Spielberg’s imagination.

Jenny didn’t know me well then. She’s a new addition to my friend group; it’s a group that dwindled to almost nothing when I decided I’d rather be a dolphin than a shark. I abandoned all those other sharks in my wave of change, and despite their desire to reconnect I can’t let myself participate, to enable the damage.

Jenny is put-together, presented in a package that’s equally hireable and dateable. I feel like I don’t deserve her sometimes. Despite my change of heart, I still feel like I’m wearing a sign that reads “dangerous shark, befriend at own risk.” My ability to smell pain and trauma is the same, but it no longer draws me. The only problem is I’m no longer excited by the prospect of...anyone.

There’s something about traumatized people that is like a hurricane. If you’re also a hurricane, you feel at home, like you understand that spiral of storm and destruction. You’re drawn to other hurricanes, making superstorms that wreck whole cities. Now that I’ve dissolved into the Atlantic, I feel empty, bored. Like now that there’s no storm, I lack anything interesting.

I’m just another happy dolphin.

I could point out four hurricanes just by a glance around the migraine-inducing strobe lights. And part of me aches for them. I watch them make out with strangers, gyrate against them like it’s their only escape. I used to let people use me, to feel something, to navigate the black pit, because someone wanting you feels like existing. If I were to makeout with a few randoms tonight, I know Jenny would judge me. She doesn’t want the hurricane. Or maybe she would still love me, like I still love her even though she needs a chaser.

Jenny yells above the music, “Do you want another shot?”
I smile. “Sure,” I say.
The narrow dirt road is worn, cracked, and forgotten. Splinters of golden sunlight shine through the white, fluffy clouds to reveal a powder blue sky. On the left side of the road, an apple orchard stretches to the towering, snow-capped Rocky Mountains in the distance. The green leaves of the apple trees rustle in the cool autumn breeze, carrying their sweet scent. A flock of sparrows occupy many branches of the orchard. Their melodious chirping makes me think of better times. To the right, there is a meadow of luscious grass, where a sea of wildflowers resides. Their colors range from vibrant oranges, pastel pinks, and deep purples. The scents of the crisp, fresh apples and autumn wildflowers spread a smile across my face.

I shuffle along aimlessly as one does when they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. My body and mind are worn like the soles of my dirty boots. In the distance, I see the outline of a man sitting on the wooden steps of a dilapidated house. My pace quickens as I approach him with angst. It has been so long since I have talked with another man. My wrinkled, chapped fingers tighten around the headstock of my precious guitar. Like all humans, I crave company. Living on the streets alone wears on a person. When you are homeless, people look straight through you. They treat you like you are invisible. My guitar is my only source of solace in a cruel and selfish world. I have finally reached the man on the steps. I recognize his lonely, crinkled eyes and pained smile, I see the same expression when I look in the mirror.

I stretch out my hand saying, “Howdy, my name’s Bill.”

A calloused hand reaches out and firmly shakes mine saying, “Nice to meet ya Bill, I’m Jim.”

Jim has a respectable mound of salt and pepper colored hair on his head and a scraggily beard. He wears a tattered and faded green army coat and patched baggy jeans. I sit down on the step next to him.

“What war did you serve?” I ask.

Jim replies, “I served in World War Two. You?”

“How did you know I served?” I reply.

Jim says, “I recognize the look in your eyes and the lines on your face. Much like myself, you have seen things no man should ever have to.”

I respond, “World War Two as well.”

“Where were you stationed?” he asks.

“Cornwall, England,” I reply.

“No kidding, I was a couple towns north,” he says.
“I was under the command of General McKelly,” I add.
“I know him. Any friend of McKelly is a friend of mine!” he responds.
“What a small world,” I reply. “I have tried to forget the things I saw in the war, and the
pain of the guys we lost. I found this guitar not too long ago. I saw it on the side of the road. I fig-
ured it ain’t got no home, just like me, so I picked it right up. I used to have one just like er’ when
I was a boy. Now I write songs and it helps get me through some of the pain. Would you like to
hear one?” I ask.
He replies, “You bet!”
The glowing sun begins to set as I strum my tune. The soft melody fills the sweet-smelling
air. I let the music fill me with joy and hope. As the song comes to an end, I look over at Jim. He’s
in utter shock.
His eyes are bright as he says, “Bill, you will be a star. Tomorrow, we are going to the near-
est town, and you will get a job as a musician.”
“I don’t know. Do you think I could make it?” I inquire.
“Absolutely,” Jim says. “I want to be your manager if you’ll have me?” he continues.
“Why not?” I reply.
A setting sun is now replaced by a fully illuminated moon and numerous twinkling stars.
Jim and I walk over to the apple orchard and pick some gems for dinner. After eating our fill, we
settle on the porch gazing up at the bright stars.
“How old were you when you got drafted?” I ask Jim.
“I was thirty-four. How ’bout you?” he asks.
“I was only twenty-two,” I reply. “How’d you get on the streets?”
He replies, “I got married right before being drafted. She was a small and beautiful woman,
with long soft hair, kind eyes, and a joyful soul. Before I left, we bought a nice farm with five acres.
A few months ago, when I arrived back from serving I made my way home, only to find that my
beloved wife had died of pneumonia the winter before. To make matters worse, the government
repossessed our land and sold it to another family. I didn’t know how to deal with my problems,
so I sought the bottle. Drinking seemed to ease my pain. The night I ran out of money, I was so
scared I just ran out into the night. I found this old house and have been sleeping on its steps for
the past couple weeks.”
“I’m so sorry,” I respond.
“That’s enough about me. How did you end up on the streets?” he asks.
“While stationed in Amsterdam, I got a letter from my mom saying she was really sick.
When I got back, I used all of my money to pay for her medical bills. She died two months ago.
I tried to get a job, but none would hire me because of my shell shock. I decided to travel to the
next town in search of work, and then I ran into you.”
“We’ll finally catch a break when you become a musician,” Jim says.
Jim had long gone to sleep, but I still can’t seem to drift off. As I stare up at the stars, I can’t
help but think back to the horrors of the war. Spending time with a fellow soldier takes me back
to the days of combat. My heart begins to beat erratically, my fists clench up, and I feel a weight
on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. Horrible visions of fear, hatred, bodies, and despair. As
soldiers, Jim and I were taught that you must never show emotion, because that is a weakness, and
weaknesses got you killed. Jim laying on the ground so stiffly looks all too familiar. My eyes well up and I grieve for my mother, the countless fallen soldiers, and permanently damaged. I grab my guitar and softly strum the cold metal strings. They give me comfort. With all my emotions out, I begin to write a song.

In the morning, the warm sun on my face awakens me. I remember my newly written song. I shake Jim awake, telling him the news. I start to play my song for him. Its sharp notes are filled with desperate hopefulness. When I finish the song I look over at Jim and see his eyes filled with tears.

He says, “I can’t help but think of my dead wife. Before I left for the war she told me, “You must fight for your life and a place in this world, like a wildflower fights to flourish in a barren field.” Those words were the last ones she ever spoke to me and were the only thing that got me through the war. He quickly changes the subject saying, “Once you are famous friend, we won’t have to worry about anything.”

“I’ll call my song Wildflowers in honor of your wife,” I say. “Are you ready to head off?” I ask.

“Yes,” responds Jim.

As we walk along the dusty, dirt road we both realize how fortunate we are to have met each other. We see a sign for the small town of Telluride, Colorado. As we arrive in the breathtaking mountain town, it dawns on me how insane our plan is. I am supposed to play music on the streets and somehow become a star, all while looking like a bum. I express my concern to Jim and he reassures me.

I set up shop on a corner and do what I love the most: simply play music. The crowds of people don’t intimidate me. I am at peace. The first week comes to a close and we have twenty-seven dollars! We take our new wealth and buy new clothes. I feel as though we might have been discouraging some listeners with our appearances. Jim has a way with words, so he volunteers to go into a local bar and talk me up. The outcome is amazing. The townspeople like my music so much, they invite me to play in the bar from seven to ten every night. People come from all over to see me play! New feelings sweep over me. Is this what hope, happiness, and fulfillment feel like? It has been a long time...
The varnished luster has lasted all these years in a pair of tables reflecting my father’s craft.

Before he was a knickerbockered Chicago boy playing kick-the-can in the street, the tree towered high in the fresh mountain air of my grandfather’s dreams. As they packed up and moved to a Colorado farm, it sheltered birds and shaded the forest floor.

Someone cut that tree into boards as he enlisted, missed his bid for bakers’ school, learned airplane repair, then married my mother. The boards seasoned while he worked in a gas station, struggled through the math to be an engineer, and finally decided to teach instead.

Now a man, but with no war to fight, my father got up in cold dawn to crouch in a frozen field or sit with baited hook by a rustling stream, inhaling fresh air in silence, waiting for his chance.

He hunted to feed four, bringing home trout and pheasant, rabbit and venison he cleaned and prepared for cooking as the wood waited to become something.

One day, alone in a quiet workshop, undisturbed by tobacco-chewing students and irate parents, he measured the boards twice. With sharpened tools, he cut perfect, straight lines. Planing, sanding
with gentle hands, smoothing wood to satin,
he breathed the scent of the mountains,
in the same silence, with the same sharp focus.

I imagine him happy then, angling
the table's legs with a fisherman's patience
and drilling the dowel holes carefully,
like tying a fly. Precisely as he cast his line,
he mitered the drawer face and fitted it in place
like pieces of a broken dream.

While he divorced, traveled, married
and remarried, the pair of tables stayed mated.
Someday, their ashes or dust will join the earth
and all of us, but for now, they reflect the man
I think my father wanted to be.
never fall in love with an english major,
because he has a playlist for everything.
every emotion, every mood, every setting to ever exist in his mind, he has a playlist for it,
and whenever you go on midnight drives together, he plays the same one,
and you miss the songs that used to play on the radio. (5)

never fall in love with an english major,
because he wears the same thing every day:
an oversized sweater with sleeves that go past his hands and jeans that don’t quite fit
and his definition of fancy is wearing such a sweater over a button-up shirt,
and good lord, he thinks argyle is still an acceptable pattern to wear. (10)

never fall in love with an english major,
because coffee runs through his veins like brandy runs through your father’s.
coffee shops are a second home, but only the hole-in-the-wall places --
he'd never be caught dead in a Starbucks --
and the bitter taste of coffee is always on his lips when you kiss, even close to midnight, (15)
and you've always been more of a tea person.

never fall in love with an english major,
because he'll write you poetry sometimes,
comparing you to roses not yet wilted, comparing you to starlight, comparing you to Venus.
the first was cute, and the second was even cuter, (20)
but by the seventeenth you started to suspect he liked writing poems more than he liked you.

never fall in love with an english major,
because your Mama doesn’t like him.
when you took him home to meet her, she just smiled that same empty smile
and asked if he considered what he was going to do to make a living, because (25)
“surely you can’t think you’ll make good money going into writing,”
and at first he doesn't answer, he just smiles,
like he knows that ‘this’ isn't going to last long enough for it to become a problem,
but then he makes up something about looking into finances
and your mom smiles and makes a little “ah” sound, and even though she's pleased for now, (30) the conversation leaves you as empty as your glass of chardonnay sitting on the table.

never fall in love with an english major, 
because you never get to just watch a show anymore. 
the last time you tried, he wouldn’t stop talking about how it was an allegory for the loss of childhood innocence, or a story about the place between heaven and hell, (35) and you were tired because for God's sake it's just a cartoon, but you let him keep going on because he had a certain twinkle in his eye that you hadn't seen in a long time.

never fall in love with an english major, 
because he stares at other people when you two are walking down the street. (40) he stares at every girl, every boy, every person that you two pass, as if they’re a short story that he hasn't fully analyzed yet. and he's always sure to comment on them, about how the girl next to him in class had a constellation of freckles across her shoulders, about how the boy ordering food in front of him couldn't quite fit into his new suit, (45) about how the homeless women he passed by on the street had the most beautiful smile, and one time you find a poem about a blonde girl on his desk -- you're a brunette -- and when you ask him about it, he says that she's a representation of Aphrodite, of young love, and you ask him if once, just once, Aphrodite can have brown hair instead, (50) and he thinks about it for a while, a small smile spreading across his face, before he says something about subverting modern beauty standards or tropes or whatever, and he tells you “good idea” instead of “I love you.”

never fall in love with an english major, 
because once you told him that you didn’t like Shakespeare, (55) and he gave you the same look your father gave your mother when she asked for a divorce.

never fall in love with an english major, 
because when you sleep over at his apartment -- don't get the wrong idea, you two will never do anything because he's presenting on Hemingway tomorrow, and that requires his full attention -- (60) he doesn’t cuddle up with you anymore. instead, he's hunched over his laptop, typing away, books and loose papers scattered around him, highlighted and torn in every which way. if he was looking at himself, he’d find some sort of symbolism in it, but your brain doesn't work like his. (65)

never fall in love with an english major,
because when you try to talk with him about love, 
he tells you instead about how *The Notebook* isn't true romance, 
but instead he laments about Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr 
and how their relationship, which you thought could hardly be considered “love,” (70) 
inspired a whole new generation of poetry that shaped the future of American writing, 
and the entire time he’s talking, 
you have no clue what a Beat Poet is.

never fall in love with an english major, 
because he shows you songs that are in a language you can’t understand. (75) 
when you ask him why, 
he says that art doesn’t end with the english language. 
as you watch the music video, he goes on about the symbolism of the dance, of the setting, 
of how the title of the track is representative of the death of passion, 
and you have to excuse yourself to the restroom, (80) 
because suddenly this isn’t just about the song anymore.

never fall in love with an english major, 
because you know exactly how this is going to end. 
he’s told you time and time again as he reads you his stories, that love doesn’t win 
that Juliet kills herself in the end (85) 
that Othello murders Desdamona 
that Ophelia goes crazy and drowns herself, in a psychological horror-style story, 
and when he tells you that, you tell him to shut up, 
because you know that you’re drowning in something other than water 
and he just can’t see it. (90)

never fall in love with an english major, 
because you know he’s capable of love. 
he’s in love with poetry, with symbolism, 
with the stuffy classics you were forced to read back in your highschool classes. 
because you know he’s capable of love. (95) 
he’ll just never be able to love you.
dear Sophia,
remember when Crayola peach was skin color,
even when our own flesh proved us wrong?
when you told me you were the boss of me
just because you were older?
remember when we fought over the size of the soccer goals
and I left a mean note in your desk?
now I laugh when third-graders argue over the swings.
- hey! that’s my swing!
- well you weren’t sitting on it!
- but I was just getting up to get my tiara!
were we once that dumb, Sophia?
(I sat on that third-grader’s tiara.)
(not on purpose.)
(it broke.)
(I didn’t tell her.)
(she seemed like a brat and well what did she think she was doing leaving it on a bench anyway.)
(well of course I’m sorry now, but now is too late.)

oh! and
remember when you told me you didn’t like that Maddie girl,
who walked at the head of the line on the way to the library,
talking with the teacher all the way through?
- I can’t believe her! she thinks she’s so much better than us!
- mhm!
what a pushover.

a month later, me and Maddie were friends.
- what’s your name?
(she knew my name.)
- ~~~~~~~.
(I knew her name too.)
- I’m Maddie. Do you want to be friends?
we became two peas in a pod,
and you were an awkward third pea bulging out the seam.
next year,
we made room for a third pea.
(it wasn't you.)

Piper was a Malaysian girl with a shy voice and a big smile.
she joined and fit snugly between the two of us.
Piper's desk didn't have a partner like the rest,
an island all alone at the back of the room.
Maddie and I would move our chairs and eat lunch with Piper,
and afterwards,
we'd pull out our My Little Ponies and the quidditch board game
and play that Pinkie Pie was a rockstar
and the Slytherins and Gryffindors were kidnappers in cahoots.

it's not like we were leaving you out.
you were absent most of 4th grade.
in the hospital,
where we heard you couldn't even gather up the strength to lift a toothbrush.
my mind immediately went to Beth March, who,
in her last months, couldn't even gather the strength to lift her embroidery needle.
I didn't worry enough then, Sophia.
were you okay?

4th grade was the year I got glasses.
and the year I wrote *A Pony Adventure,*
a 20-page picture book about sisters who could talk to horses.

it never even crossed my mind
that my characters could be any color other than Crayola peach.
my world was so small.
my mind was so small.

Sophia,
remember when we started drifting apart?
physically and metaphorically.
I moved to Boston, and you stayed behind
in darling Ann Arbor.
I miss Ann Arbor so much.
but my mom says I only miss my memories there.
I guess it's true.
nostalgia is a powerful thing.

oh!
but Sophia,
what I need to say is
what's so important is
what the point I've been trying to get across this whole entire time is
that
you were so much of my memories there.
you and Maddie and Piper.
we may have been the golden trio,
but we wouldn't have been whole without you.
and once upon a time, Sophia,
you were one of my best friends.
albeit a very bossy one.

so tell me then Sophia,
how can I still find it in me
to ignore your messages
just for the sake
of ignoring them?
I didn’t think they existed anymore, the kind that ride with the right hand free to work, the left, straight above the pommel, caressing the reins. These are the old boys of any age, real cowboys, slouched in the saddle like humps on their horses’ backs, ‘pokes with dirt on their chaps, and dirt on their hands, squinting and spitting and cursing quietly at the dogies in the brush, bright kerchiefs wrapped round their necks.

Forty years ago my mother, in boots and hat and a bright red bandanna, sprang up onto a quarter horse, set herself, and smiled down at the boy and the man standing beside her red mare. That was me the boy and Bill, the last real cowboy in the West. He stared at her stirrups and measured my pretty mom with understated admiration. “Captain Orlach taught you how to ride.” Something about how she set the heels of her boots at a downward angle, right for the Institute’s military ponies and their tack, was not the way a cowgirl rode.

Bill was the one who taught me how to ride a horse, and, with even less success, how to be a man of the West. He was dignified at all times, unreservedly respectful of women, kind to children and charitable to outsiders. He relished a crude joke at the expense of mescans and negroes, and he had no truck with socialistic welfare. He was an older man by the time I met him, still handsome like those hardworking aging cowmen are. After a lifetime riding, cutting and branding for $60 a month and board, the ranches had turned to pickups and he was reduced to running a dude stable at the state park outside of town. I was out there looking for a sexual experience or a useful substitute, putting in illegal 8 hour shifts as a skinny lifeguard at a pool where poor country women minding six kids turned their heads and let their babies drift into deep water. More than one infant floated by me, face down, and as I jerked them away from the water I bawled out more than one woman twice my age, in that summer of sun and proximate death.

Bill liked me for reasons I couldn’t divine, given how I came from town and liked books. We did have family connections; he knew my mother’s side well: 40 years before, at my age, he had hired on as the rough string cowboy for Mr. Fall up on the Caprock. He broke the mustangs into working mounts for that hard scrabble ranch land, teaching the mustangs how to cut mean cattle into pens. It showed still. He sat like he was part of a quarter horse even when it turned on a dime, a cut so sharp, so natural to these magnificent beasts, that more than once while astride I had continued in the previous alignment while my mount went elsewhere. On those ignominious occasions, looking up from the dirt toward my paused pony, I observed the unmistakable, humiliating sight of a horse laughing at a human being.

Fall was a cattle baron, a man of ranches rather than a ranch, a bald, big-chested force on a high desert spread that ran from the Pecos River Valley into, well, too far into Texas. Samuel
Fall of the Llano Estacado. That transplanted but unreconstructed Texan had a beautiful arrogant daughter. Her mother sent her off to a finishing school in Missouri, to no discernible effect according to my aunts. In latter life, as the wife of my mother’s brother Raymond, Mary Ford Smith favored the tailored wool pant suit that rich ranch women wore, with turquoise squash blossom necklaces as heavy as lead chains. Their number and weight measured her place in the hierarchy of her tribe. She had her hair made up by Lorena at the Hairtheewell, and the boots clomping down the wood floors of the town house in Maljamar were made by hand in Guanajuato.

Mary’s outstanding trait was that she was unforgiving of others, including children and grandchildren. She passed that gift onto the one child, Carl, she had not found a reason to throw out. I once gave a lecture in their town on the Loving Trail, well after she went kicking and bucking into the grave. After the talk, a set of the town's cowmen invited me to dinner. It was a convivial affair, a lot of laughter and ribald stories of the old West as we shared good bourbon after the raw steaks. When they tried to mark me as an effete man of the East, I let them know that I had roots right there. “Well, I spent time in these parts on my uncle's ranch, Ray Smith's place. It had been one of Samuel Fall's spreads. My cousin Carl runs it now.” As I proudly proved my authenticity, a pall set over the room, murmurs about that 'sonabitch Carl Smith and his sonabitch granddad Sam Fall.' They made their excuses, put on their Stetsons, and filed out. So Bill the cowboy liked me because of men who laid down a legacy of bad feelings in our country.

I left the state park after a season or two, pursuing books and sexual experience at school rather than on the lifeguard’s stand. Coming back home ten years later, I heard from my mother that Bill was deathly sick of cancer. We went out on the road through the mud flats near the River, and coming out of a slide along the wet caliche we saw a miserable double wide, set up on a miserable piece of land. Next to it, in a fine wooden corral, a pair of roans skipped about, nipping one another, complaining sharply about an unfair bite. Their hot breath streamed out in the cold wind that shook the gray green branches of the salt cedars. The horses came to a sudden stop as we arrived, the dirt of the corral thrown up before them, thick muscles all aquiver in their thighs and chests, an affectionate curiosity in their angular sweet faces. In their confidence you could see the gentle stroke of their owner's hand, you could see the open heart of animals dearly loved. I had seen Bill break composure only once, years before in that summer of love at the Park, the tears streaming down his face as he gazed at two young horses lying motionless on the hard clay. His mares had rested their long noses on the pipe fence of their enclosure during a little desert squall and lightening had raced along it toward them.

Inside the dark trailer I met Bill’s wife for the first time, a strong woman in her fifties, sadness etched in around her mouth, one of Henriette Wyeth's hard working Anglo women of the Hondo Valley. Juanita took us into a back room where he lay. He had been a wiry, small man but he was now a ghost stirring the bed clothes. I sat down and put my hand on his skeletal arm. He gazed at me, the blue eyes gained light, and Bill kindly acknowledged the boy he once knew. Without a word to me, he turned away, looked at my mother and said, “Good day to you Mrs. Shaw, ‘peers like you are raisin’ up a man.” We talked about the old days and he told me a secret. He had been the one that had egged on Johnny Strait, his stable boy, to pick the famous fight with me, a battle that I had mysteriously won by throwing that big country boy into the water, where he was out of his element and I was in mine. From that time on, Bill said, “I knew you had Sam
Fall stuff in you."

My wife and I drove through the country again this winter, years after his death. We crossed Apache Pass in the Sacramentos and headed down into the Pecos Valley, a thick snow falling through the black night. The dark forest crowded around the road and the headlights bored a narrow tunnel of light through the cascade of white, vaguely opening up the line of passage. As we rounded a curve a burst of yellow flame surged out of the blackness, a roaring forest fire showed its teeth along the ridge above us, leaping from tree to tree.

The snows won the battle of fire and ice—two days later, when we drove north toward Santa Fe, the Llano Estacado was blanketed in thick drifts, the cows stranded on the frozen earth and the truckers stranded on the Interstate. The first commandment for travelers in god’s country is to avoid those ugly freeways—we rolled cautiously along the state roads, just cleared, through a white landscape that moved me again to love of my place. At noon we dropped down into the Tularosa Basin where the little town of Corona holds on for dear life.

I had been in Corona five years before, after my mother died. I left for New York after the funeral, driving toward Albuquerque’s airport on Christmas Day, fighting the tears back as a Western man should. I stopped at a sign in little Corona. It advertised hand made quilts; the rough old board leaned up against the side of a retired motel promised that they were “Still Quilting.” I went in there and met Sheila Gray, a Christian woman. She sold me a quilt she favored: Moonlit Day. It weaved the moon climbing over the Sacramento range my mother loved, its beams falling across Nogal Peak. MRS. Gray’s 12 year old boy lingered in the room as we talked, a sweet piece of home schooled work. “This is Jimmy, Mr.Shaw, our son.” He had a quick smile for the city man he was curious about. “How was your Christmas, Jimmy?” He fairly leapt for joy to tell me, “My mom and dad gave me a lump of coal for my first present!..Then they handed me these, what I really wanted,” He held out a new box of Leggos. “I’m building a ranch house.”

Now, on this happier journey, my wife and I stopped in again at “Still Quilting.” My mother and old Bill, bad Aunt Mary and her well-remembered despot of a father Samuel Fall, dearly loved horses and some country children who could not swim, all were safely beneath the ground we were still above. We bought a small quilted piece for our daughter, Ramona, a sentimental square of hearts and flowers. Mrs. Gray and I complimented one another on the big snow in the sierra and admired what it would do for the grass this year. I asked about her boy. “Well, Carlton isn’t here right now—you wouldn’t recognize him he’s grown so, gosh, an inch a month it seemed this year…he’s gone to working horses, ours and those of our neighbors.” As she spoke, the boy walked in, 6 inches taller but still as slender as a rope. He was, as my wife’s sudden smile stated, startlingly handsome. His unblemished face, blushing from the weather, was a face Caravaggio would have used for an angelic representation, boyish and pure; his hands, like those of Caravaggio’s models, were rough and dirty, the fingernails caked. In gripping my own, they were as strong as a man’s. He wore a well-worn, finely made working jacket in gently tanned leather, his mother’s hand showing in every elegant stitch of ribbing and cuff. His scratched chaps worked down to scuffed up boots. Carlton pushed his ragged Stetson back and gave us a grin. His clear blue eyes turned toward me. They matched the bright kerchief he had wrapped round his neck. Old Bill was looking at me.
“Son, you’re a smart kid and can do anything you put your mind to, but you’re going to have to stop being so lazy.” My dad repeated the same old phrase that he has always told me, this time, literally at dinner tonight while we ate beef hot pot (which ended up being really delicious). Despite his repetitive comments, my dad is actually one of my biggest role models because of his character and the fact he is nice to a fault. He’s taught me most of what I know and by American standards, he achieved the American Dream. He brought himself out of poverty, created a career for himself in engineering, started a family, and now spends his free time playing guitar, Fortnite, and looking at cabins to buy because Arizona is too hot. He’s a great role model, father, and friend in my life but it took me a long time to appreciate his comments because of my tendencies to compare myself to my friends and to think that being average is bad.

Personally, I cannot say that I am at the top of anything. Society by nature is competitive and drives humans to work towards their goals and greatness. The spotlight is cast on those climbing or who are already at the top, but what about those who can’t help but to watch in awe at the prodigies and “chosen”. In this world, we are called average or in some cases, mediocre.

My name is (Name omitted for contest), all three of my names are common for Americans, Chinese, and Chinese-Americans. Like I stated earlier, there’s not much that stands out about me as in terms of accomplishments. I haven’t won any sports championships, started my own technology business, or even had a part-time job. I didn’t get into any prestigious colleges and never got higher on a D on any of my Spanish finals. Some of my interests and hobbies include but are not limited to: volleyball, swimming, golf, piano, violin, guitar, skating, drawing, video editing, photography, League of Legends, Pokemon Go, different types of potatoes, and aggressively sharing memes. Despite not having any outstanding accomplishments or feats of greatness, I still am able to enjoy my life and find happiness in things other than pride and boasting in myself.

Being born and raised in America as an Asian-American, I noticed there are stereotypes about Asian-Americans, some of which are painfully accurate while others are just annoying. My friends tend to antagonize me by saying “Are you eating dog tonight? har har har!” or “I saw you driving the WONG way in your 2014 Subaru Forester, har har har” which never fail to get on my nerves. However, the stereotype about Asian parents forcing their kids to be doctors hits hard in an indirect way. I noticed for me, my Asian-American friends, and Americans in general, most people have some source of pressure, internally or externally. In my case, most of my pressure comes from myself. When I was younger, I created the idea that I need to produce results and be the best to succeed in life and to be happy. Even though I was at the top of my class in high school...
and got a full-tuition scholarship to ASU, it was never enough. Many of my friends were getting accepted into prestigious schools that I got rejected from and this caused me to see my own accomplishments as failures. These ideas of false-pressure and toxic-comparison had me figuratively chained up and I know this is the situation for many of my friends who are struggling with the same problems. It was like we were being held back by a chain made by our own thoughts and feelings of anxiety. If we are figuratively being locked up then the figurative chain metal is a mental-condition that Rebecca Webber describes as the Comparison Trap. She describes it as humanity’s tendency to compare ourselves to others. It can be helpful when we are inspired by the achievements of others, but also harmful when we are left feeling chronically inferior or depressed.

If the metal of this figurative chain is the comparison between myself and others, then the maker of the chain would be my friends, overthinking, and social media. My friends are great people and I feel blessed to be able to be with them but sometimes I feel like they overshadow me. My friends are ambitious people with their own goals and over the years I have known them, they have failed, grown, and now the fruits of their labors are starting to show. A few examples of my extraordinary friends are: a musician that has over 2 million streams on his original songs, a violinist that is one of the top ten violinists in Arizona, an ice skater that is going to qualify for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and a friends that sold $70,000 of Pokemon cards during his senior year of high school which he used to pay for his University of California, Berkley tuition.

While hanging out with these people, I can't help but feel average and worth less in the face of their accomplishments. Social media only makes the issue worse because we are only able to see the most artificial, perfect, and selective parts of people's lives. By being exposed to this we can't help but compare our worse to their best. However, I constantly have to remind myself that my friends are human too and are struggling with their own issues.

My dad's comments helped me through this process. At first, I disliked his comments just because I thought they were a bit unrealistic. I would compare myself to my friends who put everything into their passions and think “Can I really measure up to them?” But I also have to consider from my dad’s perspective. He's grown up in way tougher circumstances and has probably seen people that work harder and accomplish greater things than my friends have. I think he also sees me more as his son and a capable person, not just someone who thinks inside his head too much.

Continuing on the chain-shackle-comparison metaphor, the key to my figurative chain was hash browns. I absolutely love hash browns. They’re my favorite breakfast food, so crispy and soft on the inside. I’ve been eating hash browns since as long as I can remember and during the fall break of my Junior year, I discovered that my uncle knew how to cook them. He taught me over that weekend, starting from scratch with a sole potato and resulting in a plate of semi-black potatoes that made the kitchen smell almost not burnt. They tasted bad as you can probably imagine, but I kept cooking and cooking because I wanted to reach the pinnacle of golden hash browns, not for anyone else but only for myself. I got into this addiction of cooking and for 7-8 months, every weekend I would cook breakfast for my family and I got ridiculously good at cooking continental breakfasts. Even though this wasn't some big defining period in my life, it taught me a lot of lessons not related to potatoes. I learned that some people don't accomplish great things for other people, they do it for themselves and the joy they find in their passions.
For me, greatness is not the result of trying to be great but rather, a product of working towards a goal, self-discipline, and passion. I also learned I would rather spend my time doing many different things and try out new activities rather than confine myself to one area. This is just my way of using my time and there's no objectively right way either.

Now, this may make it seem like I have this greatness idea figured out but I'm sure that my ideas and opinions will change in the following days, weeks, and months. After all, I'm still only eighteen and (hopefully) have a long way to go in my life. I still overthink and wonder about a lot of questions like: Should I strive for greatness? Do accomplishments satisfy the hunger in our souls? Is it possible to reach a state of self-contentment?

Now in America, I believe many people feel average in what they do whether it is hobbies or their careers. They might be discouraged that they are not producing desired results, or the progress of others may turn them away because they cannot see themselves accomplishing the same things. Tyler Fisher says that this is because "Americans are either happy with their status in life or not able to do much about it. He also states less people are following the American Dream which is due to a lack of a major goal, for example: in the 1700's we built a government from the ground up, in the 1800's we expanded westward and built a strong capitalist economy, and in the 1900's we were focused on many different goals. There were the two World Wars, exporting democracy, fighting communism, landing a man on the moon, and adjusting to the large waves of immigrants coming to seek better lives for themselves. Fisher says today we are focused on finding the perfect match in music, relationships, education, and most aspects of our lives. We can easily abandon the things we don't immediately see as perfect which can lead to people easily giving up on their goals and being complacent in where they are.

This applies to me as my mom and I are both pseudo-perfectionists. We both are very nit-picky with how things are done and accomplished and I tend to give up when something doesn't go right the first way or I don't see it as a perfect match to me. For example, I am very uptight when it comes to playing music with other people. I like having everything under control, keep the tempo steady, and play in the “right” way so that we sound decent (it usually doesn't end up this way). However, one of my favorite times while playing music is when my friends played with full energy not caring about anything else. I also really liked played improv music on the streets with some stranger for busking money (I made $15 and spent it on Jack in the Box). These small yet significant moments have caused me to let go of the perfectionist standards that I held in such high regard. Right now, I have the most fun trying new things with my friends that I have never tried before. With new activities, there is no pressure to produce results and learning/messing around is more fun than getting frustrated about failing. The feeling of making a breakthrough also feels super satisfying and worth all the effort.

I think in America, we have an unrealistic expectation of what perfect is. Every day we are shown the best of the best through media and are only shown results without the effort or struggle that is required to get there. In most situations, perfection is not needed. Most things can be achieved multiple ways and the “perfect” path that we idealize may not even exist. I have been surprised so many times when I have a dumb idea and it ends up working just because I gave it a try. In America, there are so many different cultures, languages, generations, and people, it’s like a hot pot with many different ingredients, all of which contribute to the flavor as a whole overall,
but yet are able to stand out individually without melting into each other. Everyone has a different way of doing things and I think that makes learning from others really interesting. If everyone was really good at everything and did it the same way, then would anyone stand out or be unique? In this world, diversity is key to strength as a nation which includes everyone, all of the motivated, lazy, and in between.

Maybe my hash browns won’t boost the economy or end all wars to create world peace, but my friends and family like to eat them which helps them put food in their stomachs and enjoy their Saturday mornings. I had to make a lot of bad hash browns to get to this point but struggling to get here was worth it. We can’t expect to be perfect at everything from the first try and without struggling. Being average isn’t a handicap either. Being average means we have a blank canvas with a clean slate, ready for anything that we want to put on it. Once we have something great on our canvas we can ready to show it off to the world, keep it to ourselves, or just start anew. We can also take pride in being average and show it off to the world too. Regardless of being mediocre, average, or extraordinary, everything and everyone in America comes together to create a delicious hot pot that we can take part in together. The flavors of the hot pot all stand out as individual tastes to create a unique deliciousness, and like a messy kitchen with too many chefs, it’s going to be an agonizing yet fun experience.

Works Cited


