

The background of the entire page is an abstract geometric design. It features a series of parallel diagonal lines in a rainbow color palette (violet, blue, cyan, green, yellow, orange, red, magenta) that create a sense of depth and movement. These lines are framed by black outlines of various geometric shapes, including rectangles, triangles, and a diamond. Some of these shapes have internal hatching or cross-hatching patterns. The overall effect is a complex, layered composition that resembles a stylized architectural or optical illusion.

The Writing Center @ PVCC's

**English 111**

**Personal Essay**

**Contest**

**2019**

# Contents

The Writing Center is pleased to share with you the winners of our second annual English 111 Personal Essay Contest. We've included in this booklet our three winners and four additional essays that made it to our final round. We had many wonderful entries and selecting even these finalists was challenging. The eventual winners won us over through inventive style, lyrical use of language, moving story, and distinctive voice. They appear here as they were submitted to us, unedited, and reflect the work of developing writers. We hope you enjoy them.

## **Winners:**

First Place: "The Man Behind the Mustache" — Minnie Pierce

Second Place: "Risk vs Reward" — Kim Pillion

Third Place: "The Monkey Dance" — Tabbie Eichler

## **Finalists:** (Alphabetical by Name)

"Enjoy the Scenery" — Scott Emison

"Echoes of Life" — Levi Hipp

"Humility: The Universal Medicine" — Michael Sawyer

"Lost" — Ezra Staengl



# The Man Behind the Mustache

Minnie Pierce

*Minnie Pierce's "The Man Behind the Mustache" is a profound, memorable narrative that tenderly renders a complex father-daughter relationship with art and grace. The poignant evolution of the daughter's view of her father leaves readers chuckling and misty-eyed. Successfully covering a long period of time, this essay takes the reader on the narrator's emotional journey. Even as she learns that her superhero father is flawed and scarred, she doesn't leave him in his imperfections. Instead, Pierce brings readers back to her father's mustached magic through the eyes of her children. Specific details, raw and realistic imagery, and a beautiful resolution make this narrative satisfying and moving.*

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I hear the sound of heavy footsteps on the front porch, and the loud, metallic screech of our stubborn door knob turning. I looked up from my mangled, tangled Barbies and there he is: standing in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, where I'm playing on the burnt orange carpet. He's wearing his blue striped mechanic uniform that says "American Tire and Brake." The uniform is as much a part of him as his blue eyes, as his wavy Hugh Grant hair, as his thick dark mustache. He is permanently oily and red-faced, which makes him appear either jolly or irate, depending on his mood and the amount of booze in his system. But in my five-year-old eyes, he is handsome and invincible. He fixes everything and fears nothing. He flies me around the room and tickles me until I beg for mercy. He has superhero strength and a hint of magic in his blood. He is the center of my world.

He heads up the stairs to shower and wash away the dirt and drudgery of the day. I continue to play with my Barbies, waiting for the sound of his footsteps on the stairs. When he reappears, I catch my breath—audibly gasping. His face is all wrong. Something is missing. I start to cry. My dad

## + The Man Behind the Mustache

has done the unthinkable: He has shaven off his mustache. His face is naked and exposed. As he comes closer, he scoops me up into his strong arms and wipes away my hot, sticky tears. He is chuckling now, telling me it's okay and not to cry. He is still my dad, he says. I look up at the place his mustache is supposed to be, and I see a small but profound scar running parallel to his upper lip. "What's that?" I ask with snot and tears still running down my face. And this is the first time I hear the story of the scar. He tells me about a bar fight with an Indian chief involving a broken beer bottle. I listen intently, hanging on his every word and tracing the scar with my tiny finger. This is the first of many stories I will hear about how it happened. I may never know the true origin of that scar, but its presence is always there, hiding quietly behind the mustache he grew back quickly and never again shaved off. My father is a man of many features and scars. Some of them are clear as day: marks of hard work and hard living. Others lay dormant beneath the surface. His hands have cuts and gashes, permanent stains from working on cars, and rough callouses from guitar picking. They tell the story of a man of many trades and tales, a man with deep wounds and dark secrets.

Flash forward ten years and I'm on the basketball court. I'm starting on varsity as a freshman and the pressure is on. I catch the ball at the three point arc. I pump step, face, and drive to the hoop. I'm fouled going in for the lay-up and now I'm on the line. The crowd is quiet: watching, waiting. And then I see him out of the corner of my eye, staggering into the gym with that unmistakably red-mustached face, still wearing his mechanic's uniform. He is cheering loudly, slurring, and making a scene. I want to run off the court and shelter him from the stares. I want to rip the onlookers to shreds and feed them back their mocking words until they choke on them. I am fiercely protective of this man. I've fought more than once defending him. But he has grown smaller in my eyes, no longer invincible. I've covered for him, made excuses, and cleaned up his vomit. I've discovered there are many things he cannot fix and many fears he will never face. The magic has worn off, and he is mortal after all. I finish the game, walk off the court, and drive my dad home.

## The Man Behind the Mustache +

Another decade passes and I have my own home and family. My young children are running around the house, freshly bathed in their pajamas, playing with toys on the living room floor. The doorbell rings, and as the door opens, they run to greet him. His red face and mustache haven't changed in twenty years. His wavy Hugh Grant hair has more gray in it, and the lines of his face have deepened, but mostly he looks exactly the same. He still smells of oil and booze. But as I watch my children float around him, I see the magic reflected in their eyes. He flies them around the room and tickles them until they beg for mercy. He tells them stories about bar fights and shootouts, and they hang on his every word. They trace his scars and hold his calloused hands. I want to freeze time and let them keep their image of him, forever untainted by age and experience. I want to protect them. I want to protect him. I want to go back to a world where my dad could fix everything and feared nothing. I want his superhero mechanic's uniform to make him invincible. I want his mustache to hide all his scars.

# Risk vs Reward

Kim Pillion

*Author Kim Pillion takes the reader on a journey back to carefree childhood summers with her narrative essay "Risk vs Reward," in which two young heroines attempt to repair a broken-down go-kart. Full of childlike wonder and youthful energy, the story reminds us of a more innocent time in our lives when having as much fun as possible was the only goal. The pure joy and excitement felt by the two junior mechanics during the story's climax is palpable; Pillion describes the two girls "grinning ear to ear and giggling with delight" as they ride their creation around the yard. With such lively characters and a refreshingly unexpected conclusion, "Risk vs Reward" is sure to leave the reader "grinning ear to ear" with nostalgic glee.*

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Rules are not always meant to be followed. The summer before my 5th grade school year, my best friend Sarah and I joyously discovered this untold truth. It began the day her father showed up with an old broken-down go-cart. He was clueless how to start it, but told us if we wanted to attempt to make it run, the cart was ours. Sarah and I were crafty kids, and though we knew nothing about motors, we felt up to the task.

For weeks, we tirelessly worked. Melting away, day in and day out, that hot sticky summer. We fumbled with socket wrenches, plyers, steel wool, whatever item we could dig out of her father's tool chest to perform surgery on the heap of metal. Each day, we tried something new in hopes it would make the difference. Meticulously we cleaned every inch thinking a good scrubbing would bring it to life. We stripped the chipping paint off, sanded down rusted age spots, then dressed it in a fresh coat of blue and white. We named it after characters we enjoyed at the time. Q\*bert-scooter-Bubble-O, Jr. He was ours, and he kicked ass.

After gallons of sweat poured on her concrete drive and certainly a master mechanics license earned, our arduous task would end. It was during the final touch-up on our paint job that we discovered a tiny switch hidden under the lip of the steering column and knew this MUST be the missing

link....and it was. Without hesitation, we flipped the switch and yanked the start cord with all our might. We stood stunned in amazement as he woke from his slumber. He vibrated loudly as he sputtered and squealed then coughed out a huge puff of black smoke. As the toxic cloud cleared, he calmed to a smooth idle that hummed to us for a ride.

We were outside of ourselves with excitement. We burst into the house to show Sarah's dad our accomplishment. We ran through every room, hollered inside and out, desperate to find an adult. Her older sisters sat glued to the television as we scoured the house. Their casual mention of her parents shopping trip almost sent both of us into sudden cardiac arrest.

We sauntered back outside contemplating what to do. Once we saw our boy, it was a simple and quick computation of risk versus reward. We had spent too much time and effort to wait on her parents return. We smooshed our cheeks into the overly cushioned helmets her dad had knowingly set aside for this day and settled into position.

It was glorious to be riding around on what we had created. A green track guided us as we repeatedly rolled over the same course. Carefully coasting past her mother's flower beds and picking up speed as we rounded the huge oak tree that housed the fort we spent countless nights in. We rumbled over the stone patio before locking our sights on the small hill at the back of their property. Not knowing how high we would soar, we gasped for air as our small bodies lifted off the bench seat. Every molecule we sucked in escaped us, as we slammed back down to earth. I do not think Q\*bert was ever a fan of that move, but we sure were.

We coasted down her driveway grinning ear to ear and giggling with delight into the cul-de-sac when panic took over. Sarah's parents had returned: busted! Our excitement fled as we sat head on, locking eyes as their vehicle towered over ours. Our expression mirrored theirs through the windshield. They were in shock from what they were seeing, and our elation quickly turned to terror.

## + Risk vs Reward

Fear rushed over me as we parked Q\*bert and headed inside. Scolding words spewed from her mother's mouth as she marched in front of us. She rambled on about our foolishness and how she was going to inform my mom of our reckless decision. Not a word came from Sarah's father. For a moment I thought my life was over.

He quietly trailed behind as we followed her raging mother into the den. Reliving the joy from moments before, I began to feel that the consequence, no matter what, held no weight. The reward certainly outweighed the risk. It was her father's silence causing the painful twist in my stomach. Sarah's mother had plenty to say, but what was he thinking?

Her mother's face was still red with anger as I raised my hung head prepared for our sentence. Then her father stepped out from behind us. The ringing of her mother's harsh words and threats became muted. The angst in my belly immediately melted away. It was a sparkle in his eye that hinted everything would be okay, and bit of pride I noticed tug the corner of his mouth cheering, "Well done, girls, well done!"

# The Monkey Dance

Tabbie Eichler

*Tabbie Eichler's "The Monkey Dance" stood out due to its strong voice, raw emotion, and unapologetic vulnerability. The story deftly spans several years, and the author is able to speak through the voices of both her childhood and adult selves. With its clear cadence and circular style, it effectively conveys the uncertainty that often envelopes children in unstable environments. What makes the story even more powerful, however, is its endearing and poignant imagery. From sadness and confusion, an appreciation for family and family values emerges. It is safe to say that "The Monkey Dance" will leave you smiling.*

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The monkey dance. I'd dance in circles while hooting and howling like a monkey. At a young age it was my go-to dance to try to cheer up my crying mother. She would lie there motionless with sunken in eyes and tears streaming down her face, and I couldn't understand why she was so sad. All I knew then was that my father was not how a father should be. All I know now is that my stepfather is more of a father than my biological father ever was, and it shows in my mother's happiness.

I didn't spend a lot of time with my dad growing up. He would either not be home, or I'd be sent to my room to be away from his yelling and abuse of my mom. I would sit in my room while plugging my ears to drown out the yelling. No matter how tightly I held my ears, I'd always jump when I heard something being thrown against the wall. I knew better than to go see what was

## + The Monkey Dance

thrown, but I was always the one to run to my crying, shaking mom to hug her as soon as he left. To me, the normal was a father with a short temper who drank a lot. The normal was yelling at night. The normal was being afraid. The normal was dancing in circles like a monkey trying to comfort my trembling mom.

I'll never forget the day my parents sat my sister and me down on the couch to give us a talk. I was excited, thinking maybe I was going to have a baby brother to play with. I sat there with anticipation of what would be said as the words, "We are going to get a divorce" came out of my father's mouth. I instantly became sad. Although I knew he wasn't a nice man, it's confusing having a dad who is okay with leaving you. It was hard for me to understand abuse, and how the man who's supposed to be a protector could be an abuser. It was hard to grasp the fact that I have a bad dad. However, the change for the better I saw in my mother after my father was out of our lives explained a lot.

Slowly, my mother's fragile body gained healthy weight. I started noticing fewer tears streaming down her face and more smiles. I no longer saw bruises on her. God sent a walking angel into our lives to save my mother and my family. His name is Joel. Joel and my mom were married less than a year after meeting.

I wasn't used to quality time with a dad. I wasn't used to family nights that ended in hugs, "goodnight, I love you more", and smiles. Once Joel was in my life, I had the dad every little girl imagined she'd grow up with. He taught me how to play baseball. He came to every sports game. He taught me the value in character versus materialistic things, and how a husband should treat me one day. He showed me true patience and how to communicate without anger and yelling. He taught me that sitting in my room, anticipating something being thrown against the wall shouldn't be the normal.

Although my biological dad may not be in my life anymore, Joel is more of a dad than he ever was. Blood has nothing to do with it. Joel

## The Monkey Dance +

stepped up, saved my family, and has loved me like his own since the first day. Joel will always be my real dad. Because of him, my mom is now dancing with me.



## Finalists

The following four essays made it to the final round in the Writing Center's second annual English 111 Personal Essay Contest. These student authors demonstrate memorable imagery, evocative descriptions and distinctive language. The following essays approach their respective topics with humor and depth, providing relatable insights and affecting introspection. Enjoy.



# Enjoy the Scenery

Scott Emison

The Smoky Mountains in winter are a sight to behold. Draped in the white blanket of winter, their faces are dotted with firs that seemingly catch every flake of falling snow, pronouncing to the world their rugged beauty as they carpet an endless sea of rolling peaks. That winter, no one appreciated that rugged beauty more than eleven-year-old Scott. As I marveled at the landscape from the window of my family van, little did I know those mountains had a lesson to teach me.

My family took vacations often. Twice a year, every Christmas and early summer, we'd find somewhere away from home for a little rest and relaxation. Sometimes the destination was halfway across the world. Sometimes it was an hour up the interstate. My dad, a career military officer, and my mom, a mother of five kids too smart for their own good, found the trips desperately needed. For our part, aside from occasionally reminding Mom and Dad that recess from work doesn't mean respite from us, my siblings and I played along well and ran into the experiences head-on. We had reason to. Mom and Dad made the trips engaging, educational, and enjoyable. Realizing every good hamster needs a wheel, they centered our getaways around places historically significant and naturally beautiful. Then, once we got there, they put our bodies and minds to work. At the end, we would return home with a deeper appreciation for some person, place, or period of history. This year, after our trip to those rolling peaks, eleven-year-old Scott departed with a little more: a deeper appreciation for life.

Not long before we left, Mom found it prudent to acquire a 15-passenger, navy-blue Chevrolet Express. As we came of age, the traditional minivan began to feel cramped, so this full-size van was a welcome addition. With the extra legroom, the air was especially cheerful on the way up, and as the landscape grew more animated, so did our spirits. By the time we spotted our first flakes of snow on the rolling peaks bordering Tennessee, the cheer was palpable.

When the Emison Express finally came to a stop, we were surprised to find our destination a Catholic retreat. We grew up regularly attending mass, but a monasterial family vacation was unusual. A week later, as I clung to a tree branch for dear life, I wasn't too upset I'd spent the last

## + Enjoy the Scenery

week growing closer to God.

After a week of devotionals and at least a thousand Hail Mary's, we left the retreat for some hiking in the Smokies before heading back home. While the reflection brought us closer as a family, it couldn't break one universal truth of Emison family excursions: if we're outside, my older brother, Josh, and I splinter off. There was no better place for us to roam than the side of a mountain. Breaking off the trail, we ventured forth into the tangle of firs blanketed in snow and lightly dusted with the sweet scent of pine. The world was ours.

We traversed uphill for at least an hour before slowing to take in the experience. Mountain vacations were always my favorite. The forest towered a hundred feet over our heads and smelled like a well-lit Christmas candle. Around us, it was serenely silent but for our footsteps and the occasionally rustling branches. This was worth a week of praying the rosary every day. Hiking higher up the ridge, I relished in a rare occurrence in my life: snow. It shone pure and white under the mountain sun and capped the moment well. Almost too well.

In my state of euphoria, I would have asked Josh to pinch me if not for at that very moment, fate finally decided to smack me off cloud nine. As I looked down at the snow, the face of the mountain gave out from under me. A web of branches, dead leaves, and frost, concealing a crack in the mountain's face, gave way as I stepped above. I plummeted down a mountain chasm with no end in sight.

I fell for roughly a full second in reality and an hour in perception before my right underarm felt like it was smacked full force by Sammy Sosa at a home run derby. I'd crashed onto a heavy tree root extending into the chasm and now, supported by my armpit alone, I dangled over a seemingly bottomless fall. Looking up, I saw the opening of the crack, and Josh staring agape at my precarious situation. "Don't let go!" he yelled, disappearing behind the rocky wall imprisoning me. "Great advice, Josh," I thought as I leisurely swayed in the breeze. While Josh searched for any artifact to assist in my recovery, I lost patience. I hoisted myself onto the root, hastily balanced on top, reached up, and pulled myself out. I clambered over the ledge to see Josh's face of relief. "We should probably

## Enjoy the Scenery +

head down,” he observed. Great advice again, Josh. My heart still beating as if a mountain lion were on my tail, we followed our footprints back down.

Besides a brief explanation of how I fell, Josh and I didn’t speak much about my brush with death. There seemed to be a mutual unspoken agreement to not raise the issue. Being responsible to Dad for my safety, Josh preferred not to spill the beans that I came within a couple feet of splattering, and I wasn’t dying to revisit my fall either. We reunited with our family at the base, assured them our trek was delightful, and boarded the Express back home. It was my first and thus far most intimate flirtation with my own mortality.

There are two takeaways from my Great Smoky Mountain Trip. One, you’ll never sleep better than in your own row of a fifteen-passenger van after flaunting death itself; and two, we don’t control our fates as much as we like to think. When it’s time for the mountain face to fall from under you, it will, and there’s nothing you can do about it except enjoy the scenery.

# Echoes of Life

Levi Hipp

From time to time I go back into the memories of my childhood, standing on the edge of the world, my feet sunk into the sand, grounding me to Earth. I would run along the shores near my home in Maryland. The wind was seemingly the only force preventing my imagination from running the speed of light. I stared into the familiar and unknown landscape of boundless beauty. I feel I was wiser in that moment then I am now and may ever be.

I was born in a busy Baltimore hospital in the spring of 1993, the doctors, my mother and my father the few aware of my existence. My mother fled from her husband when she had become aware of my journey into this world. My father a traveller, spent his time between Honduras and the eastern shore of Maryland. He took custody of me as mother went on her way running from her past, never to return. The years went by, as I watched my father who was a quiet man, herding cattle, riding his horse and closing the day fishing off the coast into the night. I learned many things by watching him perform his daily rituals.

My father died in the autumn of 1998, bringing an abrupt end to the unadulterated joy of being a child. I was aware of death's existence but never aware of our own mortality. I was sent to go live in a sleepy little town in Virginia with a friend of my father's, ripped from my worry-free life of rambling the woods and shoreline that was familiar to me as home. I felt alone and marooned by those of whom I came to know in my short time. I went quiet.

Memories of life then have become dreamlike. I remember slipping out of church to go kick around in the woods and ponder my own existence, rather than that of an "all loving god," searching for any body of water where I could fantasize about what might lurk beneath its surface. Hours would go by and my patience would grow as I prospected the depths with a hook and a worm. I would sometimes stop, thinking I had heard the bell that would call me back home to my ramblings on the Maryland farm I missed so much.

Years had passed since that brisk and fateful autumn morning my father

died, and I was no closer to closure than the day it happened, still stuck in denial and the nightmarish feeling of loss. I had become angry and secluded by my own will. I wanted answers to questions I didn't know how to ask. I needed the truths to things that no one could spare. There were few memories to spark joy into my life.

However, one memory sounds in the forefront of my mind. I neglected my responsibilities when I walked out the door to wander aimlessly through the woods on that cold winter day. It had snowed a great deal the night before, transforming the choppy cornfield into a smooth blanket of white. Taken aback by the awesome display, I would squint and try to focus my eyes on where I was walking. With the bitter sting of wind on my face and the cold embrace of the snow around my feet, I marched to the woodline, drawing closer into a scene of life I would never forget.

There was a rock that stood within those woods that I would climb, to sit and stare into the rituals of the wildlife that hailed to this stream of water that ran through the ravine of those woods. I peeked up over the edge and peered down onto the stream to see ducks that had been frozen upside down in the water. I remember thinking that this was one of the first times I had experienced the brutal effects of nature. The sound of shuffling steps guided my eyes to an awesome sight. It was a family of deer that dwelled in those woods. I watched in wonderment as the fawns scurried across the frozen stream. Then, the does took turns jumping or bouncing across.

I can remember, as if time stopped, as my eyes finally landed on a majestic buck, his horns and broad chest and muscular shoulders shuddered as it let out a breath so thick it resembled smoke. Through my own careless, boyish antics of slipping and sliding on frozen ponds and many warnings, I knew that buck was going to jump the stream. I watched in anticipation as the buck prepared to take off.

But his hind legs slipped, and he fell into the frozen stream that was suddenly still no more. A mighty crack echoed throughout the woods as

## + Echoes of Life

the buck let out a moan, the memory of which sends shivers down my spine to this day. I watched as the buck lifted his legs one by one to break through the ice to join his herd. My suspense melted when he crawled up the bank, then stood there poised with the successful display of perseverance in the face of failure. At that moment, my anger and sorrow evaporated and I felt renewed.

I felt that moment as a child again, with a wordless appreciation for this event, setting me free from my own seclusion. Countless obstacles still await me, and the memories of life will always follow, but echoing in the frontline of my mind will always be the sound of the ice breaking beneath that buck. His triumph will serve as a compass or symbol of strength and perseverance that helps me look past the fear that weakens my judgment. I will use it instead to sharpen my senses, setting free the locked away emotions that hinder the joyous spark of life that inevitably guides me to where I belong.

# Humility: The Universal Medicine

Michael Sawyer

I just stood there with my mouth open, and I knew the sounds coming out were totally wrong. Three pairs of eyes bored into my soul. For the first time in my prestigious acting career since fifth grade, I slowly, internally, started to freak out. A single bead of sweat trickled down my forehead.

“Something’s not right,” I said after the third try. I walked over to the pianist and glanced at the sheet music I provided her with. Suddenly, it all became clear. “Oh, I’m so sorry for the confusion, I wanted to start my song there,” I said as I pointed to a spot marked by pencil several measures earlier. *So she had started playing the piano in the wrong place*, I thought to myself. *I’m not crazy!*

For the fourth and final time, I began singing “If I Can’t Love Her” from *Beauty and the Beast*. It sounded okay, but I forgot a word halfway through. As soon as I was finished, I thanked the judges for their patience and quickly exited the room, which I swore had gotten thirty degrees hotter since I came in.

Ten minutes later, I was in another room, this time with more people.

“Step, step, step and turn, step, touch, turn, step, step, step and touch, step-ball-change, step-ball-change, jump, touch,” the instructor said as he did the moves in quick succession with perfect precision.

This is way more serious than any dancing I’ve ever done, I thought to myself as I poorly replicated, with much effort, the moves he had just displayed. What came next would solidify my new-found insecurity.

“Alright everyone, we are going to go out onto the stage where I’ll divide you into two groups, so no one can hide. You’ll be performing the dance in front of the judges. “

There was nothing I could do. I just had to do it. We filed into the auditorium and onto the stage, which seemed to grow as we climbed onto it. This room was not hot, but cold, dark, and deeply unsettling.

## + Humility: The Universal Medicine

*You've been on stages before, Michael. Calm down.* "No, I've been on *one* stage several times," I retorted to myself quietly. "This is totally different!"

"Okay, everyone from him to her are group one. The rest of you are group two."

What proceeded to happen in the next ten minutes can only be described as torture. I stumbled and fumbled through the dance steps, trying in vain to keep up with the rapid-paced soundtrack. I put on my best performance face, and made a fool out of myself. I felt like every pair of eyes was on me, mentally calculating just how many moves I had completely butchered. After what seemed like hours, the time was over. I quickly exited the stage and took a seat in the audience. They said we would hear about the results in twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours later, I read the list. To my complete lack of surprise, I was not on it.

My audition for Newsies really stunk. Over six years of musical experience could not save me from the bomb that was that audition. But going in, I felt really good.

*Surely I will at least get an ensemble part,* I had told myself. You're *overqualified for this, Michael!* As it turned out, my overconfidence was my weakness. A large dose of humility is never easy to swallow, but it ensures that you do not choke on your own pride anytime soon.

# Lost

Ezra Staengl

My brother and I trudged through the swamp, covered in grime and innumerable spider webs. The scraggly branches of black-haw viburnums created a dense tangle over our heads. Hazy green tree tops stretched into the distance for as far as I could see, giving the impression of unshakable sameness. A drop of sweat slid down my neck.

Earlier that morning, we had helped our family carry stuff from the moving van into our new house at the end of Bland Wade Lane in Nelson County. One of the biggest reasons we moved from the city was to give my brother Theo and me woods to explore. Our new home had seventeen acres of forest and a slice of river.

After a couple hours moving boxes, Theo and I decided to explore the river. We knew roughly where it was, having walked to it once before with our parents. We thought that if we hiked straight across the floodplain from our house, we would reach it. We found our binoculars and machetes and walked down the slope below our house into the woods. We carried the machetes to hack at the few species of invasive plants that had set up colonies in our woods.

Tulip poplars grew densely in the canopy, and the ground was dry and flat. The ground got wetter, until we emerged into an almost open clearing. Tall red maples grew at large intervals, sunlight filtering through their leaves to create intricate patterns on the ground. Patches of shallow standing water were scattered here and there, and many were covered in lush stands of water hemlock in full bloom.

There we were, standing in a world of dark mud and green vegetation. I realized that if we'd gone in a straight line, we'd be

## + Lost

at the river by now. Theo had been worrying that we were lost for the last half-hour. When I admitted that I had no idea where we were, he moaned, “We’re lost.” I did my best to reassure him, but I felt nervous. The landscape began to change, and we walked up a hill out of the floodplain. I’d never been there before, and I didn’t recognize it. The ground was dry and grassy, the canopy dominated by oaks and hickories. When we came out of the woods at the top of a hill, I saw an unfamiliar road. Now I really began to worry. How were we supposed to get back to our house if we didn’t even know where we were?

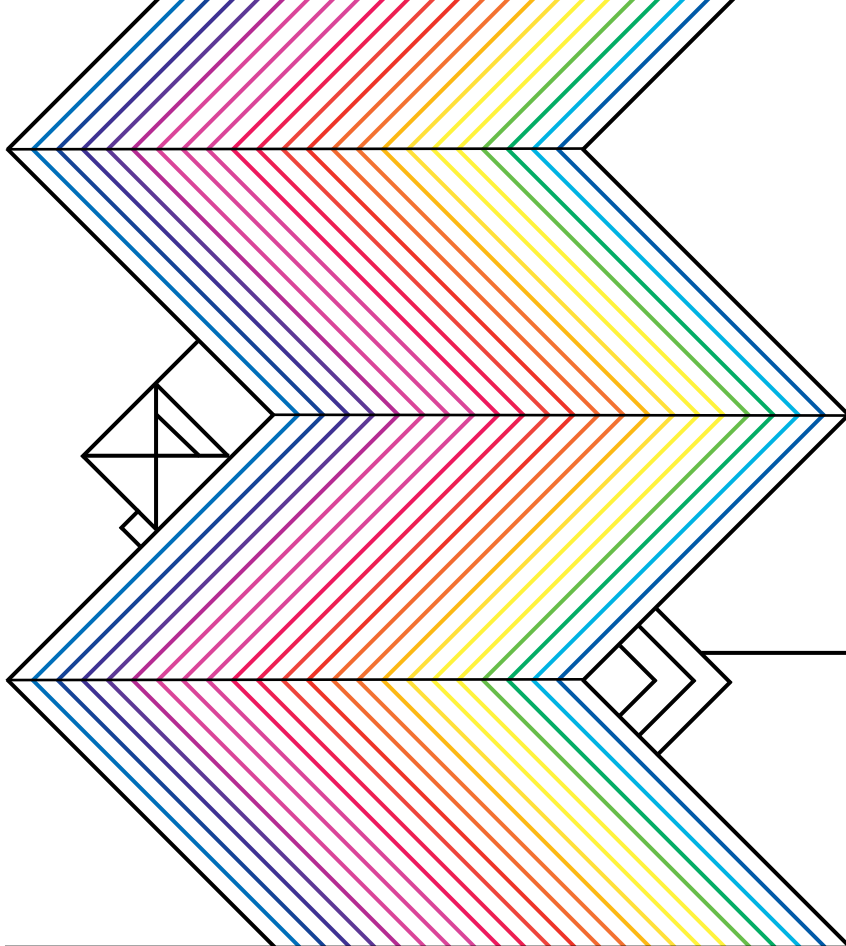
I knew I could ask for help but didn’t want to, as I feared talking to strangers and worried about their reactions. I also realized how funny we must’ve looked, two dirty, mud-caked kids with machetes as long as our legs.

Theo whispered, “oh no, oh no” under his breath, making it difficult to think. I realized I had to knock on someone’s door and ask where we were. As I approached a single-story home, I saw the inside was dark except for the flickering light of a large television showing a golf game. I paused, my hand raised in midair, wondering who would come out. I forced myself to bring my hand down and knocked. A hulking figure rose off the couch in the dark interior. As he lumbered towards the door, I saw that he was shirtless, revealing a large belly that spilled over his belted shorts. “I’m Ed, how may I help you?” he said in a loud voice. I asked him if this was Bland Wade. He responded, “Yes, it is, sonny.” What a relief! I thanked him, and we tried to leave, but he wanted to drive us back to our house. He insisted, so I gave in. Theo whispered, “But we’re not supposed to get into strangers’ cars.” I shushed him, and soon we were driving down the steep gravel driveway to our house, where our family was still unloading the moving van.

Theo and I have spent many more days in our woods over the last five years, but we’ve never gotten lost again. I don’t think it would have been a problem if we had, as now I knew my fear of asking strangers for help had been unfounded. We saw Ed many more times — almost

always with his shirt off — riding around his lawn on his tractor or just sitting and sunning himself. To this day, I have no idea where we went in the swamp the day we got lost, or where on Bland Wade Lane we emerged. I doubt I'll ever find out.





**Thanks to those who submitted essays to our contest. We will accept submissions from 2020 English 111s in Fall 2020. Students enrolled in English 111 at PVCC in the spring, summer or fall 2020 semesters are encouraged to submit their essays.**

**The Writing Center @ PVCC**

**Piedmont Virginia Community College**

**Room M617**

**434.961.5499**

**[tutoring@pvcc.edu](mailto:tutoring@pvcc.edu)**

