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Martyr or Demon?

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by Monica Cole

When I first heard about the Michael Brown case, it was probably on NPR or maybe it was a link on Google News, and most likely, it was mere hours after the event took place. What I gathered from my informal news search was that an African American teenage boy in Missouri had been shot and killed by a white police officer. I was shocked to hear it, and wondered how with an African American man as President, we could still have such blatant acts of racism. Over the next few months, much more information came out about this story, and my understanding of what had happened developed. There are differing versions of the story. According to the *LA Times* article “Back Story: What happened in Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Mo.?” by Matt Pearce, one version of the story is that the police officer, Darren Wilson, tried to leave his car while Brown pushed the door shut and a struggle ensued. According to Pearce, Wilson shot in self-defense. Pearce continues that another version of the story states “Wilson used profanity to tell the young men to get out of the street, hit Brown with his car door while trying to open it, then grabbed Brown by the neck.” Whichever of these stories is true, I still have the same gut reaction: that a teenager was unfairly killed for racial reasons. That’s not really fair, because whether or not that version of the story is actually true, it doesn’t give the police officer a fair chance. For people with the opposite gut reaction (that Michael Brown is clearly at fault), they are not giving Brown a fair chance.

Today, it may seem like we have made a lot of progress in civil rights, especially compared to a hundred years ago, or even thirty years ago. While that statement is true to a point, part of the shift has been less from racism to no racism, and more a shift in the type of racism. In Michael Omi’s essay, “In Living Color: Race and American Culture,” he discusses the difference between “*overt racism*, the elaboration of an explicitly racist argument, policy, or view, and *inferential racism* which refers to ‘those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions’” (627). The idea that Omi is trying to advance here is that sometimes racism is obviously discriminating behavior, while at other times it is simply the way we think, whether we specifically choose to think that way or not (627). Implicit racism is harder to see, but that does not mean it is not there. While it might look like we experience less racism, this might just be a shift from overt to implicit racism.

Whether or not racial stereotypes and racial profiling have really become less common, they are called-out more often by the public. This means that whether or not things are really better than when Omi wrote his essay in the 1980’s, people are seemingly more aware of the problem. I would argue, however, that this awareness does not extend to inferential racism.

Stereotypes, both positive and negative, have long been instrumental to the way we see people whom we feel are in some way “different” from us (Omi, 630). News coverage of the Michael Brown case and other similar cases show that inferential racism leads a culture to be unable to see, and thus judge, African American men fairly.

The Michael Brown case has become very high-profile, and also very emotionally charged. Whatever your political leanings might be, you likely had a gut reaction when you first read about this story, and you likely developed an image of the man who was killed. What exactly this image looked like probably varied a lot depending on your personal worldview, the news sources from which you got your information, and other personal factors. For me, growing up in a very liberal household where I was exposed to a lot of traditionally left-leaning news sources such as NPR, my initial image of Michael Brown was along the lines of the martyr who got randomly killed for doing nothing wrong, the perfect kid, etc. Other people might have had the opposite initial image. This is inferential racism in that, as Omi said, our perceptions of racial groups different from our own doesn't allow for unique people, only general perceptions (631).

Of course, it can be argued that how we, the public, view Michael Brown is a bit irrelevant. He is already dead, and that is not going to change. But whatever your view on that, there is one thing much harder to argue against: Wilson's view of Brown was and is very important. According to an article by Dexter Thomas titled “Michael Brown was not a boy, he was a ‘demon’” in *Al Jazeera*, “In his testimony, Officer Darren Wilson, the man who shot Michael Brown, said of the victim that “it look[ed] like a demon”.” These are harsh words which bring us back to that point even more strongly. Witness accounts of what happened that day vary, but Wilson's words tell us something about his state of mind. Was Brown a ‘demon’ or an innocent kid? Those two extremes again lead us to an either/or way of thinking. Binary situations such as this are not realistic: they reinforce the view that Brown had to have been one or the other, when in reality he most probably could not have been either.

There has been another case in very recent history that shows this divide even more clearly, though in a slightly different fashion. According to a CNN article by Greg Botelho entitled “What Happened the Night Trayvon Martin Died,” Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American, was walking back to the house where he was staying from a trip to the local convenience store to buy a snack. It was dark and on the walk Martin encountered George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchman. Zimmerman called 911 to report a suspicious person, then continued to follow him despite being told by the 911 dispatcher that that was not necessary. Accounts vary as to what happened next, but there was a commotion and Martin ended up dead on the ground.

Was Zimmerman (a 28-year-old white Hispanic man) racially profiling Martin? It is hard to say, and this issue has caused a lot of controversy. It is easy to sympathize with the family of Trayvon Martin. He was, it appears, doing nothing illegal, nothing to provoke a fight. He was then shot and killed by a perhaps overly zealous neighborhood watchman for looking suspicious. It is easy to see him as the martyr, the perfectly innocent kid who was simply in

the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong skin color. But if you look into Martin's history, another story develops. As Botelho states, "Martin didn't live in Sanford, a central Florida city of about 53,000 people. Yet by that winter night, he'd been there for seven days, after being suspended for the third time from Dr. Michael M. Krop High School in Miami, in this instance, for 10 days after drug residue was found in his backpack, according to records obtained by the Miami Herald." Does this information change your view of him? It is hard not to see him in either a strictly negative or strictly positive light.

Knowing what we know about Martin, it is easy to let Zimmerman off the hook a bit. He was overenthusiastic, granted, and shouldn't have shot without more information, but it isn't like Martin was the perfect person either. He had been in trouble with the law, and who knows, he might have been doing something illegal or dangerous that night, right? Well, let's go back to that night, or to what little we know about the situation. Zimmerman did not know *anything* about Martin when he shot. Zimmerman did not know where the teenager was going, or what he was carrying, or even his name. As far as Zimmerman knew, Martin was a perfect student who had never been in trouble in his life. And yet, he still shot and killed him. It is very hard to argue that there was not any racial profiling involved in that situation.

In both the Martin and Brown shootings, we have an African American teenager who was shot and killed. After that, the details begin to diverge. Both teenagers have been idolized and mourned by thousands of people. They have been held up as examples of a system gone wrong. They both also were killed by people who are suspected of having held the opposite, but potentially more harmful stereotype: because they were black teenagers, they were dangerous.

Even though my initial thought of Michael Brown was positive, it's still a form of racism because I simply took the few details I had heard (black teenager, shot by police), and made a judgment from that without actually knowing what the situation was. The problem here is not how we see people of color: it is the fact that our culture sees them as "different" at all. As Omi says in his essay, we feel a need to distinguish between the good and bad stereotypes for cultural groups, seemingly to avoid offending anyone, but that does not make any of those stereotypes less one-dimensional (631).

In the case of Michael Brown, it's particularly problematic, because there is a lot at stake. If the police officer was at fault, he should be punished appropriately. If he was not at fault, then that fact should be made known. But due to our perceptions, both positive and negative, of the person killed, it's extremely difficult to make a fair assessment. If some of us think that he is a martyr, and some of us think he is a savage criminal, we're not going to get anywhere because probably none of us are right. As Omi says, "The need to paint in broad racial strokes has thus rendered 'internal' differences invisible" (631). The problem with these stereotypes is that they do not allow people to be individuals outside of how they are viewed culturally. For the Michael Brown case to end fairly, we have to see him not as an African American man killed by police officers, but as a person. A person who may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, or a person who may have been doing something illegal, or a person in an

entirely different situation altogether. We have to see him, and everyone else who might be in a similar situation, as a complex individual, not a mishmash of the stereotypes that we have been consuming our whole lives.

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The Antis of Frankenstein

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by Laura Pen

Often times when thinking of heroes, one might imagine a powerful superhero, like Superman, dressed in a tight costume answering the frightened calls of the victim. Or perhaps what comes to mind is the image of a knight on a white horse coming to save the princess, like in the tales of King Arthur; or a brave warrior wielding a sword like Joan of Arc. By contrast, the villain might be seen as an ugly beast whose only thoughts are to annihilate humankind any way they can. The villain usually loses, and plummets to their death in one fashion or another. But what about the people or characters who don't really fit these categories? *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, is one such story where the heroes and villains belong in an alternate category. Shelley's novel explores the question of who is the true monster, and who is the hero. Shelley demonstrates the flaws and beauty of all creatures so eloquently, as she follows the stories of Victor, the creature Victor creates, and the people who interact with both of these characters. Perhaps these characters are both heroes and villains; going a step further, perhaps they are also neither. Some may argue Victor is the villain; after all, he not only created the monster, but he completely abandoned him to the cruel outside world. The creature, on the other hand, murdered all those dear to Victor, including an innocent child, so surely he is the villain. The people who encountered the creature might also be the monsters, because of their cruel actions toward him. It seems, however, they were all equally monstrous and heroic. This may seem like a cop-out, but if black and white can create gray, human beings can certainly exhibit complex personalities.

There are two terms that come to mind with the characterization in *Frankenstein*: the antihero and the anti-villain. According to Merriam Webster, the antihero is "a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities" (Antihero). The anti-villain on the other hand is defined as, "a villain with heroic goals, personality traits, and/or virtues. Their desired ends are mostly good, but their means of getting there are evil" (Anti-Villain). One could see how the lines between these two types of individuals could become blurred. After all, a hero who is selfish and cowardly, and a villain who is selfless and brave, may cause one to question what constitutes heroism.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor is the protagonist whose intentions may initially be considered good: Victor wanted to see if he could find a way to resurrect the dead, or create life. After the loss of his mother, one can't really blame him for that. Just think, if he could find a way to reanimate a lifeless body, such findings could mean eternal life for all humankind. One would never have to truly say goodbye to a loved one ever again. For this reason, the means initially justifies the end for Victor, and he has ample reason to begin his creation, which was completed on a dreary night of November (34). The "spark" used while bringing the creature

to life is a form of light, which seems to symbolize life in this narrative; but perhaps the spark highlights the light and dark qualities of humanity—much like the villain and the hero being two sides of the same coin.

What follows the metaphorical birth of his “child”, is a very dark time for Victor. As soon as Victor achieves his goal, he lacks the traditional heroic quality of courage, and begins to exhibit monster-like qualities. Victor abandons the infant-like creature by running from him the moment he realizes what he has done. When this “child” tries to speak to his father and physically reach out to him, Victor runs from him again (35). This sets in motion the downfall of not only the creature and his creator, but all that the latter holds dear. Because of Victor’s actions, Victor’s little brother, best friend, wife, and father, all end up dead by quite literally the work of his own hands. Victor did not stop to consider how the creature would be affected if or when he was brought to life, how people might react to him, or how he would take care of him. The theme of blindness comes to mind. Victor is so blinded by his obsession to create life, he fails to think about the possible consequences of his actions. To make matters even worse, once he becomes aware of his mistakes, he fails to take responsibility for his actions. Failing to show love to his *son*, failing to speak up for a woman falsely accused of murder, and not trying to stop the creature from creating havoc much sooner than he did, puts Victor in a villainous light.

Although it’s fair to view Victor as the villain of *Frankenstein*, it is also not necessarily accurate. Is Victor at fault? Absolutely. Is he a role model? No. But a villain? Victor’s remorse for his actions is certainly not enough to put him in hero territory. One thing that tips the scale in his favor though is something that Victor failed to do from the start: he finally takes responsibility for his actions. When he goes before the judge in the latter part of the book to tell his tale, Victor openly vows to destroy the murderer he “turned loose on society” (139). He concludes his confession with:

My revenge is of no moment to you; yet, while I allow it to be a vice, I confess that it is the devouring and only passion of my soul. My rage is unspeakable, when I reflect that the murderer, whom I have turned loose on society, still exists. You refuse my just demand: I have but one resource; and I devote myself, either in my life or death, to his destruction. (139)

Admittedly, Victor doesn’t openly admit being at fault here, although most likely the missing dialogue of his narrative may have done just that. He does verbalize his cycle of revenge though, and admits it is his vice.

Victor knows his behavior is wrong, but he pursues it anyway. Once again, this reads as villainous and monstrous; however, one must look at the context. Victor had just lost all the light in his life, and not only is nearly everyone he loves dead, but he also is plagued with guilt over their loss. Now the only passion he has left is his desire for revenge. He does however, display one act of heroism. He is willing to die if it means destroying the monster he created, not only for revenge, but to save humankind. While this still is not typical hero territory, considering his mostly selfish motives, it definitely fits the antihero trope.

By contrast, the creature fits the anti-villain definition brilliantly. Even though he may have become a full blown villain toward the latter part of the novel, the creature still demonstrates many heroic qualities up to that point, including compassion, courage, and intellect. For example, when the creature chops and stacks firewood for the cottagers without taking any credit; when he shovels snow from their pathway; when he eagerly learns to speak and read the cottagers' language because he wants to be accepted and loved by them. Would a true monster work so tirelessly for love and affection? Society's often black and white concept of what makes a villain stands in stark contrast to the reality of *Frankenstein's* "monster." The creature starts out as a good man who happens to come in a frightening package. The blind cottager sees the creature for the good man that he is; the cottager's children only see the creature's frightening appearance. Upon finding the creature visiting with their blind father, Safie faints, and Felix beats the creature with a stick (91). This violent rejection ends in an abandoned cottage that the creature rebelliously sets fire to. Perhaps this destruction is a metaphor for "I will see you all in hell." In other words, at this point, the creature lets go of moral inhibitions. He now seeks his revenge on the one man who could have made it all better, his father.

One would think this is where the creature becomes the full blooded monster, but again he surprises us. When he was all alone in a dense forest, sad and dejected, the creature saves a young girl from drowning. When her companion sees him, instead of drawing the conclusion that this amazing creature saved her life, the companion shoots at him, rather than thanking him. Imagine the creature's feelings at this point, though we don't really have to imagine, because he puts them into words: "Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (96). When the creature approaches Victor's little brother, William, it is not to kill him, which is ironic because the creature has just vowed vengeance upon all man. Apparently, the creature's motive is to teach the boy about tolerance and to become his friend (96). Perhaps the creature had the desire to become the father Victor never was. Unfortunately, when William sees the monster, he reacts in fear. Whether William's reaction is because of society's conditioning, an innate human reaction to a hideous form, or just from the act of being seized, is uncertain. Either way, it is the final straw for the creature. The moment he chooses to murder an innocent child is the moment the creature dies, and becomes the monster everyone judged him to be. The creature is arguably innocent and blameless until he makes a deliberate choice to kill.

This first murder seems to have a domino effect on the creature. First, he threatens his father with destruction, and to all he holds dear if he refuses to create a wife for him. When Victor goes back on his word regarding said wife, the creature willfully kills Victor's best friend, Clerval, and then Victor's own wife Elizabeth in an act of poetic justice. All these actions point to a monstrous murderer. When one thinks about it, however, someone else pointed and loaded the gun: the very man who said, "I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer" (61). Yes, Victor Frankenstein is just as guilty of murder as the creature. From the

very moment he decides to create the creature, he follows a dangerous path, thereby endangering everyone he loves. When the creature takes his first breath, he has a clean slate, just like we do when we are first born. He starts out the gentle giant, and ends as a monster.

One wonders what kind of amazing man this creature would have become if he had been received differently. After all, we believe this creature is through with the world when he burns down the cottage; but he then goes on to rescue a girl from drowning, which shows him to be a much-layered individual. Imagine if the girl the creature saved had thrown her arms around him and gave him a big hug in thanks. What if the gentleman with her praised him in gratitude? That one moment in time may have swayed the creature from his path of vengeance. Perhaps he would have been accepted by others if these two individuals spoke up for him. He may have gone to his father directly and warmed his heart with his tortured experience, with no murder to water down Victor's compassion. More realistically, he may have just escaped to the North like he planned, and lived out his days in isolation—all the while knowing that there are good, heroic people out there.

Yes, being kind to a “wretch” like him, would be viewed as heroic in the creature's eyes. In fact, kindness to anyone is heroic; viciousness, or even blind ignorance, however, is monstrous. That's why I feel we can relate to the characters with whom the creature comes in contact. The blind elderly cottager symbolizes who we can be: blind to the outer shell of a person, with true sight or insight into the heart of one. The cottagers and the two people the creature met by the river, while gifted with physical sight, are blinded to the beauty of the creature's heart. These people all have something in common: they are good people who commit monstrous acts. Victor's monstrous acts creates a domino effect; forcing the abandoned creature to wander out into a world that is monstrous toward him. And in the end, the creature becomes the monster everyone thinks him to be.

Doubtless the creature is heartbroken when he realizes this fact about himself after seeing his father dead from their own cycle of vengeance. The creature then says, “But it is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I have strangled the innocent as they slept, and grasped to death his throat who never injured me or any living thing” (155). While his remorse is no excuse for his actions, it brings to light what all humans are capable of. We are all responsible for our own actions, but we are also responsible to bestow dignity and love upon our fellow creatures. Every person makes a difference. We will never know what would have happened if the creature would have been shown acceptance and love, especially by his father. More than likely, many of these ghastly events would not have occurred.

In any event, even if it hadn't changed the narrative, each character would be free from guilt, which is something we all long to have—a clear conscience. Because of their actions, so many in *Frankenstein* cannot be considered guiltless. The cottagers, the girl saved from drowning, and even little William can be seen as anti-heroes, but cannot be justifiably called heroes. This moral ambiguity forces us to ask: Who is the monster? Is it the one who killed, or the

ones who led the killer down that path? Will we be the monster or the hero? Perhaps we need to look inside ourselves for the answers. All of us are all capable of being monsters, which is one of *Frankenstein's* most potent themes.

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The Flowers of Industry: Romantic Nature Poetry in the Industrial Revolution

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by Shia Teague

The Romantic era was a time of appreciation for the beauty in life and one especially popular facet of this was the idea of the beauty of nature. During a time when nature didn't have a huge presence in the lives of the busy city dwellers, poetry gave people an opportunity to appreciate scenes that weren't present in everyday life—as we can see in Goethe's "The Fisherman" and Blake's "The Tyger." Poetry of the time also explored the ability to recognize the natural beauty that was present, but harder to see through the smog of city life—as we can see in Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802." These poems exemplify a movement that reinforced the importance of recognizing nature as a force of mystery and beauty, a value that helped to define the Romantic era.

In "The Fisherman," Goethe employs imagery of nature as a device to make the interaction between him and the maiden (probably a siren or nymph of some kind), seem more like a wonder of nature rather than a wonder of the supernatural: "The water rushed, the water swelled, a fisherman sat by, and gaze upon his dancing float with tranquil-dreaming eye. And as he sits, and as he looks, the gurgling waves arise; a maid, all bright with water drops, stands straight before his eyes" (lines 1-8). Goethe puts a heavy emphasis on the state of the water rather than on the fisherman or the maiden; even though this could be an opportunity to talk about the maiden's beauty and other-worldliness, Goethe leaves that entirely up to the imagination of the reader and doesn't mention anything about the maiden herself, other than that she is covered in water drops, having just risen from the water.

This theme of focusing only on the natural aspects continues throughout the poem; as the maiden speaks to the fisherman she talks about how happy the fish are and how beautiful the ocean itself is. It's interesting that at the end of the poem, Goethe doesn't give the reader any information about what happened to the fisherman, but simply says that he went into the water with the woman and "ne'er was seen again" (line 32). Similar tales usually express the disappearance of the human character as a bad thing, meant as a tale of caution, but Goethe doesn't say that at all; he never gives us any indication that the fisherman dies when he goes with the maiden, or that he meets some equally tragic fate. It is most likely that Goethe deliberately leaves out an "ending" for the fisherman and the maiden in the story to draw attention to the fact that the two characters are merely devices by which the beauty of the natural aspects of the scene are expressed, such as the glittering water droplets that cover the maiden, rather than being the focus of the tale themselves.

While Goethe highlights the beauty of nature using a rather fantastic scenario, Wordsworth's poem "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802" describes a beautiful morning in Westminster as seen from Westminster Bridge in a modern (at the time) and realistic way: "Earth has not anything to show more fair: Dull would be he of soul who could pass by a sight so touching in its majesty" (Longman 2159, lines 1-3). Here Wordsworth begins the poem by informing the reader of the impact of the beauty of nature even in something as simple as a morning in Westminster, going as far to say that one would have to be "dull of soul" to be able to pass by the sight untouched by its beauty. He goes on to use simile to develop the imagery of nature, "This City now doth, like a garment, wear the beauty of the morning" (Longman 2195, lines 4-5). This choice of words is interesting because it shows how Wordsworth holds the city apart from nature; the city is not part of the beauty of the morning but instead is enhanced by this aspect of nature. He continues this imagery of nature covering the city in beauty with, "All bright and glittering in the smokeless air, never did sun more beautifully steep in his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill; never a calm I felt so deep!" (Longman 2195, lines 7-11). Wordsworth also uses personification to elevate the sun and the river, placing emphasis on the insinuation that they are indeed what makes the morning beautiful. Unlike Goethe, Wordsworth does not need to create a scenario in which something ordinary can be seen as beautiful, he simply invites the reader to see what is present every morning on Westminster Bridge, weather notwithstanding.

While the readers of Goethe were inspired to go outside of the city to appreciate nature and the readers of Wordsworth were inspired to find the natural beauty within the city, Blake introduced a kind of beauty that one could not easily experience, requiring a broader use of the imagination. Tigers were an exotic foreign creature that couldn't be found by simply going a little ways out of the city into the country, they were part of a continent that was still being explored and might as well have been a world away, as opposed to the water in Goethe's poem and the sunlight city described by Wordsworth whose equivalents could be sought out by most readers. Blake's choice of subject is interesting because this poem was written during a time when explorers and missionaries were going to Africa and seeing many creatures and cultures they didn't understand, like tigers, which were something to be feared. Explorers sent back stories, descriptions, and drawings of the horrors and wonders they were seeing, so it is likely that Blake wrote the poem based on a picture or description rather than having actually seen a tiger, which may explain why the poem carries a tone of fear and wonder. This same sense of wonder was what inspired many people in the Romantic Era, who felt estranged from nature because of the emphasis put on technological advances in the Industrial Era.

It is also interesting to note that this poem, featured in Blake's collection *Songs of Experience* has a companion called "The Lamb" in his other collection *Songs of Innocence*. The two are meant to be reflective of each other from different perspectives. Blake starts off with the image of a tiger, with his bright orange fur, stalking through the forest in the night: "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night" (Longman 2154, lines 1-2). Then Blake inquires as to what could possibly have made such a fearsome creature, questioning the idea

of an omnipotent creator: “What immortal hand or eye, could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Longman 2154, lines 3-4). Blake follows by asking where the tiger came from—“In what distant deeps or skies, burnt the fire of thine eyes?”—while adding to the imagery of the tiger being a fearsome creature, once again comparing it to fire (Longman 2154, lines 5-6). In the following lines, “On what wings did he aspire? What the hand, dare seize the fire?” Blake insinuates that whoever created the tiger was like Icarus who flew too close to the sun (Longman 2154, lines 6-7); Blake is saying that creating something like the tiger is overreaching some kind of natural boundary. He has also changed his question: before, he asked who could create the tiger, now he asks who dared to. The next few lines continue along the lines of asking how something so fierce was created and then Blake moves on to compare the tiger to Satan as portrayed in “Paradise Lost”: “When the stars threw down their spears and water’d heaven with their tears; did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the lamb make thee?” (Longman 2154, lines 17-20). Blake is asking if the same God who created innocent beings could possibly have also created the tiger. In the poem Blake thematically questions religion, asking if a God who is considered good and who creates good things can also create evil things. On a deeper level, Blake is questioning the existence of an omnipotent being by asking who *could* create the tiger and also challenging the assumption that a being who could create evil could also control that evil. This is why he asks who would *dare* create the tiger and is also why he compares the tiger to Satan using a “Paradise Lost” reference. Blake not only questions the authority of God, he also gives an example of God not being able to control the evil he created.

It is important to keep in mind that at this time God was considered to be the creator of nature and that industrialism removed humans from nature to a great extent, thus this might also be interpreted as industrialism removing humans from God to a certain degree. This concept can be related to “The Tyger” because people were so removed from nature (and therefore God) that they were not familiar with so many aspects of nature, such as tigers, and even grew to be afraid of these things that were outside of their industrialized world. Blake used this concept of the tiger to challenge the reigning religious beliefs of the time because the interest in natural beauty and the unknown were so relevant in the Romantic Era that it was easier to get the attention of the public this way, ensuring that his message would be relevant to the readers of the time.

Each of the three poems captures the spirit of the Romantic Era because together they cover the three main categories that nature was divided into at the time, which can be described as 1) the natural beauty within the industrialized city, 2) the natural beauty that lay just outside the cities, in the surrounding countryside like an oasis from industrialization, and 3) the exotic beauty of things that could not easily be seen by the average reader because it could be found only in faraway places. “The Fisherman” gives an example of the power of nature to draw humans to it, away from industrialized society, thus it falls into the second category, and serves to remind readers that the beauty of nature is never completely out of reach, even to those who live the industrial lifestyle of the cities. “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802” gives an example of the power of nature to eclipse industrialized society,

covering the cityscape with its beauty and thus falls into the first category, serving to inspire readers to appreciate what is already all around them, even in places that seem removed from such things. “The Tyger” gives an example of the power of nature to fill those of industrialized society who are removed from it with terror and awe and serves as a sample of the third category, encouraging readers to think of all the beautiful things in the world that are wild, in contrast to industrialization. Each of the three poems has its own message, but all three place a great importance on the power of nature over humankind and also prove that the Romantic Era caused people to think of themselves as being outside of nature, rather than a part of it.

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The Self Becoming: Exploring Bergeson's Idea of Absolute Knowledge via Ben Jelloun's novel *The Sand Child*

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by Nicola Thompson

The First Gate: The purpose of Story

Literature serves many purposes. On the outside, it is simply an expression and to tell a story. However, it is often that we find ourselves reading pieces of astounding literature to bring understanding of the world around us, and to find our own inner growth.

Thousands of classes in every level of education involve literature – some to strengthen the art of reading, some to use as creative examples for writing, and some to analyze to see what the deeper meaning of the story is. Why do we do this? What can be gained from so much time spent with our noses in books and picking apart poems, short stories and novels that are clearly fiction?

Life is created of experiences, and while some of us are more adventurous, and willing to throw caution to the wind and snatch up anything new that might come our way, we don't all have this luxury. For those fearless explorers of the world, and for those who chose to simply stay in the shire, it is impossible to learn all that there is to learn without the aid of hearing the truths of others. Each individual is on their own path, and while two individuals might follow each other down the same path, their experiences will differ purely because they are not the same being. By sharing their thoughts and knowledge of these experiences, it enables each individual to come together and grow singularly as well as wholly.

The purpose of reading through literature is to gain insight through others' words. To show this, we will be examining the novel *The Sand Child*, while exploring Henri Bergson's philosophies on the development of the individual, which he calls *The Self Becoming*.

The Second Gate: The Tale of Ahmed and Lalla

In Moroccan author, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, *The Sand Child*, the reader meets a character struggling to find their self in a male-dominated middle-eastern world at the turn of the 20th century. The many voices of the story weave through the experiences of life, much like the city streets, spiraling through the web of alleys and main roads, building the evolution of a human within life. Ben Jelloun cleverly changes the focus at important moments by taking the reader through seven gates, each one relaying a different meaning.

The novel is initially about a nameless storyteller who is heading towards the end of his days, having created his masterpiece of a tale, and releasing it to those who are willing to hear it in a coffee shop. He tells the story of a man, a wealthy man, who has seven daughters. The man is tired of daughters, and needs a son for an heir, and decides when his wife falls pregnant, that no matter what, his next child shall be a boy. When the baby is born, he happily announces to the world the appearance of his first son, who he names Ahmed. He goes through great lengths to ensure that Ahmed's biological gender is never discovered. The focus shifts to Ahmed, who figures out swiftly what his father is playing at, and that he has been given a gift that no other woman has been given – the gift of freedom.

When Ahmed comes of age, he is determined to take a wife to keep up appearances. He decides to wed his cousin, Fatima, who is disabled, and thought to be unmarriageable. His parents are shocked, horrified because they know the truth of their son, though cannot argue against it, for his logic is sound. If he is to inherit his father's land and business, then he must do as other men do. He chose his cousin because he knew that she would not be able to produce a child, and thus he would not have to lie when one did not arrive.

Fatima soon dies, and his father too, and his mother goes blind. Around this time he finds himself receiving letters from a secret correspondent, one who has admired him from afar. He knows not this person, though confides in them, since they seem to know his secret. It is unclear as to if these letters are between the battling of Ahmed's inner selves – his female identity and his masculine one – or if there is truly someone who has figured out his dualistic nature.

Ahmed begins to explore his/herself^[1], wondering about this feminine part that biology bestowed upon him. S/he begins to wonder if perhaps s/he might enjoy the world as a woman, and one day decides to set out and see what it is like. S/he cloaks him/herself and goes into the city, and fairly immediately finds herself abused, attacked by an elderly woman. However, this does not deter her. She embraces herself as a woman, adopts the name of Lalla, and heads out again, managing to find herself joining a circus. She finds the same old woman there, who is the mother of the cruel circus owner. They set her up with her own act, the dance of man becoming a woman. Someone in the audience recognizes her, her old correspondent, and the letters begin again.

The story-teller is said to cease coming to the coffee shop. His listeners worry. After eight months, the story-teller is found dead near a river, clutching the book that he read from, he had compiled, while telling his tale of Ahmed and Lalla. The listeners of the story take it upon themselves to finish the story of Ahmed and Lalla, each chapter examining a different possibility for the character/s. Some say the Lalla went off to continue on adventuring and living life as a woman. One teller dismisses Ahmed's decision to become a woman at all, and returns to the life of a man to live out as a man should.

The fate of the Ahmed and Lalla is never resolved, as the listeners-become-story-tellers can never agree on an ending for the person. The character's state of being is unresolved and restless as the novel comes to a close.

The Third Gate: The Philosophy of Henri Bergson

As we go through life, what is it that we are trying to accomplish? For some it is money, for some it is freedom, family, ticking off items on a bucket list and so on. However, the only thing we can guarantee is that in order for any success to be obtained in life, one has to know themselves.

Henri Bergson, a French philosopher at the end of the nineteenth century, believed that in order for understanding of the consciousness to be achieved, one must be able to recognize the moments that build up to a person's current state of being. In this essay, we will be walking through Bergson's ideas of *absolute knowledge*, gained through personal evolution of *intelligence*, *sympathy* and *intuition*. These concepts involve understanding and accepting the fractured pieces, and exploring how Tahar Ben Jelloun might have shown this through his novel. This is to better understand how one can find success within their own lives, based on Henri Bergson's philosophies. In order for each individual to grow and fully embrace the human experience, one must find *absolute knowledge*, or the understanding of *self*.

The Fourth Gate: Intelligence and the Self Becoming

Bergson has a concept of what experience and knowledge is, which is explored during the journey of rebutting Kant's definition of Freedom – which is that it “belongs to a realm outside space and time,” according to a summary of Bergson's Philosophies on a Stanford website written by Leonard Lawler and Valentine Moulard Leonard. Bergson's response is to firstly, separate the ideas of space and time, and to understand that consciousness is temporal. This means that consciousness only exists in time, as it takes up no conceivable space. He says in his essay, “An Introduction to Metaphysics”:

Now, there are no two identical moments in the life of the same conscious being. Take the simplest sensation, suppose it constant, absorb in it the entire personality: the consciousness which will accompany this sensation cannot remain identical with itself for two consecutive moments, because the second moment always contains, over and above the first, the memory that the first has bequeathed to it. A consciousness which could experience two identical moments would be a consciousness without memory. It would die and be born again continually. In what other way could one represent unconsciousness? (p.4)

To put his idea into different terms, we can consider the path of life to be a spiral. It starts in the center, representing the fundamental self (the self as a being first entering the world, as a baby), and at the beginning stages of life – events seemingly repeat themselves: wake up, cry, get cuddles, fed, burped, changed, etc. However, after each experience a baby has, the number of past experiences increase. Thus, habits are learned, motor skills are developing, and memories are formed. So while the motions might be the same – in general, it is never

the same person that is burping and changing, nor is it ever the same baby being burped or changed. Each experience builds a person's understanding and accordingly alters the person. This is what Bergson defines as *intelligence*.

Consider old cinematic film reels. While a reel is made up of several similar pictures running over light to give the impression of a moving moment, it is a series of pictures building on each other to create a scene. Looking at each picture individually, they seem the same, though are slightly different, as they are a continuation of the pictures before them. The scenes created of the repetitious similar pictures can be viewed equivalent to the building of *Intelligence*, as each one builds on the other to create something grander.

What's more, Bergson uses the example of two spools and tape running between them to explain the *self becoming*, though perhaps the continuation of the example of the reels might accentuate it best. If we keep the reel in mind to describe intelligence, we can consider the circular streets that the story wanders through the spiral of life and experiences through which Ahmed goes in order to obtain it. In other words, if a person were to watch a movie that started and ended with the exact same scene, word for word and frame for frame, they would be different scenes. The meaning behind the second showing of the scene would have the experience of the viewer, having watched the rest of the movie, altering the meaning of the scene.

Because each experience builds upon itself, contributing to the individual development of a being, this is the first aspect of the *self becoming*. Each person can never complete their learning through life. There are always new habits that are formed or broken, new understandings of the environment and people surrounding the individual, as well as new rules being made within a culture/society a person interacts with. An individual is always in a state of *becoming*, since there are always external influences with which an individual interacts.

Ben Jelloun's story begins by showing these repetitious functions, and how the protagonist, Ahmed, gains his/her intelligence. By going regularly to the Moore baths with his/her mother as a small child, Ahmed learns of the place of the women, what their lives are to be. S/he learns of the ways that the bodies of women form as they grow older, and accepts without question his/her mother wrapping his/her chest to prevent breasts from growing. When of age, Ahmed begins going to the baths with his father (for at this point, Ahmed is bridging on becoming a man), and is allowed to accompany him to the Mosque, where he learned prayers.

With each visit to the baths, Ahmed is a different person, as each time s/he learns more in the time between. With each visit, more gossip is learned from the chattering woman, more growth has occurred within Ahmed's body, and the memories between baths have given Ahmed's perception and imagination more to contemplate. When he begins to attend the mosque, he admittedly fumbles the words of prayers, and enjoys doing so. Though, with each attendance and each prayer, the words become more familiar. Every moment leading up to

the moment experienced by Ahmed is a fragment, a piece of splinter that contributes to the growth of the tree that is Ahmed. The collection of experiences, while seemingly routine and similar, contribute to the *intelligence* of Ahmed, and aid to the steps along the spiraled path of *the self becoming*.

The Fifth Gate: Sympathy and Intuition

Bergson's idea is that a person is not just a person that exists in a moment, but a compilation of memories and experiences which makes up that person. From each moment, they differ from the person they were in the past, and location in time and space, leaving them to be a fragment of themselves, and a piece upon which their *intelligence* is built upon. In other words, since consciousness exists only in time, the physical body is what exists in space. It is the compilation of both of these things which contributes to the human experience.

Lawler and Leonard express that through these experiences, we develop Bergson's idea of *intelligence* – which is defined by Bergson as “true empiricism,” a term meaning that knowledge obtained through experience of the senses (through the body, and thus in space). His idea is that we begin as a point, and then spiral around, building on the fundamental self (memories). We have repeating experiences which create *intelligence*.

“The normal way our intelligence works is guided by needs and thus the knowledge gathered is not disinterested, it is relative knowledge” (Lawler). The understanding that a baby has from the get-go is learned from repetitive behavior. It learns early on that if it cries, it gets its needs met. This is *intelligence*, according to Bergson. Just as a dog might understand that when a human makes a hissing noise followed by a clicking sound at the front of the human's teeth, it means to sit, which might yield a treat or approval from the human. These are necessary needs being met, and thus experiences which teach that in order for these things to be met, the action must happen – crying in the case of the baby, and sitting in the case of the dog.

“How it gathers knowledge is through what Bergson calls ‘analysis’, that is, the dividing of things according to the perspective taken. Comprehensive analytic knowledge then consists in reconstruction or re-composition of a thing by means of synthesizing the perspectives... This synthesis... never gives us the thing itself, it only gives us a general concept of things. Thus, intuition reverses the normal workings of intelligence, which is interested and analytic (synthesis being only a development of analysis).” –Lawler

However, *intelligence* is simply a globulation of our own experiences. According to Bergson, there are further steps to continue participating in the evolution of being, or *the self becoming*. Because synthesis is the next step of analysis, synthesis can be expressed as a projected hypothetical perception. For example, a cat might be observed to have a twitching tail, which the cat watches with its ears slightly turned back. Eventually, the cat curls the tail around, and rests its paw on the top of the tail, which then stops twitching. No human is that cat, nor is any other being that cat, and thus, cannot create an organic and accurate idea as to the cat's intentions (without, of course speaking *cat*, at the very least). However, by

compiling all other observations of the cat from a human's lens, the observer might conclude that due to the twitching tail and the ears turned back, the cat is annoyed. From there, the human might project onto the cat that it is annoyed at its twitching tail and thus put a paw on it to stop it.

The human experience ended, falling short of the actual experience of being a cat, and through analysis of the past observed actions of the cat, the human can synthesize the perspective of the cat, and inject the human's own intuition to postulate the intentions and experience of the cat. Bergson also calls this *sympathy*, or putting oneself in the place of others. Because a person has to know somewhat the world around them, and have their own experiences to draw from (*intelligence*) in order to make such a guess, this is the only way one might be able to understand where another being might be coming from and experiencing, themselves. The importance in this is that without understanding of those and the environment around them, they cannot gain the insight and external wisdom which could contribute to the individual's *self becoming*.

However, *sympathy* is very close to Bergson's definition of *intuition*, the former of which is needed in order to develop the latter. *Intuition* is the ability of not only understanding the being or thing with which one sympathizes, but taking the step further and projecting the *self* into that being or thing.

“Intuition therefore is a kind of experience, and indeed Bergson himself calls his thought “true empiricism”. What sort of experience? In the opening pages of “Introduction to Metaphysics,” he calls intuition sympathy. As we have seen...sympathy consists in putting ourselves in the place of others. Bergsonian intuition then consists of entering into a thing, rather than going around it from the outside. This ‘entering into’, for Bergson, give us absolute knowledge.” – Lawler

Bergson's definition of *intuition* and *absolute knowledge* are both compiled and equal to *intelligence* and *sympathy* turned inward into the self.

It is through using *intelligence* that we are able to develop and put to use *intuition*, by Bergson's definition. Returning to the example of the cat, the human projects its experiences and observations (*intelligence*) of the cat into the cat, and surmises that it must feel annoyed at the involuntary twitch of the tail and sought to stop it. This is *sympathy*. To be able to turn that action into ourselves, that is *intuition*.

“Intuition is entering ourselves...we seize ourselves from within...when one sympathizes with oneself, one installs oneself within duration and then feels a certain well defined tension, whose very determinateness seems like a choice between an infinity of possible durations.” –Lawler

This concept of *duration* is explained beautifully in Bergson's essay, “The Creative Mind,” by using the color spectrum. He asks the reader to focus on *being* the color orange. By doing this, you are not only orange, but you are red on one side and yellow on the other, coming

together to create orange.

Projecting the self *into* the color orange is *intuition*, since we *are not* the color, nor *in* the color orange. Our experience tells us that red plus yellow makes orange. We also have certain associations with the color orange, such as the fruit, safety cones, flowers, and so on. With our experiences of the color, we can postulate what it means to *be*. We have put our *intelligence* towards *sympathy* to arrive at the postulation of being orange. The writer is saying that if one can extend that *intuition*, we can not only find ourselves in the *space* of being orange, but in the *time* of being orange – that is, the duration which is a point from when red shifts to yellow. *Intuition* in its fullest, according to Bergson, is the ability to *sympathize* to the extent that the *intuition* develops into a point in time and space. The combination of these aspects is Bergson’s definition of *absolute knowledge*, something we will explore later.

Returning to *Sand Child*, our character Ahmed is in a constant state of trying to discover who he or she really is. Where does s/he fit in this world where women are the servants of men? Through observation and experience, s/he is savvy in what it means to be a man during this time. He adopted the role so intently that he married his cousin, in order to keep up these appearances, on his own volition, no less. He tells his father and mother:

“I don’t just accept my condition and endure it, I actually like it. It is interesting. It gives me privileges that I would never have known. It opens doors for me, and I like that, even if it then locks me in a glass cage. Sometimes I nearly suffocate in my sleep. But when I wake, I am glad to be what I am.” –*Sand Child*, p.34

“In this family the women wrap themselves in a shroud of silence. They obey. My sisters obey... They come and go, slink along the walls awaiting the providential husband... What a miserable existence! Have you seen my body? It’s grown, it’s come home. I’ve shed the other bark—it was fragile and transparent. My body has grown and I no longer sleep in another’s body.” –*Sand Child*, p. 36

Ahmed has watched and experienced what it is like to be a male in this society during this time period, in this location (in this time and space), and has watched his mother and sisters, and the fate they endure. At this point, Ahmed is nothing but *intelligence*, for he lives and acts the way he has been shown and taught to. He has practiced little in the way of Bergson’s *sympathy*, never projecting his understanding of the world into the women that surround him. At no point during this period does the story explain that he considers what it would like to be his mother, his sisters. He has only played witness. Having lacked the experience in doing so, Ahmed has not being able to cross the threshold into *intuition*.

The Sixth Gate: Absolute Knowledge

As mentioned before, it is through the journey through *intelligence*, *sympathy*, an *intuition* that one can experience Bergson’s idea of *absolute knowledge* ^[2]. Once one can do these

things, then one can turn the experience and insight gained through *intuition* into the self. This allows for reflection, which is one of the golden keys of personal growth beyond a survival capacity.

For example, the basics of survival are to know what the physical self is capable of doing, know how the surrounding environment functions so that one can navigate safely and soundly. Again, this is *intelligence*. The act of *sympathy* is to be able to relate to those within that environment, which also acts as a survival mechanism. Without being able to relate to the people around, one will not have social bonds, nor the ability to predict the nature of another person to gauge whether or not they will hinder the quality of wellbeing. Hence, these are acts of survival.

However, the human experience is more than simply surviving. It is what makes us more than animals in the wild. This is our ability to grow consciously. By being able to turn our *sympathy* into *intuition*, it allows us not only to survive, but to help those around us survive as well. It contributes the ability to create relationships, but also supports a kinder environment and society. This is external. Turning *intuition* internally, one can grow, and enhance their human experience by gaining *absolute knowledge*.

In Ben Jelloun's novel, it is Ahmed's cousin and wife, Fatima, who first shows example of the understanding of *intuition*, which, in turn, triggers Ahmed's journey for *absolute knowledge*.

“One evening...she said to me, with a little smile: ‘I have always known who you are, and that is why, my sister, my cousin, I have come to die here, near you. We were both leaning over the stone at the bottom of the dry well, over infertile ground, surrounded by unloving looks. We are women before being sick, or perhaps we are sick because we are women. I know our wound; we share it. I am your wife and you are mine.’” –*Sand Child*, p. 58

Being disabled herself, she was able to see Ahmed's “disability” that Ahmed himself may not have seen. Because of her physical frailty, Fatima was able to view herself, and project her *intelligence* further, into Ahmed, and *sympathize*, creating *intuition*. She was able to see the neglected aspects of Ahmed, the fractured parts of the self that Ahmed denied, and she brought them to light for him, whether he was ready to hear them or not. This was the force which brought him to look inwardly.

“Though I had intended to use her to perfect my social appearance, it was she who had managed to use me; she almost dragged me into her profound despair.

“I write that, but I'm not sure of the words, because I don't know the whole truth. That woman had a special kind of intelligence. All the words she never spoke, all the words she saved up, were poured into her unshakable condition, reinforcing her plans and projects. She had already given up living and was moving slowly and surely toward disappearance, toward extinction.” –*Sand Child*, p. 57

It is only after he declares to his parents that he wishes to wed his cousin that Ahmed begins to reflect upon himself. This is the first time that we see him turn himself inward and begin to look at the dualistic nature of himself. Until now he has only seen himself as a creature upholding an image, and protecting a secret. Though after deciding to pursue his curiosity of marriage, he begins to question his other side, his feminine side, and realizes that perhaps it should be acknowledged and spoken to.

“I drink coffee and live. Neither good nor evil. I ask nobody anything: my questions have no answer. I know this because I can see both sides of the mirror” (*Sand Child* p.40). It is here, after Ahmed has indicated the observation of the reflection in the mirror, that the story-teller makes mentions of letters of correspondences that have begun with Ahmed. He challenges his listeners, the reader to consider whether they are from another person, or if they are simply a conversation that Ahmed is having with himself.

The letters are then read to the audience by the story-teller, though as a reader of the novel, it is easy to lose understanding as to which letter belongs to Ahmed (or the conscious Ahmed) and which belongs to the mysterious correspondent (or possibly subconscious Ahmed). Throughout the book, the correspondent never is found out. Due to the ambiguity of where who wrote which letter, it is quite possible that Ahmed is conversing with his- and herself. This being the case, then it is a conversation with the fractured self, a moment of the self that has been recorded so that the self which occurs after might grow. Each letter and journal entry of Ahmed is another picture in the movie reel.

Until this point in the book, there have been a series of assumed repeated experiences as a man for Ahmed (soon to become Lalla). These experiences have tough him the *intelligence* of being a man, and have enforced his position in the world. As Ahmed begins to examine his feminine side, he is beginning from scratch. An infant, as their brain develops, discovers their limbs – they have feet, and hands, and a mouth in which to put these limbs. The baby is exploring its body as it discovers its parts. In starting from the beginning, Ahmed does this in a more adult manner, examining her given body, and exploring just what it is to be a woman, in the physical sense. When Ahmed puts on a *jellaba*, and unwraps her breasts and goes into the world for the first time as a woman.

“For some time I have felt liberated, yes, ready to be a woman. But I am told, I tell myself, that before that I must go back to childhood, become a little girl, an adolescent girl, a girl in love, a woman...what a long path, I shall never get there.” –*Sand Child*, p. 73

Her first experience, as she says was a mistake, though perhaps not. She was abused almost immediately. It disturbed her to think of later, yet again, when she decides to venture forth into the world and join a circus, she finds herself further abused. This is the repetition that began to build her *intelligence* on what it was to be a woman in that duration of time and space. The experiences she finds are harsh though it is never fully seen whether or not she, as

Lalla, is able to gain *sympathy* for the world around her. However, perhaps it is so that she gained *sympathy* and *intuition* for Ahmed, which, should she continue on as Ahmed, as some of the story-tellers suggested, that s/he was able to find *absolute knowledge*.

The Seventh Gate: The Self Became

Tahar Ben Jelloun was familiar with Bergson, and even went so far as to quote him in an essay response to the turbulence in Tanzania called “Que Peut la Littérature?” or, “What can literature do?”

“*L’intelligence est caractérisée par un incompréhension naturelle de la vie*. Intelligence is characterized by a natural incomprehension of life” (Que). While Bergson examines what it is for a being to take part in the human experience, to grow as an individual, every journey is unique. No one person can tell another what they will experience and have the listener comprehend in completion. The individual’s path is a mystery, one whose doors will open as each step toward *absolute knowledge* is completed.

As stated before, is difficult to understand the fate of Ahmed, who, having once joined the circus, adopted the name of Lalla Zahar. The initial story-teller, though having shared the story with the voices of the listeners, was found dead, some eight months after relaying that Lalla’s correspondent reemerges. However, the story was continued on by the individuals that had dutifully stayed a part of the story, of those that had contributed and listened to the tale of the *self becoming* – the glimpses of time and memories that continued to compile and build the character of Ahmed/Lalla.

In turn, each told their understanding of the fate of Ahmed/Lalla, some accepting that Ahmed was a woman, and continuing the story of Lalla, while others denied the change in gender role. This is a continuation of the battle of learning, each a fragment of the story, a fragment of perception, all rolling together, to create scene after scene on the movie reel. With every aspect depicted, every situation imagined and told, the story came together. Whether the Ahmed/Lalla died in the end, or continued on in some part of the world, or in the very circle of story-tellers, s/he was constantly in a state of the *self becoming*, building her *intuition* through self- analysis and growing sympathy towards those she had wronged in the past, how disappointed her parents would be of her having shed her masculine self, if only for a moment, and the way she had treated Fatima.

Ahmed/Lalla finds *intelligence* through various situations and experiences, however, as the story is never concluded, it is never found out if *absolute knowledge* – complete knowledge of herself through intelligence, as well as knowledge of the world around her—and therefore, success, was achieved within her life.

Thus is the story told via ink symbols bound into a book, of an individual making the steps to understanding the *self*. Surely this is what life is about? Had these words not been woven together, perhaps some time go their entire lives never having gained such insight as to

questions of identity gained. Now that this journey has been made, understanding the self through the writings of others, we can perhaps understand the importance of literature, and the examination of the deeper meanings of texts.

Bergson states that it is only through intelligence and sympathy that one can develop intuition. And it is through duration, through the space and time that one can understand the fragments of moments. Through the combination of fragmented moments building upon themselves can one attain *absolute knowledge*, or, *intuition*. However, since we are in a constant *state of becoming*, our moments are continually building upon themselves and giving us new experiences with each tick of the clock—the paradox is that *absolute knowledge* might never be captured.

This essay, its own little life on paper, began with the idea of the importance of the analysis of literature, the starting point. From there we defined what it means to be human, spiraling along the definitions of Bergson, and pausing at the start of each gate, remember what it was that go us to the doors. And finally, we rest again at the question initially posed, hopefully answered, hopefully wiser, and hopefully ready to inquire further on the far side of the last gate.

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[1] Because the story of Ahmed/Lalla involves two different identities of the self, the different masculine and feminine pronouns are used to correspond to which self the character identifies with during that portion of the story. When there is a combination of the two pronouns, it is during the time that the character is torn between the two identities, or, later on, the story-teller(s) begin debating between which identity is chosen.

[2] It is important too to note that just because one has come to a state of *absolute knowledge* in some regard, does not mean that they have finished *becoming*. As mentioned before, an individual is always receiving information from their external world, and thus, always learning new things, and evolving.

2010-11 Retrospective More than Child's Play

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/more-than-childs-play

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by Semilla Sanchez

As a culture we tend to discount play as a resource beyond the ages of childhood, and yet play is often how we navigate any new experience. Play is an integral element in our lives, enriching how we interact with the world. In the educational curriculum play is often delegated to early learning centers where it then becomes derailed in middle school to be replaced by catchy gadgets designed to stimulate and entertain. The value of play is in its creativity which engages the mind to create and make connections out of the unknown. The process of play has the potential to develop multiple learning dimensions that are relatable throughout one's life. While play is often considered a trivial childhood pastime, its resource for developing innovative and flexible problem solving is needed for navigating many of the complex issues we face in society.

The role of play in Early Childhood Development (ECD) facilitates multiple learning concepts. The four basics are physical, cognitive, social and emotional. In the early childhood setting play is the first tool to facilitate learning of these concepts that will continue into adulthood. In *"Teaching Young Children: An Introduction,"* Michael Henniger a professor at Western Washington University, shares that "play is a crucial way in which children learn about language, develop intellectual concepts, build social relationships and understandings, strengthen physical skills, and deal with stress" (Henniger 5). Play provides multisensory experiences that engage children to make sense of the world around them and their place within it. Advocate for children through research and educational speaking platforms, Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg reports that when children play "they become masters of their world through the development of new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges" (Ginsburg 183). As each challenge is accomplished, children begin to build a base of resource able elements that can be called on for each new challenge.

Play teaches children how to adapt to change with the flexibility of innovative thinking, decision making and the self-confidence to experiment. Jean Piaget, an early philosopher for (ECE) who established several theories on cognitive development, has termed 'constructive learning' as a descriptor on the process of learning. In constructive learning "we are all constantly receiving new information and engaging in experiences that lead us to revise our understanding of the world" (Henniger 45). Play is the vehicle of discovery for developing infinite possibilities which cultivates early problem solving and adaptability in children. An example is two children who are playing with blocks to create an elaborate structure. Working together, they are negotiating the early signs of problem solving by sharing in the development of their construction. One wants to build tall sky scrapers while the other wants

to build a small city by the bay. All four of the basic learning skills are engaged in this activity: The physical with fine motor skills; Cognitive development with spatial awareness towards balance, shape and color, plus early mathematics; Social and Emotional development is engaged as the two generate ideas through interaction and the testing of solutions. These children begin to gain self-confidence and control by their shared ability to co-create their inspired vision. This illustrates how play stimulates active learning for children by engaging their naturally innovative minds. The importance of play has been “recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child” (Ginsburg 182) This law recognizes the multi-dimensional value of play as a facilitator for education, abstract learning and the pleasure of free (non-adult-directed) play. Play allows children to be themselves, to reflect on what they know by implementing it in their play, to interact with peers, and to experience the fun of learning new things.

Creative play has taken a recent backseat with the passing of “No Child Left Behind Act” in 2002. The act was formulated to provide support to children who were falling through the cracks in academia, yet its repercussions have changed the curriculum offered in many schools. It is a reflection of how the best intentions can have adverse effects for children. Nationwide, many school districts are “responding to the pressure by reducing time committed to recess, the creative arts and even physical education in an effort to focus on” academic standards for all children (Ginsberg 4). Though some of these standards may be important for advancing children’s ability to meet the competitive job market in today’s society; “this change may have implications on children’s ability to store new information, because children’s cognitive capacity is enhanced by clear-cut and significant changes in activity. Children need free unscheduled time for creative growth, self-reflection and decompression” (Ginsberg 4, 185). By lessening play opportunities, many educators are discounting the value of free associative play that fosters cognitive development through social-emotional learning in favor of intellectual standards. In “Play and Social Interaction in Middle School,” Doris Bergen, a professor of educational psychology, and Doris Pronin Fromberg, a professor of education, show that “when children have had opportunities to practice pretense and use their imaginations, researchers have found that they’re more able to be patient and perseverant, as well as imagine the future” (Bergen & Fromberg 4). Children need this down time in order to absorb and learn advanced reading, mathematics, the critical thinking of the sciences and the cognitive development involved in social interactions. Fostering imaginative play provides children with non-adult-directed activities and supports children’s abilities to make their own conscious decisions, allowing them to have some control within their lives.

Through play, many children experiment by role playing adult behaviors, exploring their evolving self-identity by acting out different “selves.” Similarities are seen across the species as many young animals use what appears to be play to explore themselves and their environment. William Crain a psychology professor at the City College of New York has been researching the connection to play in our earliest ancestors. In his article “Is Children’s Play Innate?” Crain explores through research, the role of play across all young mammalian

species. Studies are showing play as a universal presence for every mammal observed. There are several hypotheses on the adaptive value of play seeing it as “developing the capacity to improvise and therefore handle unexpected events” (Crain). Play is also seen as a self-assessment tool of animals’ potential capabilities. Watching young kittens is an example of learning through play. Their rough and tumble aggressive rushes relate to hunting behavior which aids in their survival. Cats constantly modify their behavior as they observe and learn; in this way, play provides a blueprint of social skills that are learned through creative exploration.

This early wiring of connective links is the brain developing synapses through the vehicle of experience. Human babies are born with 100 billion neurons awaiting the forming reinforcements that the experience of their environment provides. In “*Learning with the Brain in Mind*,” Frank McNeil, an educational researcher, shows “it is our sensory experience which provides the brain with the basic resources to make sense of our world. Children need time to attend, observe and engage in the world with their senses in order to differentiate and form concepts” (McNeil 61). Play facilitates this by its open-ended and often multi-sensory engagement. Chris Mercogliano, author, editor and writer for the journal *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, addresses the role of the brain through play showing that when the brain “encounters something new it releases increased quantities of the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin. At the neural level,” these hormones “activate the brain’s attentional networks and energize all of the cognitive areas that cooperate to make learning happen” (Mercogliano 13). Play stimulates our active brains to make new connections which build on the matrix of evolving concepts. The experience of play is often the most enjoyable because it is the exploration of new and exciting territory. There has been “recent brain and heart research showing that positive emotions have profoundly beneficial neurological effects on the learning process” (Mercogliano 13). Play makes learning fun and by fostering play as a useful tool throughout life society may reap the benefits of its innovative problem solving potential.

The development of learning is often stimulated by product play. In the early stages of child development young children begin to conceptualize the world around them through products that enhance their creative learning. A few examples are playing with blocks, puzzle shapes, books, art and dramatic play. As children progress in age, however, product play can become the standard activity that drives their creative play. As a culture many humans are driven by the commodification of acquiring and playing with their adult toys. Through the media we are driven by the newest and greatest “something,” which culturally models to children our materialistic values. By “modeling this materialistic approach to play and childhood, many children have gotten the message that valid experiences are bought experiences” (Wilson 9). This changes the perception of play as a creative endeavor for children’s expression of self. For play to develop innovative thinking and problem solving skills, children need opportunities to engage their minds beyond some of the passive play that can develop with an attachment to products for their entertainment. In older children it is important to counter balance product play with equal amounts of process play which engages their natural

curiosity and aids in the progressive development of problem solving (adapting to change), a needed skill in today's society. In life there are various events which call on us to adapt and respond to changes, like housing decisions, job/career/education, personal relationships, community service, birth of children, environmental concerns, voting/politics, personal expenses, travel, etc. These experiences require creative adaptability to the changing landscape within one's life. Children need to develop the resiliency to cope with change by strengthening their innovative and imaginative critical thinking skills; and children need adult mentors who will support their creative process (often through play) for discovering their own path through the diverse problems/changes we face as an evolving culture.

Process play is a creative outlet that is often facilitated by open-ended play experiences which engage children's minds to think outside the box. In process play ordinary objects become extraordinary. Dorothy G. Singer, a research scientist and Jerome L. Singer, a professor of psychology, share insights from their research in *Imagination and Play in the Electronic Age*. Child development shows that "when children use objects to replace other objects in play (a block becomes a boat) this sets the stage for abstract thought" through symbolism (Singer & Singer 28). An example is the power of an ordinary cardboard box. It has the power to become anything a child imagines: a race car, a house/fort, a submarine, a robot, a flying saucer, a doorway to another realm, etc. The box represents a vessel for whatever the playful heart desires. (My cat loves cardboard boxes, no matter what the size. Is he engaging in the mystery of infinite possibility by playing with unknown and abstract images?) Penny Wilson, a "playworker" around the world who facilitates play studies and creates environments driven to cultivate self-reliant and exploratory risk takers shares "it is a universally acknowledged truth that a child will play more happily with a cardboard box than with the present that came in it" (Wilson 10). Granted this usually peaks between the ages of two to six years, however, give any child an appliance box and watch the creative innovation of process play emerge. Play is rooted in our "biological, psychological and social genetics. Children need to discover the world for themselves if their play drives are to allow them to come at the world creatively" (Wilson 30). Process play stimulates problem solving solutions through its adaptive reactions to changing experiences and environments. Using the creative imagination in this way enhances the joy in play; and considering the last 20 years of research in positive psychology, "positive emotions increase attention and memory, facilitate open thinking and innovative problem solving, and promote cooperation and sociability" (Mercogliano). Play changes the dynamics of problems or obstacles making them games or puzzles to be solved.

Process play is considered unstructured play because it creates open-ended opportunities to learn and adapt too many of life's complexities. The process of unstructured and "undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills" (Ginsburg 2). This illustrates the need for balance between the structured play of academia and the free associative play of diverse learning styles that are unique to the individual. Penny Wilson adds that when we organize every second of children's awake time, filling their days with action plans devised to mold them for

adulthood, we teach them to bypass play in favor of our own structured and hurried lifestyles (Wilson 15). When adults support the expression of play for children, we model the value of creative diversity for exploring the world. By engaging and supporting children in play “adults provide real choices where children can build the trust they need to cope with solving physical,” emotional and social dilemmas/obstacles (Bergen & Fromberg 4). Instead of creating carbon copies, we can teach and support children to honor their uniquely creative adaptations in the world as they eventually evolve toward leaving the nest to become competent, independent and community conscious individuals.

Early problem solving is strengthened when children are left to their own devices such as that in nature. A fairly new concept called “nature-deficit disorder” considers that children lack direct exposure to the natural world which they need to develop a healthy physical and emotional self-concept. However outdoor play is dwindling for many children in our culture and “nature-deficit disorder” is a response to this disconnection from nature. Outdoor play creates opportunities for children to investigate their environment and their own minds. Nature engages the senses and “allows children the full blossoming of creativity, curiosity,” imagination and developmental strategies which strengthen critical thinking (Ginsberg 4). The natural world is a place of wonder and awe that has the potential to inspire children to explore their vivid imaginations. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv, author, writer and spokesperson for “nature-deficit disorder” explores the growing body of research connected to ‘nature’ driven play which unfortunately is showing a “new trend for the landscape of childhood”-indoor entertainment. An example is a fourth grader’s comments to Mr. Louv during an interview about playing outdoors: “I like to play indoors, ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are” (Louv 10). This simple statement speaks volumes to the direction that play has become for many children. Many are now passively engaged in play like experiences which basically appears to have made play a catch all for media and technological entertainment. Children’s minds are now stimulated by many programs and activities which suppress their naturally inquisitive minds. They are learning about the world and themselves through the media. The natural world has become a distant and abstract concept for many children. An example is in the evolution of play. Up until the 70’s and early 80’s, the landscape of unsupervised play was very different. Children were more apt to be encouraged to go play outside producing, as Chris Mercogliano calls it *In Defense of Play: Protecting Kids Inner Wildness*, “hardy and self-sufficient youngsters.” Shift to today’s landscape and we have many children who are “delicate, and dependent creatures who at any moment might be struck down by germs, or unforeseen circumstances,” like the many dangers present in society (Mercogliano). Today’s children lead protected lives, and rightly so in many circumstances, and yet what is the cost of sheltering children to the extent that we limit their natural curiosity and opportunities to play in creative ways? A study from “2005-06 reported that children between the ages of 8-18 spent an average of 6.5 hours per day plugged in electronically” (Louv 119). This illustrates children’s connection to the often passive form of entertainment and a further disconnection from the engagement of the natural world. There is a “new study suggesting that exposure to nature may reduce the symptoms of ADHD, and that it can improve all children’s cognitive abilities and resistance

to negative stresses and depression” (Louv 35). Nature’s sensory world is full of multiple levels of stimulation which engage our process orientated brains. The natural world is a huge resource for children (and us) because it engages all our senses, stimulating our brain to make multiple neurological connections about the wonder and mystery of our environment. Being in nature helps us reflect and reconnect to something bigger than ourselves and our hurried lifestyles; helping us slow down and honor the quality in our experiences. This feeling is reminiscent to awe and wonder which the essence of play and creativity is.

The role of play in childhood is an essential skill that shapes what is needed as children transition into adults. As an evolving culture there is a necessity to go further than training children to emerge as “cogs in the machinery of commerce. The international community needs resourceful, imaginative, and inventive problem solvers who will make a significant contribution, not only to the Information Age in which we currently live, but beyond to ages that we can barely envision” (Henniger 442). In the work force, society needs people who can think on their feet and are not afraid of fast changing environments that require flexible, innovative and often hands on proactive approaches to problem solving. To illustrate this, imagine you work in a community center as a lead cook and it is your job to feed the hungry masses. On a hypothetical Tuesday afternoon an unfortunate occurrence happens when the planned meal for 300 burns. You have 20 minutes to come up with a solution. Putting on your thinking cap you quickly take stock of available foods and begin to delegate the production of a large pot of tomato soup. You accomplish this goal by quickly assessing the situation and taking a leap of faith. This example is creative problem solving and taking a risk in the unknown. Instead of choosing to flee or remain frozen, problem solving uses existing resources to adapt to change. Play facilitates this by creating opportunities to experiment and find solutions. In *Creative Expression and Play in the Early Childhood Curriculum* Joan P. Isenberg and Mary Renck Jalongo introduce the big picture with:

“In the future, children will need to know how to learn, how to cope with change, how to build and evaluate a body of knowledge that will evolve throughout their life, and how to adapt to a changing work environment. They will need to acquire critical thinking, decision making, and communication skills with an emphasis on the cognitive processes of inquisitiveness, sequential thinking and problem solving. Children need to learn flexibility, experimentation, autonomy, risk-taking and innovation” (Isenberg & Jalongo 329).

This example illustrates the broader picture of the role that play has in fostering innovative and capable adults who are empowered by their vision and willing to take risks in unknown situations which require flexible hands on problem solving. Play is the resource for these skills.

Often play is not recognized as a learning source that facilitates a broad and wide spread resource in society; specifically in today’s work force. There are researched studies across the globe that has discovered that many of today’s young adults do not have adequate, hands on problem solving skills. An example of the need for hands on learning is in Stuart Brown’s researched book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates*

theSoul. At Cal Tech's aerospace research facility (JPL) in the late 90's, management began to hire young engineers and scientists to replace the large group who were retiring. Though many of the new potentials were at the top of their field, they lacked the hands on problem solving skills common within the older generation. A consultant was brought in to discover why this was so. In the process of talking to a wide range of employees, it was determined that the older generations had more skills in problem solving because their childhood play experiences were often outdoors, in woods and fields with hands on activities which supported innovative thinking and creative solutions around obstacles. The younger generations did not have these skills because their play experiences were more structured and often confined to the school yard or indoors with limited free associative imaginary play. In addition, it was determined that "academic excellence was not the most important measure of the new graduates' problem solving skills;" instead what was needed was a balance of both because as a "premier aerospace research facility," complex problem solving was/is a key ingredient for safe space travel (Brown 10). This example addresses the complexities of incorporating both play and academic achievement to gain employment. It also illustrates the importance of process play for engaging children's minds.

Innovative process play is a growing need for the children of today to succeed in our world. There are many reasons for this shift away from avenues which support imaginative or process play: Many children are more apt to play indoors due to the results of fear among parents about the dangers of the outdoors and unsupervised play which tends to be geared toward active engagement within parks, fields, and woods; children are more engaged in media and electronic entertainment which can lead to passive play, limiting the innovative problem solving skills developed through process play; children's lives are more structured and adult-directed (sports, music, dance and various educational afterschool programs). The reasons for these are multiple as well; a few examples are that parents are working longer hours and or are structuring their children's lives in order to prepare them to succeed in school and the often demanding and competitive work force. More and more, children do not have the opportunities and support to seek pleasure in the leisure of play. By structuring their lives with a full course meal of adult-directed activities we (may) lose sight of the development that takes place in child-directed play (not to be confused with the passive programming of television, computer/internet, texting or structured toys that limit creative play). Play has become secondary to many of children's organized lifestyles and by removing it from children's lives we may be educating out the very skills we desire from these generations who will help shape the direction of our global communities in the future.

As a culture we need to take play more seriously, to ignore the critics who deem play as unproductive and instead realize the multi-dimensional learning that takes place through the avenue of play. We need to let children to have 'their time' in the wonders of childhood by supporting their meandering and creative journeys'. The future needs well rounded thoughtful people who can easily engage and adapt in the complexities that life has to offer and play is the creative pathway toward realizing this reality.

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2011-12 Retrospective Choked with Emotion: The Depreciation of Fact-Based Discourse in American Politics

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by Matthias Hofer

Since my exchange year at Sehome High School in 2007, I have been interested in U.S. politics as well as the related occurrences and achievements. Having grown dear to my heart, the fate of America and her people have become important to me – and because the elected representatives in Washington, D.C. play a pivotal role in this respect – so has the political system. Even after I had graduated from Lynden Christian High School in 2009 and had returned to my native country of Switzerland, my fascination and my concerns didn't abate. Thousands of miles away, I tried to stay informed about the trends and decisions in my "second home." As I looked at the political processes from afar and started to compare them to their Swiss equivalents, I began to believe that something in American politics is currently going fundamentally wrong. Whereas the political landscape in Switzerland features at least seven noteworthy parties which have to hold bipartisan discussions and form alliances on a daily basis, the fronts in the United States between the Republicans and the Democrats are so hardened that the current situation resembles a football game. The two political interest groups constantly crash head-on at the line of scrimmage. Whoever has a majority in the two chambers of Congress, and/or has a member of the party sitting in the Oval Office, tries to run the ball as far as possible before a shift in the public opinion and a loss at the ballot box make them turn it over. This tendency reveals that the political climate in America has experienced a grave change. Instead of getting to hear fact-based arguments, the 313 million citizens are nowadays the subjects of a bombardment of advertisements and speeches which aim at their hearts and not their brains. Emotions have been elevated over reason.

A paradigm that exemplifies this creeping change in a masterly fashion is the campaign ad "Rick Perry – Proven Leadership" which was launched in September 2011 to support Rick Perry, the current governor of Texas, in his endeavors to become the Republican nominee for the 2012 presidential election. Having a running time of one minute and forty-five seconds, this powerful commercial may overshadow even official trailers of Hollywood movies. In the first forty-two seconds, a hail of criticism pours down on the incumbent president, Barack Obama. The advertisement starts off by painting a dark and depressing present and exposing its viewers to a flood of disquieting shots. Deserted Times Square, crumbling billboards, a decommissioned, dilapidated factory, rainy streets, abandoned swings on a children's playground, an empty restaurant and an anonymous, homeless beggar somewhere in this vast nation convey the impression of a pre-apocalyptic world. This feeling is juxtaposed with excerpts from speeches by the president, in which he maintains that "[d]espite all the

naysayers, who were predicting failure, our economy is growing again.” Moreover, he reassures his compatriots that the government has taken the perfect path into the future, by saying “We are headed in the right direction.” Confronted with the overwhelming visual sensations, however, these statements seem overly ludicrous.

The precariousness of the situation is accentuated by the sound of sirens, dramatic music and the voices of news anchors that smother the viewers with negative statistics about the economy. They indirectly accuse the current commander-in-chief of having fallen short of his goals and excitedly recapitulate their points by yelling “No jobs created!” or declaring that “[p]eople are demoralized.” The signs of the Obama campaign which are intricately interwoven with the remaining visual material get rid of the viewers’ last doubts and reveal who the culprit is. The message is clear: Barack Obama has disappointed his people. Analogously to his former popularity which has faded away, the audience is shown a poster of him which is moldering on a wall.

Suddenly, the music stops and the screen turns black for a second. Afterwards the headline “IN 2012” announces the beginning of the advertisement’s second segment. Music which is commonly associated with trailers of Hollywood blockbusters like Independence Day or Transformers resounds. The previously dark-toned footage is superseded and contrasted by bright and colorful takes of galloping wild horses, the Statue of Liberty and almost omnipresent Star-Spangled Banners. The resolute voice of Rick Perry can be heard. He distances himself from Obama’s opinion and indicates his intention by enunciating, “A great country requires a better direction. A renewed nation needs a new president.” A flurry of camera flashes can be seen, when Rick Perry stands in a statesmanlike manner behind a lectern and addresses the crowd in front of him. The listeners admiringly look up. They cheer and clap their hands in support of the orator who goes on to make statements which are soaked with patriotism. Perry postulates that “[t]he United States of America really is the last, great hope of mankind.” As the incumbent governor of Texas can be seen traveling through the nation – shaking hands with workers, giving a high-five to an employee and being saluted by a soldier – he confirms his faith that there will be better days ahead. He proudly proclaims, “I believe in America. I believe in her purpose, in her promise. I believe her best days have not yet been reached. I believe her greatest deeds are reserved for the generations to come” (RPerry2012).

By the end of the ad, when a “Perry President” logo shines out, the situation seems to be crystal clear. Similar to Hercules in Greek mythology, America is standing once more at the crossroads. This year, her citizens have the choice between the disastrous status quo and a new beginning personified by the determined, down-to-earth and optimistic Texan Rick Perry. This conception, however, is highly hyperreal because it is based on a biased and misleading campaign ad. Even though Perry was competing with more than half a dozen contestants for the official Republican nomination at the time of the advertisement’s release, not a single rival is mentioned. Instead the televised video already predicts a battle between its two main characters – the incumbent president and the aspiring Texas governor. In

addition, the featured utterances of the news anchors and the president were taken out of context. When Obama declares “I’m just getting started!” at the climax of the commercial’s first segment (after a forty second-collage of depressing audiovisual fragments), his statement sounds like a threat and the spectators start to wonder if America would survive another four years with this guy as the head of state. If one takes the time to search for the original footage online, the contrasts are amazing. As it turns out, the excerpt was derived from the CNN live transmission of a town hall meeting in New Orleans on October 15, 2009 – almost two years before the release of Rick Perry’s campaign ad. Nine months after having taken office, the obviously cheerful, nonchalant and optimistic president talks about the accomplished progress and reminds his audience that bringing about lasting change is not going to be easy. Fired up by the ecstatic crowd, he doesn’t adhere to the prepared remarks and – speaking freely – promulgates, “Those folks who are trying to stand in the way of progress... They’re... They’re all... Let me tell you: I’m just getting started! I don’t quit! I’m not tired. I’m just getting started” (joegerarden). In this context, the assumed threat unexpectedly becomes a promise by Obama, an assurance that he will gradually put all his campaign pledges into effect.

This distortion of reality caused by political advertising is reminiscent of an idea of Susan Sontag. In her essay “In Plato’s Cave,” the American writer elucidates the impact of photographs on the public mind and their influence on the perception of reality. She writes, “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks” (Sontag 270). Similar to the photographic medium, Rick Perry’s commercial is very deceptive because it combines incoherent takes and quotes to make a point. Still focusing on photographs, Sontag talks about this issue when she declares that in a photograph “anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently” (Sontag 270). Creators of partisan propaganda and speechwriters make use of the same technique. In order to achieve a certain effect and trigger the desired reaction from the audience, they can employ even opposing comments for their benefit – simply by transplanting them into a new context.

No matter if one shares Rick Perry’s worldview and his political approaches, one is likely to admit that the video “Rick Perry – Proven Leadership” is an impressive creation. It is so powerful and can be very persuasive because it makes use of the AIDA formula, a concept every marketing student is taught in the first semester. In less than two minutes, the television ad manages to arouse the viewer’s attention and interest, awakens the desire for political change and encourages all registered voters to take action and back Rick Perry. But what are the commercial’s ingredients that make the AIDA formula work?

When examining the ad closely, one is amazed by the lack of facts. Perry’s campaign doesn’t underline its claims with solid evidence, but tries to impose a negative picture of the current situation upon the voters’ minds and offers an almost paradisiacal alternative. The advertisement plays with our emotions. It conveys the stereotypical spirit of American

optimism and interlinks it with the possibility of an emergence into a more glorious era – a combination that is reminiscent of the frontier mentality. To put it another way: how does the footage of galloping wild horses prove Rick Perry’s qualifications and abilities to be the 45th president of the United States? The only message in this ad that the spectators can take for granted is the fact that there’s a public figure by the name of Rick Perry who would love to move into the White House.

It is important to realize that the advertisement of the governor of Texas is just an example picked from a vast pool of political commercials which circulate on the Internet and air on TV channels these days. Even though they may feature different parties and candidates, address miscellaneous topics, and denounce various shortcomings, their style and their lack of fact-based content are alarmingly alike. Whereas the ad of a corporation which is launching a marketing campaign for a new product is regulated by law to protect the customers, political promotions aren’t controlled (“The Persuaders”). Hence politicians, interest groups and entire parties are given a free hand to hoax the public into believing whatever they want. This, in turn, is pure poison for the political discussions among citizens.

The public discourse is also an important topic in the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman. The American author and critic describes in this literary work how the rise of new technologies over time has changed the way we attain knowledge and thus perceive reality. He claims, that in past time periods – when the “printed word had a monopoly on both attention and intellect” (Postman 60) – the masses usually didn’t know their famous contemporaries’ appearance and rhetoric. As a result, they based their judgments about the public figures solely on the information which they had derived from reading books. Postman illustrates his point by writing, “It is quite likely that most of the first fifteen presidents of the United States would not have been recognized had they passed the average citizen in the streets” (Postman 60).

Today, on the other hand, we don’t live in a “word-centered” (Postman 61), but in an “image-centered culture” (Postman 61). Photographs and television shape our everyday lives – and inevitably our minds. Thus, Postman notes, not the bare facts, but pictures of the people concerned appear in our mind. Names are automatically accompanied by pictures. Apart from these photos, however, “almost nothing will come to mind” (Postman 61).

From my point of view, political commercials promote this new lifestyle. Thanks to the innumerable shots of Rick Perry in his campaign ad, for instance, we know his looks, but his accomplishments and the details of his plans to bring America back on track are cloaked in ambiguity. After watching the advertisement, people have an opinion nevertheless. They either see themselves confirmed in their worldviews or they are convinced that Perry doesn’t deserve their vote. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman points out, that as our ways of acquiring knowledge have changed, the significance of our opinions has diminished. He clarifies, “It is probably more accurate to call them emotions rather than opinions, which would account for the fact that they change from week to week, as the pollsters tell us. What is happening here is that television is altering the meaning of ‘being informed’ by creating a

species of information that might properly be called *disinformation*” (Postman 107). According to Postman, the result of this lack of coherent facts brought about by the emergence of television is that “the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense” (Postman 16).

Since I don’t intend to make a case for a specific political party, but for the resuscitation of a democracy based on fact-based discourse, I am going to elucidate my next point using an example which focuses on a Democrat. In Rick Perry’s advertisement, headlines such as “ZERO ‘HOPE’” and “ZERO ‘CHANGE’” (RPerry2012) target the rhetorical terminology that Barack Obama used during the campaign leading up to the 2008 presidential elections. Back then, the senator for the state of Illinois advertised *change*, philosophized about *dignity* and *respect*, promised a time of *prosperity* and more *opportunities* for the *middle class* and thus managed to embody a sense of *hope*. To many he seemed to be the herald who was proclaiming the advent of brighter days – those which Rick Perry, according to his ad, can bring about as well. With catchy slogans like “Change We Can Believe In” and “Yes We Can,” Obama managed to convert a majority of the voters to his columns and defeated his Republican opponent, John McCain.

It is not up to me to judge if President Obama has been able to keep his promises because this call heavily depends on one’s personal opinion. What I’m interested in are the cores of the different terms. Let me ask you: where in the social pyramid does the middle class start and where does it end? How much money do you have to earn annually to call yourself prosperous? Isn’t the perception of opportunity and dignity rather individual? Does hope fill an empty, rumbling stomach or offer you a new job? And how do you define change? I am convinced that when Barack Obama spoke of “change,” it meant something else to the gay couple in Dallas than it did to the laid-off worker from Detroit who used to assemble cars at a factory. The hopes of a single mom in the suburbs of Los Angeles were (and still are) not necessarily the same as the ones of the university graduate from Florida who was facing a crushing mountain of debts or the soldier from rural New York who had served three tours in the Middle East.

Words like “hope” and “opportunity” sound as promising as the names of mars exploration rovers or of the former NASA space shuttles (Atlantis, Columbia, Challenger, Discovery and Endeavour). They are an effective weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of a politician because they are broad, can be furnished by every individual with meaning, and arouse emotions. On the other hand, these terms that Germans refer to as *Worthülsen* (This word, literally meaning “word husks,” has no English equivalent, but its sense can be conveyed by the expression “hollow words.”) have helped to dilute and shroud the current political issues in American politics. They are not tangible and thus impede the development of concrete discussions.

Besides the utilization of inspiring language that is intended to evoke positive connotations, hostile and even defamatory rhetoric is a part of the daily political bickering as well – and its impact on arguments as well as the resulting progress is even more devastating. In Rick

Perry's commercial, Obama denigrates the skeptics of his policies by referring to them as "naysayers" (RPerry2012). Since he is gunning for contemporaries who most likely politicize on the other end of the political spectrum, he is undoubtedly speaking about members of the Republican Party as well as the Tea Party movement. In turn, some legislators affiliated with those parties have in the last few years coined phrases like the derogatory term "Obamacare," have repeatedly called the president a "socialist" and a "Muslim," and have accused their counterparts of fostering "class warfare." Not taking that insult, the Democrats have returned the verbal fire again and tried to project the image that the Republicans are not interested in taking part in a bipartisan government. In an interview with the Swiss current affairs show *10vor10*, Robert Lichter, a professor of Communication at George Mason University and a well-respected media expert, tried to explain the current situation to the European audience. Talking about the results of his studies, he reported, "The use of language has become a new social technology that is applied to the political arena (...). The result is the words that you hear people say on the news are not spontaneous, they are the results of carefully calculated campaigns" (*10vor10*). As an essential and nearly indispensable part of those campaigns, verbal attacks have to perform a simple, inglorious task: staining an opponent's name or political venture. Truth is in the best case secondary. To make it even worse, the media – always eager for more news and emotions they can fill the slots in their twenty-four hour news cycles with – have jumped on the bandwagon and have adopted the same rhetoric.

The increasing importance of terminology in campaigns has fathered the existence of a new market sector. Nowadays, some political consultants' sole specialty is the power of words. They work meticulously on rhetorical constructions and tailor them so that they convey a certain party's perception on an issue and bring about the desired reaction from the addressees. An influential icon in this rather young branch of political science is Frank Luntz, an American opinion pollster and – according to his website – "one of the most honored communication professionals in America today" (Luntz Global). His field of expertise being the testing of language and its impact on the audience, Luntz pockets huge sums of money from corporations and political organizations for which he conducts studies to find the best wording to approach a subject. In a 2004 edition of the television program *FRONTLINE*, Luntz summed up his philosophy by stating, "Eighty percent of our life is emotion and only twenty percent is intellect" ("The Persuaders"). Similar to Indiana Jones who is out for precious, antique relics, Frank Luntz is therefore on a constant quest for more suitable words which sell an issue to the people in the most effective way and make them act on an emotional level. On the homepage of his company Luntz Global, he touts for customers with a political background by implying that carefully picked expressions can decide whether a bill passes. He maintains, "If you need to create the language to build support for legislation, we'll find the right words. If you need to kill a bad bill, we'll show you how" (Luntz Global). Additionally, he presents a few samples of his creations and accomplishments. He praises his company and boasts, "We changed the 'estate tax' to the 'death tax' and that changed the course of legislative history" (Luntz Global). As a consultant of the Republican Party, he further suggested to substitute the term "climate change" by "global warming" and "drilling for oil" was suddenly referred to as "exploring for energy" – simply because it sounded more

appealing (Luntz Global). Let me ask you: which term sounds more pleasant to you – “tax cuts” or “tax relief”? Are you rather in favor of a “War in Iraq” or a “War on Terror”? If you have chosen the second term in both cases, you have just succumbed to expressions created by Frank Luntz (“The Persuaders”).

Even though Luntz claims that he serves the public good by clarifying with his word combinations the otherwise complex political issues, his creations seem to bring about the opposite effect. With their subconscious, emotional impact, they obscure the items on the agenda. Analogous to the footage employed in partisan propaganda, the usage of language has become another subject of the Sontagian reframing. Depending on the choice of words, the course of a political discussion can be controlled and dramatically altered.

As previously mentioned, I don’t intend to scapegoat a particular party. As a matter of fact, the Democrats are just as responsible for the depreciation of public discourse as the Republicans. What I am essentially criticizing is the occurring political arms race, a war fought with everything the visual and audible world has to offer. Both the GOP and the DNC have drafted numerous consultants to join in the battle for their cause and since in today’s fast moving and distractive world the parties would lose their target groups by conducting an extensive line of argument, they put forth an effort to mobilize people and get them on their side through an emotional appeal. Just like fast food, this method is simple, requires less time and has proven to be effective in the short term. But as my comparison gives away, there are also downsides to it. Robert Lichter touched upon the same topic in the interview with the Swiss news broadcast *10vor10*. He had recognized that if the public is bombarded with emotions, the people struggle to understand the issue. He cut right to the chase of the matter, when he said, “...this whole process of trying to use language itself as a political tool is debasing public discourse” (*10vor10*).

Having perused my essay up to this point, some readers may think of me as a grouching pessimist. “An average citizen,” they may argue, “has simply other priorities than the boring political skirmish on Capitol Hill. Especially during these tough economic times, most middle class families’ focus is on the kids and the job.” Others may add that politics isn’t a matter of concern for many Americans because an unprecedented range of choices and possibilities concerning their leisure time and technological advances like cell phones, television and Internet distract them. Therefore, they might suggest that candidates and legislators have to appeal to our emotions to arouse attention and be heard. Otherwise, a serious political conversation couldn’t even get started.

I agree that this explanation may be true to a certain extent. From my point of view, however, the strategies that are used to get the public’s attention have reached unsettling proportions. Was it really necessary to show a grotesque portrayal of George W. Bush as the devil incarnate during his presidency? And how do photo-shopped and distorted pictures which depict Barack Obama as Adolf Hitler or the Joker help spark a fact-based argument? Such creations are out of touch with reality. They simply serve as the spearhead of blasphemous smear campaigns. Similarly, terms like “class warfare” and “naysayers” don’t contribute to

the talks about the health care system, the economy, civil rights and foreign relations, but distract and leave a negative impression on the blamed party. The result is a political landscape flooded with emotions in which arguments can go off course very quickly. In 2008, for instance, when a heated debate about abortions was stirring up citizens across the country, Barack Obama justified his opinion during a televised interview with Pastor Rick Warren in the evangelical Christian Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA (“Saddleback Church”). On that day (and actually in several other situations while running for president), he had to remind his compatriots that pro-choice doesn’t mean pro-abortion (BarackObamaFan123).

So why does all this matter? Throughout this paper I argued that a rise in emotionality has occurred in political advertisements and in American politics as whole and that this tendency has been accompanied by a neglect of facts and circumstances. This calamitous combination has led to an obstruction of productive discussions and it has influenced the population’s view on the political hustle and bustle. A lot of people seem to be demotivated or they are simply overwhelmed and want to save themselves further trouble by abstaining from taking part in the conversation. In the *NBC Nightly News* edition of February 14, 2012, Brian Williams reported that, according to a new study, a quarter of all eligible voters isn’t registered (*NBC*). And as we know, not even all registered voters regularly make use of their right to cast their ballot. I’m afraid that this trend will continue as so-called “social media” create a novel battlefield for political interest groups and as a technique called “narrowcasting” lets campaigns contact and address people more individually. In my opinion, an oversaturation of emotional politics may lead to a standstill in the democratic dialogue.

Since the Founding Fathers composed the U.S. Constitution more than 224 years ago, America has had to get through several challenging periods and has overcome numerous obstacles. However, if the politicians don’t find the way back to a rational way of talking politics, the “land of the free” may soon be heading towards another, unexpected one – and it won’t have anything to do with outside threats such as terrorists or the ominous “axis of evil.” If the public discourse continues to be shaped by emotions and not by facts, I fear that the United States will reach a deadlock and start to resemble a disabled and adrift luxury steamer on a giant ocean. Due to her size as well as her history she may still seem to be impressive and mighty. In reality, however, the cruise ship “America” would fail to bring its passengers forward and drift along without a destination, her fate being solely at the mercy of the random political waves, winds and currents. Consider the 2011 debt-ceiling crisis, for example. Last year, when the Congressional representatives publicly fought about the modalities of a bill to increase the nation’s debt ceiling and childishly exchanged verbal blows, the world’s biggest economic power suddenly found itself at the verge of a financial disaster. If the Senators and Representatives hadn’t come to a last-minute compromise, the United States could have fallen into insolvency, millions of pay checks wouldn’t have been sent out and the U.S. dollar’s supremacy as the leading global currency would have been threatened. Events like this may just be the harbingers of an impending, sinister future: a

country that is not able to take a step forward and struggles to keep pace in international affairs; a nation whose lawmakers don't manage to comply with the interests of the people they are supposed to represent and thus a government which isn't really a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" ("Gettysburg Address") anymore. However, such a worst-case scenario can still be averted. The American public simply has to become aware of this trend and take action. Every citizen can do his share by bracketing the ubiquitous emotions out. Not taking heed of political advertisements and thus fighting the metastasis of their messages may be one of the first and most important steps. In addition, all citizens should inject themselves into the debate again. Through talks conducted in a constructive spirit and by getting to know other perspectives and opinions, more positive and sustainable solutions will be achieved. The United States of America is a wonderful and amazing land and if the politicians manage to return from the trenches to the round-table, I am sure she will stay like this for many generations to come.

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2012-13 RetrospectiveImprovisation: Galaxy Unfulfilled

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/improvisation-galaxy-unfulfilled

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by Marianne Brudwick

Like a horse and rider, the piano keys and I galloped briskly along keeping pace with the director and choir. We bumped over obstacles as we sightread a new jazz piece to consider for the next concert, but that's par for the course. Upon one particular page turn though, this rider slammed the horse to a stop before going over a cliff. The written music stopped and the simple words "ad lib" appeared, along with several measures of a blank galaxy staring at me, just waiting to be explored. The words "ad lib" literally mean "to improvise" or in other words, "make up something here." My music education had not prepared me for this cliff. I had been trained to read and interpret music as it appeared on the page. This particular day I was faced with a situation in which I felt completely helpless, not to mention humiliated, despite twelve years of training and my parents' long-term investment into private music lessons. So why was I now unprepared to venture into this galactic "improvisational" moment?

Up to this point, I had been taught by three well-trained, private music teachers with years of experience. They didn't know any better. To their credit, they taught me according to how they had been taught, carrying on the traditions of typical musical pedagogy (the science of teaching music) including music theory, technique and standard classic repertoire. Occasionally I had heard of a rare species of people who played completely by ear, able to improvise freely over the keys, making the piano sing with their voice. Oh, how I envied them! But my ear did not cooperate in the same instinctive way so I became dependent upon my eyes reading the written music score and my fingers translating it onto the keys. Without the written page, I was lost. Thus, the horse and rider experience in my teen years catapulted me into new thinking about my music education and the lack of creativity within.

Another educator, Dr. Martha Baker-Jordan, describes a similar scenario in which concert pianists are at an informal affair and someone requests a rendition of "Happy Birthday" on the piano. Surprisingly, many were unable to do this on the spot and eventually Baker-Jordan was found and thus the need was met. Having devoted much of her life to the study of music pedagogy, she has gathered information to determine her best suggestions for becoming a well-rounded music educator. She integrated all this advice into a book entitled, *Practical Piano Pedagogy*. Within this book is a chapter called "The Black Hole," which pinpoints the missing link in many piano studios. She explains the problem by saying:

There seems to be a huge void in the universe of our classical piano training and concertizing that I call the ‘Black Hole of Piano Teaching and Performance.’ The gravitational pull of this black hole is so strong that the functional keyboard skills of harmonizing, transposing and improvising (all of which can include reading chord symbols) are sucked out of our world into oblivion. Concert pianists, studio teachers, even piano and pedagogy professors, all are affected, and many go through life without ever acquiring these skills. (242-243)

Evidently, I am not alone. I have witnessed the “deer in the headlights” look on many teachers I have met in various circles, social or educational, over the years at the slightest mention of improvisation. Ironically, as frightening as this black hole is, it also seems to be the earnest longing of so many adults – to just sit and create music for their own enjoyment. Unfortunately, many only remember one or two songs from years of lessons and though they are proud of those few accomplishments, that is the limit of their musicianship.

If a parent is willing to invest in private lessons to develop their child’s musicality, shouldn’t they expect their child to have opportunities to explore the creative, imaginative side of music through improvisation, along with learning to read and perform written music? Likewise, shouldn’t the public school music curriculum allow for a window of time devoted to musically creative opportunities? Before exploring the repercussions of this, we need to more fully understand the meaning of improvisation. According to *The Encyclopedia of Music*, the simplest definition of the word is “the performer’s invention on the spur of the moment” (253). It also explains two different kinds of improvisation: the first is often used by jazz players, making up melodies over a given harmonic structure. The second is more complex in that the musician “plans a form” in which a “theme” is able to work into (253-254). If the improviser has a base knowledge of harmony and a good ear, his imagination can reach for the stars. But I firmly believe improvisation should not be limited to these two different kinds. If someone has no previous music training and is just beginning lessons, it may be as simple as playing on black or white notes to create their own unique “sound” for experimentation. It can also lead to discovery, self-expression or the beginnings of a composition to call their own, with or without a harmonic backdrop provided by a teacher, as will be explained later.

Improvisation is not a new concept in the music arena. It has always held a place of importance in history. Many of the greatest composers including Mozart and Beethoven were known for their improvisations and a keyboardist of the Baroque period was expected to improvise over a figured bass. Opera singers, organists and the earliest church choirs also had a history of practicing it in order to embellish their performances. Most often, in today’s culture, Americans tend to regard improvisation as strictly associated with jazz. True enough, it was a vital part of our jazz history and continues to be used and studied within this category. In Duke Ellington’s published essay “Swing Is My Beat!,” written in 1944 and quoted in *Music in the USA*, improvisation sounds as easy as eating apple pie when described in this setting: “I might just sit down at the piano and start composing a little melody, telling a story about it at the same time to give the mood of the piece. I’ll play eight bars, talk a bit,

then play another eight and soon the melody is finished. Then the boys go to work on it, improvising, adding a phrase here and there” (535). This is how jazz played out. Improvisation led to compositions but frequently there was room within the composition to freely improvise, giving jazz a spontaneity and spice unlike any other genre. This early twentieth century era produced many of our country’s most well-known musicians and beloved songs but it should not be a category in which to box improvisation in.

So if improvisation can be practiced by the novice or the experienced musician, why has it evidently been missed or avoided in many musicians’ training, leading to this major rush of fear in so many adults? This is not to say that all teachers train the same way, for there are a few who encourage such practices. Those that come from a background of playing jazz or had instructors who gave them opportunity to “play around” with notes are obviously more comfortable teaching it, but this is not the norm. One of my childhood friends grew up with a teacher so strict that her knuckles were slapped with a ruler if she played an incorrect note. Her story is not alone and I experienced a similar fear if I played the music in any way but what the composer (interpreted by my teacher) intended for my lessons. There was no room for personal interpretation, improvisation, or “playing around” on the keys and unfortunately, there were few smiles of enjoyment as well.

In answer to the question of what causes this “fear factor” amongst current day teachers, Forrest Kinney, creator of the “Pattern Play” piano instructional books responds:

The problem is at its worst with people who have learned to read because they have a notion of what they “should” sound like. It is very difficult to get many experienced classical musicians to even try to step “off the page.” And yes, this is because we have generations of people teaching people to read [music] BEFORE they learn to “speak.” We need to teach people to improvise in the first lesson and then there is no fear. (Kinney)

He compares it to childhood and how from little babes, we are taught to speak words first and eventually read written words on paper. Likewise, a piano student should be taught to play or “speak” music first, to experience the touch, listening to their sounds and reacting intuitively, gradually working into note-reading. This develops more of a kinship between the student and their instrument, allowing them freedom to express themselves however they wish from the beginning.

It seems the typical approach in teaching private music lessons in the second half of the twentieth century included an emphasis on reading standard repertoire and performance techniques, otherwise known as traditional music pedagogy. Considering this alongside Forrest Kinney’s thoughts, I wonder what happened to the message James Mursell presents to the listening audience of his book entitled, *Music Education: Principles and Programs*, written in the 1950s? Mursell reminds music teachers that their main “aim” is to provide people a means of pleasure; something they can enjoy here and now as well as the rest of their lives. He outlines expectations for both teachers and students at the elementary school level, reminding those in charge of the importance to be a “creative teacher,” keeping the

spirit of enthusiasm for the art alive. We often think those “gifted” few are the only ones capable of being creative geniuses. But he dares to differ in explaining how each of us is capable of discovering something new in ourselves, even in our responses to music when he says, “They are creative responses because from them comes something new. So all creative response is discovery, and all discovery is creative response” (330). He further illustrates his point by saying, “The discovery of an unsuspected ability in oneself is a creative experience. A child whom you may have begun to consider unmusical suddenly finds that he can sing a descant part against a melody. To be sure, the descant may consist of no more than one or two notes. But he can do it! Finding this out is a creative act” (330). Though Mursell does not use the word “improvise” in his book, he does give much attention to the topic of *creative teaching*, (which could easily include improvisation) and goes so far as to say it is a “requirement” for promoting musical growth (329). I wholeheartedly agree that the most magical moments of greatest joy in my studio have been when the student “discovers” something about their music that comes from within. As a teacher, I can be the source and giver of musical opportunities, I can show them by example and I can encourage but I cannot discover their creativity for them. Once found, it is a rich and rewarding treasure to claim all their own.

Though it seems reasonable for improvisation to be introduced as a creative tool to a musician at any level, educators may feel hard-pressed to implement it. Pianist and elementary music teacher Julie K. Scott explains why in her article entitled, “Me? Teach Improvisation to Children?”: the demands of a public school music teacher include teaching students how to sing in tune, read music, play various instruments and prepare for PTA programs. Their time is hard pressed to allow for anything else. Creativity and improvisation may end up low on the priority list. The other factor for causing an educator to hesitate teaching how to do this is that they may never have been formally trained themselves or trained in how to teach such creativity. She asks if it is worth the effort and “if so, where do we begin?” (par. 5). After suffering an embarrassing “horse and rider” experience similar to mine, her eyes were opened to her lack of training in this area. She then set out to find a program on her own that taught her how to improvise in order to fill in this “black hole” and prevent this from happening in her students’ lives. How many educators would go so far to overcome their personal fear by determining to find solutions to help overcome their fear? Unfortunately, many just avoid the subject completely and stick with what is comfortable.

Likewise, valuable private piano lesson time is eaten up quickly if an instructor is trying to include all major elements of pedagogy including technique, theory and standard repertoire. To further her argument why improvisation is a valuable training tool, Ms. Scott lists five benefits, including how it can:

1. allow students to be musically creative and musically expressive,
2. improve their technical skills, aural skills and music-reading ability,
3. provide links to culture and tradition,
4. provide opportunities for musical social interaction and

5. give students opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of musical concepts and skills. (Scott par. 5)

If this is truly the case, then improvisation is a necessary and beneficial asset to music education, richly enhancing the other, more commonly taught skills listed above. Perhaps our focus as a whole needs to be shifted and an expectation of practicing creativity needs to be brought to the forefront so the musician can be “wholly” shaped from the beginning, making music a more personal exploration, one that can be taken out of the studio to be worked and reshaped the rest of their lives into a treasured gem to call their own.

I recently had the opportunity to attend a workshop by David Lanz, Grammy-nominated composer and world-renowned pianist/performer, who encouraged his participants to explore creativity by trying improvisation at home while making our own arrangements of favorite pop songs. When asking him why he thought improvisation could help every musician, he responded: “Improvisation is a way for the musician to reveal his soul and express what is inside of him or her. It is a way to free up the musical intellect and allow the muse to speak directly through the musician...without reading and/or relying on someone else’s work to express your feelings” (Lanz). In response to the same question, Melody Bober, a mainstream composer/teacher/clinician answers, “[Improvisation] allows everyone a certain measure of creativity; it gives everyone a chance to understand the creativity of others as they learn other composers’ music; teaching the rudiments of chord charts expands sightreading skills greatly; provides an opportunity to expand their ear; enhances expression, personalizes; may lead to composition” (Bober). Both agree that improvisation does things to the musician that cannot be taught otherwise, including self-expression and freedom of thought. There are too many benefits to quickly dismiss it from musical training and cast it aside as only for the jazz musician or those who have a good ear and a natural “feel” for it.

In order to avoid creating a “black hole” in training current young musicians, educators need to know the options available today and that they can enjoy learning improvisation right along with their students. Ms. Scott referred to the Orff Schulwerk training as her personal learning method but also mentioned Kratus, who proposed that improvisation be divided into seven sequential levels. Ms. Bober suggests finding method books, more readily available in the market now, that include improvisation as part of the whole learning experience. Mr. Lanz suggests starting with “simple input, like just play [...] the black notes (a natural pentatonic scale) so you really can’t play a wrong note, or playing with a “C” pedal tone in the bass and playing any single or group of white notes—these two ways can start most students off on their own!” (Lanz). No matter what method is used, the important point is the starting point. Like putting a crayon in a child’s hand to create their own unique visual masterpiece, let their fingers play the keys, creating their own aural musical masterpiece. When you might be tempted to tell your child to “stop fooling around” on the piano, listen closer. They may be speaking from their heart through their music.

Before we limit the introduction of improvisation to the younger crowd, we must consider those who have already been trained without the opportunity to find their creative voice. Specifically for pedagogy instructors and students, Dr. Martha Baker-Jordan, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, has two suggestions for plugging the “black hole” of classical piano music. First, she recommends a required course that covers harmonizing, transposing and improvising at a level corresponding with their keyboard skills. Her experience has seen music educators take such a course only if required, not realizing it is a practical step in helping teach their future students to “play something they know,” which parents would like to hear as well. The second recommendation is to teach these potential music teachers “how to teach” these skills to their future students (244). I believe her experience of observing students has given her a credible link to discovering a problem that filters down to many students over time. Improvisation may be developed as far as a student wishes, but the basics are learnable and teachable, helping to fill in this gap of the vast unknown to a waiting audience of music appreciators and partakers.

The most effective way of incorporating improvisation into piano instruction that I have personally found is through Forrest and Akiko Kinney’s “Pattern Play” books. They have developed an easy to use format for teachers and students that begins with a new improvisational idea on nearly every page. This idea, known as a “pattern,” is typically easy to memorize consisting of a short sequence of chords/notes and rhythm that is to be played repetitively on the lower half of the piano by the teacher while the student gets to play music of their choice on the top half of the piano within a few guidelines. There are suggested ideas printed should the teacher or student feel overwhelmed by this new open galaxy of creativity. Unlike most piano instruction books, though, Kinney suggests taking the patterns and expanding them, making them your “own,” using them as solo, duet or even trio piano creations. Through these simple little patterns, he paints musical pictures of thoughtful reflections, explosions of energy and various shades of emotion. He also introduces composer “styles,” such as Beethoven or Chopin, and takes you on travels into foreign lands such as Ireland and China. Some patterns lead you into past genres of music such as blues, boogie-woogie and ragtime (*Pattern* 10-11). Through the magic of improvisation, he explores musical settings using your fingertips and imagination as the telescope and lens.

All four leaders in the music industry that I inquired through personal interview responded when asked what has happened to them as a result of improvising. For Melody Bober, it led to a successful career creating compositions and arrangements played out in pedagogy and repertoire books for all ages. For David Lanz it led to universally acclaimed compositions, arrangements and performances as a soloist and with well-known bands heard around the world, as well as the simplest reward of “a great way to just experience the moments of life.” Robert Lundquist, a successful and distinguished vocal/piano instructor as well as composer responds: “It feeds my hunger for music and I can get lost in it endlessly. Free time and a tuned piano are exhilarating for the spirit and my musical soul!!” And finally, Forrest Kinney, having spent much of his adult life studying and writing about improvisation as well as performing in prestigious gatherings such as for Bill Gates says, “Often I will think deep

thoughts, or feel strongly, or feel peaceful, or feel powerful—it all depends on the moment. And that is the power of improvisation—it is a revealing of what is in the moment, right now.” None of these leaders in the music industry would have been able to accomplish their feats without improvisation. Creative exploration was a necessary step to get to their next level of potential. Though not all young students will become such an accredited musician as those listed above, any outlet of personal creativity allows an expression of life, and a place to go to reflect inner thoughts and feelings that may otherwise feel trapped within.

On the contrary, the effects of not allowing children a window to discover their “genius” causes them to shut down their potential, believing they are not “capable” of creating something worthwhile, so why bother trying? It has been my observation that this attitude carries over from childhood into adulthood. It is sad to see many adults come to my studio for lessons, having already put limitations on their ability to create and explore more deeply the world of music. It takes time to break down their fears and destroy the barriers that have been built up unnecessarily. Fear of failure seems to be the largest barrier to overcome even though there may be no audience, no teacher to “fail” anymore, only themselves. Lundquist says adults are afraid of “(1) the unknown and for many, composition and improvisation are unknowns, (2) being exposed as not knowledgeable and (3) not being able ‘to do it’, so therefore hide from it, and discourage their own students from exploring music” (Lundquist). There is a distinct issue of pride involved when a person has been trained to excel one-dimensionally but when pressed upon to create spontaneously, suffers humiliation because of lack of experience in this “black hole.” Despite the fact that we can become our biggest enemy, the potential for possible creativity remains in each of us and teachers must be determined to open that door for all, themselves included.

Clearly, the opportunity for students to practice improvisation opens doors for exploration into their imagination. The question is how to weave it into the current curriculum of the private and public spectrum so students of all degrees may experience it and use it to enhance, not deter from their performance skills. Though it takes perseverance to find help getting started, it is not impossible. The day of my “horse and rider” cliff experience was a turning point in my musical education. I determined, with the help of my parents, to find another teacher my senior year to fill in this black hole. My mother found me an elderly but spunky little man named Einar Moen, who happened to be her teacher years earlier, but also happened to be one of the last to ever play for the vaudeville shows at the Mt. Baker Theatre in Bellingham, Washington. I will forever be grateful. From the time he set his fingers to play, I was mesmerized. He was the first to teach me how to see beyond the page, to enter the musical galaxy, to let go of my inhibitions and just “play!”

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2013-14 Retrospective The Allegory of the Pen

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/allegory-of-the-pen

November 20, 2015

by Katelyn Carlton

I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
You return to the source of being.
– Lao-Tzu

The simplest solutions are the most elegant. We witness this in solving mathematical equations, personal dilemmas or even the telling of a tale. Often the process and problem involved in reaching these solutions are neither simple nor elegant. They are a tangled thorny mess of overlapping grey hues that we must unravel if we are to move forward. It takes a wealth of resources, thoughts and a bit of bold action to work our way through the briar of our existence. Those that are able reach an elegant solution did not get there alone. They borrowed and stole the tools they needed from many predecessors and contemporaries. In order for our best work to be done we must be welcomed into the minds of others as friends and neighbors, free to partake of the wealth we find there. Conversely we must leave the doors of our vaults open for others to explore and extract. We do a great favor to all when we package our insights for easy transport in the forms of stories, songs, and equations.

All the great thinkers are thieves, they simply cannot help themselves, like a crow when it sees the shiny marble of an idea they must pick it up. When many ideas have accumulated they begin to look over their cache. They compare each gem, looking not at the stark contrasts, but at the many shades and values that can be connected and combined to form another vision of what lies beyond the briar and how we might get there. It is not a compromise between extremes that we seek, but commonality. No one person or society is truly absolute. We are all made up of many and often conflicting truths.

Culturally we have conventions for expressing and comparing our truths, parables about marbles and crows, stories of caves and gardens of metaphors as lush and varied as Eden. These are packages that contain our ideas and experiences. Why not grab one of these bundles and tuck it under an arm? Don't be afraid, the thinker left it there for us and we are engaged in an ancient and noble form of larceny. Now that it is liberated from that dark and dusty attic perhaps we should open it and see where it takes us. The label says, "The Allegory of the Pen" and this is what is inside...

Imagine a pen. It is a very large pen, full of sweet grass, fresh water and sunshine. There is shelter to get out of the wind and the rain and warm dry bedding available. The pen is completely surrounded by an electric fence and in the pen there are two goats. The first goat loves the pen. It makes her feel safe. She spends her days eating sweet grass and enjoying the feel of the sun on her back. It is her joy in these simple pleasures that makes her feel alive. She has no desire to leave the pen or test its borders.

The second goat loathes the pen. He sees it for exactly what it is; a prison, a false environment of dangerous contentment. He longs to know what lies beyond its borders. What other plants and animals might exist. He longs to know what it would be like to be wild, to be free. He spends his days testing the perimeter. He is searching the border for breaks and weaknesses in his captivity. He spends his life pushing the fence. Each time he pushes he is stretching and weakening the electric wire, microscopically expanding the parameters of his world. Each time he tests, each time he pushes, he is shocked by the electric fence that contains him. It is the pain experienced from challenging his limitations and expectations that reminds him that he is real. It is the pain that makes him feel that he is alive.

The allegory just described leads us to ask the questions; which goat's life has more meaning? Which goat is free? And finally are freedom and happiness mutually exclusive or intrinsically intertwined? If we were to present these questions to Lao Tzu the philosopher from the sixth century B.C. and author of the Tao-te Ching, we would find answers as poetic as they are opaque, but consistent in their commitment to the Tao. The Tao is sometimes translated as "The Way" it embodies the philosophy of the middle path. A method of living that is centered and balanced in harmony, humility and compassion. It is a path of least resistance as Lao Tzu reminds us "The great Way is easy, yet people prefer the side paths. Be aware when things are out of balance. Stay centered within the Tao" (29). The Tao is as much a manifesto for the governance of a great society as it is a prescription for personal fulfillment and meaning. It does not differentiate between the individual and the whole for in its full manifestation they are one. "If a country is governed wisely" Lao-Tzu promises, then:

People enjoy their food,
take pleasure in being with their families,
spend weekends working in their gardens,
delight in the doings of their neighborhood.
And even though the next country is so close
that people can hear its roosters crowing
and its dogs barking,
they are content to die of old age
without ever having gone to see it. (33)

This description of life as it could be reminds us of our goat at the center of her pen. Living a life of contentment and simple pleasures she is free. Free from want, free from pain, free from the questioning discontent that torments her brother. As Lao-Tzu puts it "The Master

sees things as they are, without trying to control them. She lets them go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle” (26). There is no pursuit in her happiness or her freedom by the means of her existence, it simply is.

But what about the dogs barking and the roosters crowing in that country so near? Is it not a shame to live an entire life without ever knowing or experiencing anything beyond one’s own existence? It could even be argued that it creates a mentality that is potentially dangerous. In his essay “The Individual in the Chains of Illusion” Erich Fromm, a twentieth century sociologist and humanist, describes how primitive clan mentality translates its self in nation states and world cultures. He explains:

There are moral laws governing the members of the group, and without such laws no group could exist. But these laws do not apply to the “stranger.” When groups grow in size, more people cease to be “strangers” and become “neighbors.” Yet in spite of the quantitative change, qualitatively the distinction between the neighbor and the stranger remains. A stranger is not human, he is a barbarian, is not even fully understandable. (333)

Thus regardless of how large or well-connected a person or a nation is by never experiencing the inhabitants in the countries nearby they never have a chance to become “neighbors” and will remain “strangers” thereby creating an isolationist mentality rife for defensiveness and brutality. Ignorance is the mother plant of fear and fear an invasive weed that chokes out both freedom and happiness.

This brings us to the question of the fence its self. To fence something in or to fence something out is an act of segregation. In “The Letter from Birmingham Jail” civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. asks his detractors “Isn’t segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement” (3)? This question asks us that by allowing socially constructed fences to exist, have we been “strangers’ to one another and is segregation both a symptom and the cause of our estrangement? Segregation is one of many social constructs dictated by the written laws and unwritten codes of our cultural infrastructure. This suggests a moral imperative to disobey any “code that is out of harmony with the moral law” as an unjust law (3). Dr. King explains this:

In the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. (3)

Returning to our allegory, the goat that feels compelled to test the fence also questions his segregation and isolation from the other creatures of the world.

A pen is related to a penitentiary and to be incarcerated in one whether it is complacently or against one’s will, is to have one’s freedom denied. Anyone cognizant of their captivity should feel compelled to take action against it. To challenge their constraints and test their limits is

both a direct act of disobedience and the greatest act of hope. Just as we have seen that ignorance is the mother of fear, we must acknowledge hope as the seed of freedom. In reminding us of the virtue of “the capacity for disobedience,” Fromm draws upon the Hebrew and Greek myths (332). He uses Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and Prometheus stealing the fire of the gods to illustrate how “Disobedience was the first act of freedom” (332). Just as Adam and Eve were punished and Prometheus chained to the rock for their daring, so too is the goat punished when he does not obey the limits of the pen. Not only is he experiencing physical punishment, but even more deeply, the emotional and spiritual malaise caused by the unjust fact of his segregation. Still as long as there is continued struggle there is continued hope. For him the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of freedom are in no way exclusive from one another, but intrinsic in that happiness is impossible and irrelevant without freedom. Fromm validates these struggles when he writes:

Man has continued to evolve by acts of disobedience not just in the sense that his spiritual development was possible only because there have been men who dared to say “no” to the powers that be in the name of their conscience or of their faith. His intellectual development was also dependent on the capacity for being disobedient, disobedient to the authorities who try to muzzle new thoughts, and to the authority of long-established opinions which declare change to be nonsense. (332)

What do Erich Fromm, Martin Luther King Jr. and our revolutionary goat all have in common? They all have their freedom, freedom to think for themselves, freedom to act with integrity, and freedom from fear. They are aware that there will be recourse and punishment for their thoughts and actions, but continue on their path with “simplicity, patience, [and] compassion” (Lao-Tzu 32). The value of their beliefs is of greater importance to them than the fear of punishment or the allure of comfort. This makes them extreme in their integrity and free in their thinking. Lao-Tzu writes that “There is no greater illusion than fear” once we dispel this illusion we are free to be direct in our actions and generous in our thoughts (28). Free to remove the battered walls that protect our fragile hearts and be defenseless in our happiness. All great thinkers are thieves of ideas. The questioners are invaders laying siege to our castle walls. Upsetting and destroying the safe and ordered sovereignty of our established beliefs. These are the forces for personal growth and social evolution.

What do these two goats have to teach us? Should we strive for the peace and contentment of Lao-Tzu’s goat or the sacrifice and passion of Fromm’s and Dr. King’s? If we step back we can see that both are fully and honestly experiencing their worlds. While one fights to destroy the fence that he perceives to be a barrier to his true self, the other takes a different path, one that goes within to discover her true self and the fences cease to exist. Each is gaining a greater understanding of themselves and their world through their experience. The methods and ideals that they both represent “have given us the intellectual tools to break through the sham of rationalization and ideologies, and to penetrate to the core of individual and social reality” (Fromm 336). They demonstrate that the pen is of our own construction.

We build fences around ourselves, our communities and our nations to protect what is inside, but in fact we are segregating ourselves from the world at large, from our fellow humans and our greater selves. History has shown us through countless wars and personal heartbreaks, that no good can come this. As long as we maintain the territorial mentality of protecting what is “ours” our fellow man will always remain “strangers” having never been allowed to become “neighbors.” In order to free ourselves from this self-imposed segregation we must be brave and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. The Yin and Yang of our convictions balance us on a center path toward our ideals, but in order to maintain this balance we must be both brutally honest and compassionately empathetic with ourselves and others. Lao-Tzu states it more elegantly when he writes “Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate toward yourself, you reconcile all beings in the world” (32). Inspired by the Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha who was a contemporary of Lao-Tzu’s, Fromm addresses this in his own way when he introduces his One Man ideal:

As long as any fellow being is experienced as fundamentally different from myself, as long as he remains a stranger, I remain a stranger to myself too. When I experience myself fully, then I recognize that I am the same as any other human being, that I am the child, the sinner, the saint, the one who hopes and the one who despairs, the one who can feel joy and the one who can feel sadness. I discover that only the thought concepts, the customs, the surface are different, and that the human substance is the same. I discover that I am everybody, and that I discover myself in discovering my fellow man, and vice versa. In this experience I discover what humanity is; I discover the One Man. (336)

In order to discover the One Man we must first fully emerge as individuals. We must eliminate the fences within ourselves only then will we have the strength and the sovereignty to know all men as neighbors and the whole world as a community.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Erich Fromm and Lao-Tzu were each in his own way working to end segregation. Dr. King fought for civil rights on a physical and political plane. Erich Fromm writing about the “One Man” ideal connected the individual in “One world, One nation” on a cultural and national level and Lao-Tzu teaches that spiritual oneness is possible through the Tao. All these great thinkers were thieves and they hoped for their ideas to be freely plundered. They have shown us a path through the briar. A solution as simple and elegant as it is challenging. That with an open mind and a generous heart there can be both freedom and happiness, but only if we can overcome both the internal and external fences will our pens cease to exist. No longer strangers to one another we can be free to each travel our own paths and find a place at the center of the circle.

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Snowball Fight

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/snowball-fight

November 20, 2015

by Jonah Belvins

silence of winter's cold broken by
ice cycles crashing thunderous to ground under
freshly minted snow. isolated freeze—a place
for soul as snowballs pound away
at walls, protection
sting of compacted snow—child's play. taste of rusting
steel filling hallows of veins. wasteland
of soul, filled with tears as blackness of snow
coats the lucidly of mind. no color to behold
this is the war
whored-out words solidifying the isolation
of fight. lacerated scars mark battle, pounding
of my heart—the song of a warrior's drum, retreat
into the warmth of swirling hot
chocolate with a floating marshmallow placed by this little boy's mother
wake, move one foot at a time, frozen, unable to move, no help in sight. hit
flurries pelted from across the steel-blue
haze of battlefield. floating cotton settling
to the bottom of oozing tar traveling
through bruised veins like embers
half alive fully dead

mind too numb for tears

arms too heavy to complain

buried in trampled snow

frostbit glimpse of sobriety

falling snow

rising up telling myself for the last time, tossing snowballs

with precision, powder splashing

the white tundra, lingering close looking for weakness

caught off-guard in winter glaze, stinging snowballs

like boulders on my chest. hard to breathe

lungs filled with lead, caught in the combat of fun

this game might take my life

Co-op Jeezus

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/co-op-jeezus

November 20, 2015

by Charlie Lahud

I sat down at the Co-op table for my between-class, over-priced lunch with Jeezus Christ (the savior of the earth for those of you previously unaware) on the other side, happy to be able to partake in conversation with someone for whom I and others have so many questions. As soon as we finish our food—Pad Thai noodles for me and a large yellow bag of Pirate’s Booty for Him—I start, knowing that Biology would start promptly.

“First and foremost, Jeezus, do you control my destiny? Am I that feather in Forrest Gump, or do I have control of the reins on this ride? Am I going to die today? Or tomorrow or the day after or the day after the day after?”

And the Lord told me, dusty Pirate Booty bits spurting from his lips: *“I am the way and the truth and the path and divine and the best and your lord and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Kudos to those whom are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

“Great..... Also, did you ever meet someone in heaven named Virginia Woolf? You see, she is one of my favorite writers and it would be a legitimate real shame for someone as inspirational as her to be puttering around in purgatory. Did St. Peter let her in, even though she waded into that river, her pockets full of stones, taking the life you gave her? I really am intrigued.”

With a single finger raised, pointing to the sky, and two others being licked clean of snack, He told me *“A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. Except that prick in your Pre-Calc class, I hate her too.”*

“Before this next question I want to thank you, Jeezus, for your helpful certifications. Ok, I really hate to be an apostle Thomas and a jerk here but let me tell you: this ‘Zanadoo’ in the sky that you have conjured is difficult to believe. Your evidence is significantly lax to say THE least. Do you understand what I’m saying, O Savior of the Earth?”

“Yeah. Furthermore, come unto me, all you that labor and are carrying a lot of crap, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you all shall find good, rest unto your souls,” Jeezus told me while noisily popping open a recently-conjured bag of Doritos. The lady at the cashier glared at him disapprovingly, probably not for the noise but for eating such an un-co-op-y snack.

“Wonderful. Thanks a million. One last thing, Jeezus, I think I have figured it out for myself. Our only chance of a Utopia is to have happiness emerge from the constant struggle of lamentable and remarkable events. My life here on earth is just so; it is perfect because I do not receive all that I want at *any* time. This world on this planet is perfect just because it rarely is. Considering these thoughts, your proposed ‘perfect heaven’ sounds of claptrap, hogwash, rubbish, bunkum, humbug. Celestial skullduggery, if you will. Tell me, Christ, even if your castle in the sky is actually “there,” how is it a “heaven” better than what we have on earth? Why must I suffer now just to not suffer later?”

Jeezus continued, looking directly upon me: *“And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is most bodaciously profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. Never forget this, because if you steal something with your right hand, self-mutilation IS the answer...ask Hamurabi.”*

“My lord, perhaps Luis Bunuel was right: you are a bit of a joke...akin to Sarah Palin or Scientology or my high school geography class (where is Africa located?). It is difficult to take you seriously. I need your assurance that this is not so, otherwise I just can’t listen to you...”

“Remember, blessed are the merciful: for they shall get mercy from someone...unless of course they don’t.”

“You have greatly disappointed me so far, Jeezus. Your blatantly abstract fuckery...I talk about one, you blabber on about the other... please Jeezus; I’m on hands and knees (I wasn’t really). Be relevant to my life here on earth and my intellectual dilemmas. I need you to be relevant to me and all that surrounds me. At the moment you are only an old, old book. One weathered and worn that plays with language, develops an interesting plot and attracts my interest, but in no way connected to anything AT ALL in my life. Be important, be there for me.”

“But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek that you swallow all the rude actions that swell deep in the depths of your soul and those you would normally engage in... and settle for giving them the finger. Or the classic ‘up yours’ if it wasn’t really that bad,” the carpenter’s son told me whilst wiping orange Dorito digits along the sides of his gleaming garment.

“Huhhhhhhhh... Jeezus Christ! Whoops, sorry,” I say as He looks over at me, clearly puzzled. “I was just cursing, wasn’t actually talking to you.”

“It’s all good.”

“Cool...” I offer, sensing the futility I expected to feel at the beginning of the conversation. But still....

I glance at the clock on the wall: 11:35, already late for Biology. After explaining to Jeezus that I was in fact *again* late for class and my presentation on the evidence of evolution (of course he grimaced), I said my goodbyes:

“Thank you for your amazing help, Jeezus. You helped me better understand the world. As you do every single Sunday.”

His mouth filled to the brim with Double-stuffs, he gave me the double thumbs-up. I smiled meekly, waved good-bye, and trotted to class.

Sylvia you misunderstood:

noisywater.whatcom.edu/sylvia-you-misunderstood

November 20, 2015

by Mallory Langen



Sylvia

you misunderstood:

you wondered why mom never her mom *mom*

it was *Sylvia* or *Gramma Sylvia* or

a solemn subtly exasperated: *my mother*

solemn like that first cold of the season that

reminds you what winter is and that worse is coming

screaming meant anger, coldness. silence tranquility

you misunderstood

when Sylvia slapped mom's face

a silent reaction

tranquil

you thought of what you heard on the phone

you misunderstood

when Sylvia called mom

they scream, you see mom's neck redden

vessels become larger, her voice becomes

a small bird in agony

loud screeches but small

unheard by those who matter

screaming rage silence serenity

you misunderstood

when mom told you Sylvia dragged her downstairs by her hair

thud thud thud

blond tendrils in a clenched fist

yanking her head by

delicate threads

you thought of Sylvia hugging you

all you understood was

thud

thud

thud

a wailing child, face red and plastered with salty tears

small mom, you'd seen photos of her as a child

platinum blond hair, thin and wispy, you

thought of her tugged scalp, straining skin

but wait

Sylvia made hot chocolate for you

melting cheap chocolate bars

in the microwave, cups buzzing

in her trashed kitchen

she fed wonderbread to the seagulls with you

made scrambled eggs

another screaming phone fight

mom got slapped

you couldn't understand

Through The Holes

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/through-the-holes

November 20, 2015

by Tiana Noll

A nail.

I didn't know what it was until

you told me of its deepest

flesh, its deepest

intentions.

I remember squirming

out of place

in an overly-lighted place

fake—full of sinners

and saints.

You and I lived here, in

the basement.

Sunday morning

parades of people

playing charades as

happier people would

gather and sing and

shout and pray and

weep and laugh and

sometimes change.

I've always wanted to run.

But you were my
strength. You labored
mighty and onward as you
fed and clothed and
bathed and
saved me in
the kitchen sink, next
to the coffee machine.

I somehow knew then
as I do now:

people break
other people.

I was born into
a home with races and
bitterness and
secrets and
storms.

But you were always
a gentle peace.

I felt filthy and
unclean in
a basement underneath
the feet of people with
silver seeping out
their pockets and

the sun scorning their creamy

pale skin.

I didn't comprehend it all, but you—

I trusted you, so told you. And

you cried and

held me warm, rocked me slowly, back and

forth, a four year old in

mother's arms.

And that was when

you told me of a man

with nails driven deep into

brown aching skin just

like mine. Hurt that I

had felt, pain like I had

seen in your brows.

But deeper.

“And even though

white people are rich

and black people are rough

we the same

through the holes in

his skin, baby. Always

remember: we all

the same.”

And even though you've

lost some of the youthful resilience, and

I don't hold the man

you taught me of

in such high esteem

I will never forget

what it means to be

human. I never forget

brown skin

and white skin and

blood and

holes and

nails.

Nikon Flash

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/nikon-flash

November 20, 2015

by Soha Pourpirali

mom's red painted fingernail
pressed hard on that white
Nikon flash blinding capturing
your hand placed firmly
in your sister's sweaty
from the midsummer
California sun
bodies pressed
together inside that old
golden Nissan towers
of bug spray sleeping bags
backpacks soccerballs
your head on her shoulder
knee on thigh smiles wide
eyelids heavy
you remember flicking imaginary
ball back and forth from fingertip
to fingertip she would release
it with force and you pretend
to be hit covering eye with sudden
movement of the arm

falling back against the seat and crying
out amidst bubbles
of laughter she had big
cheeks sunk in with dimples
when she smiles at the lake bubbles
form from your dive
together off
the jagged cliff into clear as glass
water below heart pounding from the rush
mom standing across red
painted fingernail capturing you mid air
hand held in hand
when at McDonalds she climbs up the slide
you follow closely
behind gripping the plastic sides
bare hands
and feet until at the top you squeeze
into her lap inching
down the tube
static forming and sparks
sounding laughter popping
mom's red painted fingernail
on Nikon capturing you and her
on the ground bodies
intertwined driving through yellowstone

she points to a pile of bison poop larger
than your head
steam rising
says to take a picture
next to it your matching
converse climbing across the
wooden fence crouching
mom pointing white Nikon
flash capturing brown pile
like ice cream you two
on either side
years passed by
as you two grew older she sat behind mom
and you behind dad the pile
between you barely able to see over
you look ahead to
tunnel approaching
bounce in your seat squeeze
eyes shut
stick arms out straight elbows
locked palms up and wish
to play twenty questions
but her steady gaze
is fixed out her cracked
window the brown

in her eyes tracing changing
evergreen pines to palm
trees you tracing the change
from together
to apart
you watch him
slip the symbol
of together past her fingertip
take the seat between
you and her their hands
intertwine yours underneath
legs pressed against leather seats
veins popping out
from heat fake smile for mom as her
red painted fingernail
captures you
your solitude stretching neck out
window watching
cars rush by
wondering how the time rushed by she dressed in
white and he in black the next summer inside
old gold Nissan not crammed
mom's red painted fingernail capturing
seats wide open
you alone in the backseat

under the California sun

Hang Up

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/hang-up

November 20, 2015

by Tarin A. Stefens

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press 5.*

Beep

“Hey, Nick. Just calling to make sure you got home alright. You probably got stuck in traffic – I heard it’s pretty bad on Haybarry. An accident or something. Anywho – I’ll try again in a little bit. Call me back if you beat me to it.”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press 5.*

Beep

“Hey Nick. You back yet? It looks like you left your tie here. I told you you would forget it. At least I have to be drunk to leave my things lying around – you can’t even remember things sober. Whatever. I’ll bring it to you tomorrow. Call me back. I’ll try again in a few.”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press 5.*

Beep

“Man that thing is annoying. Your answering machine is prompt enough. Anyways – where are you, man? Haybarry still blocked up? I guess Layna hasn’t checked in yet, either. Maybe she’s in the bumper mash, too. Whatever. Just call me, alright?”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“Layna just checked in, Nick. She left after you. Did you go somewhere else?
Nah- you were way too tired. You said so yourself. Maybe you’re asleep.
Just be asleep, okay?”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“Hey, Nick. I just wanted to call to tell you you’re awesome, man. The best friend I ever had. I can’t even tell you how much better you made my life. I just want you to hear that. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“Come, on Nick! I need you! Get back to work! I can’t deal with Mandy all on my own! You’re being gone is enough as it is!”

Beep

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“It’s good to hear your voice, Nick. We planted a tree for you today. Like the kind you read under at work during break.

...

It looks great, Nick. It... I...”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“My counselor said I need to stop calling you. She said it isn’t helping.

...

I just want to talk to you, man. You and I – we didn’t have to say anything. You got it. She doesn’t get it. She doesn’t get me. Not like you did.

Not like you do.”

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

“I’m keeping your tie at my place until you come get it.

It’s the same one you wore to my wedding. I didn’t notice that before.

...

You always notice that kind of stuff.”

...

Click

“Hello, you’ve reached Nick. I’m not here right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll try to get back to you! Thanks!” *At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press 1 for more options. To leave a callback number, press*

5.

Beep

The Story of Her

 noisywater.whatcom.edu/the-story-of-her

November 20, 2015

by Grace Thompson

Cassie:

This was the third time her cell phone had rung in the past ten minutes. As she looked down at the unknown number from California, she realized it was the same number that had been calling her all day. She wondered how they possibly could have gotten her phone number since it had always been unlisted, plus she lived in Miami. Cassie knew she needed to go; she had been at the mall all day, and after the rousing event earlier, she really just wanted to go home. Andre had texted her to say he would be home in an hour from practice and he told her to be ready for their date night tonight.

Just as she was getting into her Audi, the phone rang again. “What do you want from me?” Of course she was talking to herself, but her husband told her that she does that often. After the fifth ring, she pulled her vibrating phone out of her black-hole-of-a-bag and answered it with an exasperated, “Hello?”

“This is Huntington Hospital in Pasadena California calling in regards to your mother who is in desperate need of a bone marrow transplant match.”

After a loud sigh and a quick punch of the passenger seat, Cassie replied, “I’m sorry, I think you have the wrong number. My mother doesn’t even live in California and I just talked to her yesterday so I know she is completely fine. Now can you please take me off your calling list or I will report this number.”

The nurse said, “Sorry, I’m calling for a Mrs. Robertson?”

“Yeah, okay. This is she.”

“I know this may come to a shock to you, but the woman who I am calling on behalf of is your...” The next word out of the nurse’s mouth made Cassie drop her phone. She sat in her idling car staring out at a black bird picking at crumbs. *My birthmother?* She never really got angry, unless a pair of shoes were sold-out of course, but in that moment she got so mad that she picked up the still-connected phone and said as calmly as she could, “You can tell her this: I never want to hear from her again nor do I ever want to meet with her. She was never a part of my life and I never wanted her to be either.”

Just before she was about to abruptly end the call, Cassie heard someone saying something about giving her space, but she was too frustrated to even care.

Maria:

Maria stared up at the too perfect ceiling and even though it'd been twenty-one years and counting, she could clearly remember carrying the little baby inside her. She never gave up on the journey despite all the people who said, "Get it ova with." She knew that wasn't right, because she's a believer. Like a do-what-is-right-and-worship-the-Lord Christian. That's how she was raised until her daddy died of a drug overdose.

That messed up her whole life, but it also woke her up a little too. She never paid attention in church until a year after daddy was in the grave and she found out she was pregnant by some man she never really loved. That man stayed in her life until he found out the news, then he left. Maria was glad he left though, because he was the first person who told her to end her baby girl's life.

The night she realized there was a child inside her, Maria sat bare-naked on her cold bathroom floor in her shag-carpeted apartment, too stunned to cry. She was all alone, so she most likely would have stayed prostrated until the new day was it not for her loud all-knowing mother's phone call. She recalled stretching her stiff limbs, feeling pins and needles as she walked to her unpredictable flip phone. She would never forget the first words out of her mother's voice, which was mixed with sniffles and a tenderness only a mother could muster.

She yelled, "Baby girl, you keep the child or God knows what I will do!"

Maria recalled standing there, feeling the cool breeze from the fan nearby on her still naked body. She was shocked, not by the fact that her mother knew, but because of the intensity in which she delivered the message. Maria had looked down at her right hand. In it, was the four-inch-long white piece of plastic that had told her that she was carrying a human inside her. As the seconds passed, Maria's sullen face turned to a smile. A moment later her mama started to wail, thinking the deed had already been done.

Finally seeming to gain her voice back, Maria said, "Mama, don't worry I am," with as much force as she could coax out of her dry throat.

"Good. Now come over to see me and bring as much of your belongings as you can fit in your car, because you are moving back home," her mom replied.

Maria loved her mama. That wise woman stood by her the whole way through the long, tiring and unwell months of pregnancy. When her mother died of natural causes the previous year, Maria went into deep depression that lasted months. To this day Maria still had days where she couldn't talk or move because she longed to talk to her mom just one more time. Maria was an only child, so she never had a brother or sister to share those sorrowful thoughts with. Her little girl would have been an only child too, because Maria got her ovaries removed as soon as she could after the baby was born. She hated thinking about having another baby.

Not because she didn't want to raise a child, but because she wanted to keep the one child that she did have special. So that was Maria's way of remembering what she gave to her baby: life.

Cassie:

She woke to Andre's arm draped over her curvy waist. He wasn't what woke her up though; it was the bright light coming through the slip in the brown curtain. She hated any kind of light when she was sleeping. Andre always teased her about her sensitivity to lights, especially florescent lights, but she would brush the topic aside, saying how it was a normal thing. He never bought her argument though.

As she lazily moved her eyes around their spacious tan bedroom, she couldn't help but re-read the framed words of their wedding vows placed with precision above her white vanity across the room. As the sun shown though the blinds, Cassie thought about the day they got married; standing there on a Miami beach with her sheer white dress blowing gently in the warm breeze. Andre stood across from her, all of his six-feet-seven-inch muscular frame decked out in a custom tux. He always looked clean-shaven and put-together, but there was something about their wedding day that really made him look so sexy. Just then Andre took an extra deep breath, breaking her dreamy state. Luckily neither one of them snored, but they both breathed deeply. Cassie liked to think about it as if the air around them was love and neither one of them could ever get enough.

Cassie was just twenty-one, her birthday last week, so she was sure her perception of love was still naïve despite being married for over a year. Andre was five years older than her, but he loved how she acts silly during their movie nights, and he too joined in on the pillow fights that she starts. Cassie looked over at him again; his black curly hair cropped low into a fade and his skin is almost the same toffee shade as her own. Most people, her family included, thought that she married him because he's "a forward for the Miami Heat," which translated to "he has money." No, she said yes to him because he was the one person who saw every little high-maintenance quirk that she had and still said, "Yeah, I want her to be mine."

He rolled over and sleepily gave her a kiss right in the middle of her forehead. They were silent for a long time; she's not a morning person and neither is he. "What day is it?" she asked.

"Thursday: our date day," he replied in a yawn.

She smiled because he never forgot to take her out to a new restaurant every week, even if he'd had a long hard day of practice. The alarm clock began its loud morning ceremony announcing that their quiet time together is over.

She hated this part of the day because he left her for work. Before Andre, Cassie never cared about leaving anyone. She loved her family, but they weren't as hard to leave as he was. After about twenty minutes of "procrastinating," which is what Cassie and Andre called the time

that they made-out instead of getting out of bed, Andre finally sat up and smiled down at his bride.

Cassie smiled back at him saying, “You know you’re already late for work. What’s another fifteen minutes?”

“And that, Mrs. Robertson, is why I married you,” he said as he lay back down beside her.

An hour later, Andre was fully ready for work and the knot in her stomach grew to an almost unbearable pain. He pulled her to him and she smelled his clean musky scent on his neck. He sighed, running his fingers through her long dark wavy hair and then gived her one last kiss before leaving for the day.

Maria:

At the time of her baby girl’s birth, some nurse told Maria that giving up a child for adoption was easy. *They were stupid and wrong*, she thought. As she sat in the same hospital that her baby was born in, now all these years later, she could still picture the look on that nurse’s face when she told her to, “Stop y’all cryin’. It’s just like an abortion honey.”

Maria wanted to punch her right then and there. That nurse had no right to say anything to her. Maria was not crying because she was “giving her child up for adoption.” No, she had confidently made the decision because she knew she was giving her baby a chance at a life better than the one she had grown up in. Her mother had done all she could to keep Maria well fed and in school, but Maria had misused all the opportunities she had in her education and instead went out partying. Maria knew that the life she could give to her baby would be the same one that she had, because that was all Maria knew. That is what she wanted to say to that nurse all those years ago, but she couldn’t stop her own tears of joy and hope that her baby could live a comfortable life.

It was strange though; the nurse that has been assigned to monitor her stem cell transplant because of her leukemia was actually really kind. The nurse kept Maria company and would sometimes braid her long dark wavy hair. This morning they discussed the difficult topic of finding a match for her. The nurse brought up her daughter, but Maria quickly said no. *If I haven’t been able to find her all these years, how do they expect to now?*

She sat up, flipping her long hair over her shoulder, just as the nurse and doctor came in to see her. They talked to her about bone marrow and how much she desperately needed to remember if there would be anyone in her family that could donate for a transplant. *I think of her instantly, my little baby who was never mine.*

Cassie:

As she sat and stared out at the annoyingly too green lawn, she wished she could have worked today. When she doesn’t work, Cassie goes to the mall, simply to distract herself from the queasy feeling of being away from Andre. *I wonder if the pain would go away if I go shopping*, she thought to herself. She used to be independent when she was younger. Even

went off to cosmetology school in a different state on her own and was completely fine. Now she can't even stand one day on her own unless she is busy doing something outside of their home.

She often told Andre that her makeup business is what keeps her out of the hospital. That comment never failed to upset him. He said he would quit his job if she needed him home more, but that wouldn't be fair to him. So Cassie always made sure she was either busy doing something or glued to his side. She truly enjoyed her life though, and wouldn't trade it for anything. How she was living right now is how she always pictured her world would be like – rich, famous, and married. Her parents always knew she was destined for this life too; she wouldn't be here without all their financial support.

Thirty minutes later she slid into her car, trying to keep the anticipated vomit from completely coming up her throat. She took deep breaths, hoping the day would go by quickly.

Maria:

Only about thirty minutes had passed since she had been checked on, so when the nice nurse walked in, Maria's face went from its usual calm and relaxation to anxiety. Every time someone walked through her door she expected bad news either about her condition or not being able to find a donor, since this was a hospital after all.

"We found your daughter's number this morning!" the nurse exclaimed, "All we need is your consent so we can call her." As Maria looked at the nurse, tears began to form behind her eyes. She remembered when she gave birth to her daugh... to the baby inside her. The pain of childbearing was nothing compared to all the pain that she was feeling now. She would give anything to do it all over again. The thought of possibly getting to see the little girl she had made was what brought the tears to Maria's eyes. *I wish my mama was still alive to witness this*, she thought. After all these years all she had wanted was to even just talk to her little girl.

"You have my full consent," Maria choked.

The nurse came over, sat on the edge of Maria's hospital bed, and placed a pale steady hand over her own shaky caramel tone one.

"You are the best mother in the world miss Maria," the nurse said with a smile.

Maria looked at her with a confused expression and then said, "What you talkin' 'bout? I never got to be a mother."

"Oh hush. You are the mother to that girl no matter if you think so or not. Plus, you've been like a mother to me during your stay here. I've felt much love being around you," the nurse said assuredly. Maria thought about what the nurse had just said, *like a mother... felt much love*.

“Well thank you,” Maria said quietly, “but could I ask what I did that made you feel... loved?”

The nurse giggled and it echoed off the smooth unembellished walls.

Then she leaned down close to Maria as if it was a secret and whispered, “Nothing. You just have a motherly heart that longs to care for whoever you come in contact with. It’s a beautiful thing.”

The doctor and other nurse came in before Maria could respond, but more tears slid down her stress-worn face although this time they were tears of joy. Maria flashed her large smile at her nurse to say a silent thank you. In that moment, she knew that whatever happened was no longer in her control. *I am a mother*, she thought. If she died without knowing her own child, at least she would rest knowing that she had been a mother to other people in her life.

Cassie:

Thursdays at the mall are boring, Cassie thought while looking at her twenty-four carat white gold watch. *Where are the interesting couples with three children they can’t take care of?* She sighed and realized that she had been at the mall for almost five hours already. She flipped her brown wavy hair over her shoulder, then got up from the not-so-comfy chair she was sitting on with her large Neiman Marcus bag in one hand and her cobalt blue Celine tote in the crook of her other arm. As she lazily sauntered through the familiar mall, people watched her, sometimes pointing.

“Excuse me, lil’ lady, wha’cho black ass mixed with?” some black guy asked her. Cassie rolled her eyes and prayed that this insignificant man wasn’t going to continue hitting on her. *They all know I’m married*, she thought, *yet they continue to “holla attacha girl.”* She was used to all the white people staring and whatnot, but she always felt a sort of distaste for black people. This man, for instance, was grating on her last remaining nerve.

“What am I mixed with?” she snapped. *He probably already knows I’m mixed with boring white.* “Well, I am mixed with Great Dane, Blue Healer and a touch of Husky,” she stated, ticking each one off on her long manicured fingers. She smiled and stared at the confused man, flipped her hair then continued walking. She heard the man cursing behind her, saying something about her being stuck up and rich.

As Cassie was just about to leave the mall, she noticed a large advertisement about a major Labor Day sale in her favorite store. Checking her watch again, she realized she still had plenty of time before she had to go home. *Besides what’s a few hundred more dollars anyways*, she mused, and then clicked away.

Maria:

After another deep breath, Maria said she was ready for the phone call. The two nurses and her doctor were all present. They decided that the nice nurse was going to be the one making the call. *Why is she so calm? I can’t even breathe right and my head is throbbin’*, she thought to herself as she looked around the medium-sized hospital room. This simple cream-

colored room had become quite familiar to her in the month she had been there. Maria's hated being in this room because of the lights. The windows were far too small to let in enough natural light, so the too-bright florescence lights were on pretty much all day, unless she was sleeping. In that case, it was the flashing lights from all the monitors that she was connected to that kept her from sleep. She liked to call the monitors children because they never stopped harassing her with their rainbow-colored lights and bleeping cries.

"Okay, Maria are you ready?" The nurse said as she gently squeezed her hand.

Maria nodded, her throat too dry to speak.

The phone was ringing. It rang until there was a click and an automated voice said that the person on the other end was not available at this time. Maria felt like crying. After thinking about how all the lights bothered her, she wished she could be cleared to go home. With the doctor's permission, the nurse called back again. *Just stop, just stop, just...*

"Stop," Maria said, her voice barely a whisper even though she felt like shrieking.

"Miss, maybe this is really your daughter's number," the nurse said with a hopeful look,

"Just one more time okay? Then we will give you a break." Maria wondered why she even had pleaded for them to make the phone call with her present. All she wanted to do now was make them all go away. *I wanna go home*, she thought, *but what's there? All I'll be goin' back to is an empty ole apartment and bills.*

"Fine," she said as she took a shaky breath.

Cassie:

She walked into Zara as two workers immediately bubbled over to say hello. Well, they really just wanted her to buy the usual three-hundred-dollar purchase and both ladies wanted commissions, but that was none of her business. The first lady to greet Cassie was a bit too excited and ditsy.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Robertson," the clerk said. Cassie turned toward her with a smile, hoping to not get into one of those meaningless small talk conversations.

"Hey, it's nice to see you today," said Cassie flatly.

Just as the first clerk was going to reply, another lady came over with the most gorgeous little black dress in her hand. She didn't even say hello, the lady simply held the dress out in front of Cassie smiling, showing her large gums and pearly whites for the entire store to see.

"I'll take a size 8 please," Cassie said rudely. As the clerk quickly clicked away in her heels Cassie noticed a husky dark figure walk into the men's section of the store. He looked around; not noticing her leery gaze, he then grabbed a gold diamond watch out on display and slid it into his inner left coat pocket.

Cassie was the only person who knew who committed the crime, yet the person who notified the store manager that the watch was missing was one of the workers located in that area of the store. She watched as the manager returned from making a quick call just as four mall police sauntered in to the store. *Oh joy*, she thought to herself, *now there's going to be mall cop drama*. She decided to stick around in the overly air-conditioned store to see how this all played out. She meandered over to the fitting rooms, which was a fair distance from the "crime scene" plus the lights weren't so bright and annoying. After a few minutes, they realized that whoever took the watch was gone. *Slow clap for the brilliant mall cops*. After minutes of customer's hushed whispers about the dangerous person and all the workers huddled in a corner like scared greyhounds, the "cops" began asking if anyone had noticed the individual who took the watch. One mall officer looked her way, but Cassie just shook her head and flipped her hair over her shoulder.

"You would think our mall cops would at least look good," Cassie said aloud, "This is Florida after all, why are they so fat?" She wasn't talking to anyone in particular, although some prissy old woman gave her the Don't-Judge-Unless-You-Too-Want-To-Be-Judged look and then walked out of the store. Cassie rolled her eyes and smoothed down her cream Chanel crop top that revealed part of her rose tattoo on her left hip. She too felt like leaving; now that the "excitement" was over she was in much need of a non-fat light iced latte from some shop other than Starbucks plus her stomach pains were coming back.

Just as she was walking out, the two store clerks yelled out to her that she hadn't bought anything yet.

Without looking back Cassie said, "I'll be back later, just need some caffeine after all this."

Maria:

After the fifth ring Maria knew there was no hope. She was about to tell the nurse to just hang up the phone when the ringing stopped. She froze, her still-trembling hand hovering in front of her mouth. She couldn't hear the voice on the other end, but she knew it had to be her sweet girl.

After a second, the now-stunned nurse quickly responded, "This is Huntington Hospital in Pasadena California calling in regards to your mother who is in desperate need of a bone marrow transplant match." Maria wanted to finally hear her daugh... Yes, her daughter's voice.

"Speaka phone?" she asked. The nurse hastily pushed a button and that was it, Maria was listening to her baby girl for the very first time. *Well, I remember when I heard her cry right after she was born*, she thought, *it was the most melodious noise that I had ever heard. Then they took her away...*

“...I think you have the wrong number. My mother doesn’t even live in California and I just talked to her yesterday so I know she is completely fine. Now can you please take me off your calling list or I will report this...”

The nurse said, “Sorry, I’m calling for a Mrs. Robertson.”

“Yeah, okay. This is she.”

“I know this may come to a shock to you, but the woman whom I am calling on behalf of is your birthmother,” the nurse said softly. Maria held her breath as she pictured a young lady with light caramel skin and long wavy black hair just like hers staring back at her.

After a rustling sound and a short pause the voice on the other end replied, “...Tell her this: I never want to hear from her again nor do I ever want to meet with her. She was never a part of my life and I never wanted her to be...”

All those tears of love, hope, joy and now deep mournful hurt didn’t hit Maria quickly. Instead of bursting into tears, she sat there on her hospital bed slumped into the thick off-white pillows behind her. *She doesn’t want me in her life?*

“Maria, do you want to be alone?” her nurse asked hesitantly. The pain the leukemia brought on her was nothing in comparison to what Maria was feeling now. She was staring blankly out the small window. Her face looked like that of an eighty year old: sullen, wrinkled, and ashy-grey in color.

“Let’s give her some time,” the doctor said quietly. His hand softly patted Maria’s, then he and the nurses left the room.

Maria didn’t want to be alone; she wanted to be held by someone who knew what she was going through. But there was no one in her world that would have filled the hole in her heart. *I want my mama. My daughter doesn’t love me. I shouldn’t have called her. I wouldn’t be hurt. It’s all my fault. I’m dying anyway. Why should I live then? I want my mama. I’m coming mama...*

All of a sudden Maria reached for the one tube attached to her arm she remembered the nurse saying something about it being very important. *Oh, my sweet nurse... she’ll understand.* Maria quickly yanked the tube with the purple liquid out from under her thin skin. Nothing happened. Then dark blood rapidly started dripping down her arm and sliding onto the light green sheets. Maria began to shake, thrash and have convulsions that set off a chorus of flashing lights and alarms from her monitors.

The nice nurse was the first to hear the commotion and after seeing Maria quickly called for the doctor, who was just down the hall, while she desperately tried to rein in the still-thrashing Maria.

“Her vitals just dropped, they can’t go any lower or we’ll lose her,” the doctor said urgently trying to replace the missing IV. “I can’t get a pulse now... Get the defibrillator.”

The nurse raced around the room gathering the needed supplies. Even after trying the defibrillator, they couldn’t get a heartbeat. Her forty-year-old heart had stopped beating and could not be revived.

Cassie:

She couldn’t stop shaking. After a quick 5-mile drive home, she arrived to an unnerved Andre telling her that he had tried to call but the phone was busy. As he pulled her into a comforting sweat-drenched embrace she began to cry. He let her cry for a few minutes, occasionally wiping her tears away with his comforting hands.

“So, what’s wrong? Did someone hurt choo?” he prodded.

It took Cassie a few more deep breaths before she replied, “My birthmother is in some stupid hospital in California and she needs some dumb transplant so the hospital somehow found my number.” The hatred in her voice was apparent. Andre looked about, stunned as she had ever seen him.

With his eyes wide, he whispered, “Birthmother?”

“Yeah, I know. Stupid, huh? I told her I never wanted to hear from her again and...”

“No,” he interrupted, “You can’t just say that to yo mother.”

“She is not my mother, Andre, and you have no say in what I tell some woman who gave birth to me.” She had let go of him at this point. Her tears of annoyance turned to tears of anger toward the whole situation. He looked at her as if he was disgusted, which made her cry more. She loved him more than anyone else and to see him with this much detachment in his eyes truly scared her.

“Are you... sure that she was yo birthmother?” he asked hesitantly, with a questioning gaze.

“I’m completely sure. Why else could they have tracked me? You of all people know that we aren’t the easiest people to get ahold of,” Cassie said with a defensive tone. Andre took two of his long sauntering steps and held her again. She stayed stiff because she knew he wasn’t just holding her because he wanted to. No, he was holding her to make his point since she was so upset. Her brain sort of softened when she was in Andre’s arms. He was like a tranquilizer to her and she had the same effect on him too.

“What if we called the hospital back together? Just to make sure that everything is alright with your...”

“She is not my mother,” Cassie interrupted sharply.

“Okay, but would you be ‘aight with that babe?” Andre asked pleadingly, letting his urban intonation bleed through even more. Cassie thought about it. She thought about what it had felt like for her to even think about the fact that she was speaking to this lady she had never met, but who made her feel so much hate.

She said, “No, I won’t be a part of the phone call. I told her I never wanted to meet with her and I consider calling her back the same as meeting her.”

“You know that doesn’t make any sense, right?”

“Andre, I don’t even care at this point. Let’s just clean up and go get dinner like we do every Thursday night and just forget about all this?”

“Fine. We will go get dinner. But, not until after I call the hospital,” said Andre insistently. “You can pretend like nothin’ happened today, and that the woman that gave me you didn’t just step into your life. Cool, tell me how that works out for you. But I’m gonna call and see.” He reached out his hand for her phone and she gave it to him instantly. Cassie was always a rude, heartless girl, but the one thing that made her vulnerable was Andre. The fact that he was now involved in all this drama made it tough for her to separate being a snob and being his angel.

“I just have one question to ask you,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“No matter what happens to that woman, can you forget about all this and just move forward? And please don’t tell me what you find out, ‘cause I really don’t care.”

He looked at her with a look only Cassie would recognize as equal parts love mixed with equal parts sadness and said, “I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, and to cherish you for...”

“As long as we both shall live,” they said in unison. Cassie wasn’t surprised that he quoted their wedding vows word-for-word to her, since they both stared at them on their bedroom wall daily.

She smiled at him saying, “I’ll be in the shower baby...” He smiled back at her, showing his perfect white teeth, as he watched her walk away and then pressed redial.

Courtney Berkompas

 noisywater.whatcom.edu



Eggs in Rose Bowl, photograph – digital manipulation, 8" x 12"
courtneyberkompas.com

Mike Doyle

noisywater.whatcom.edu



Moon Leaves, mixed media, 8" x 8"

Stanley Kuntz

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Nevergreen, charcoal and chalk, 14" x 17"

Kristel Leung

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Untitled, photograph, 6.6" x 10"

Moriah Shields

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Spring Flowers, pencil, 8" x 8"

Megan Swanland

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A False Sense of Resilience, found and recycled materials, 12" x 6"

Jessica Wilbert

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Brain Waves, relief/monoprint, 7" x 12"

Nicolas Willis

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Untitled, charcoal and chalk, 18" x 24"

Olivia Diehler & Emily Harrison

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Bucket of Fire, charcoal and pastel, 24" x 18"