

Personal Essay Contest 2020

<https://sites.google.com/email.vccs.edu/narrativeessaycontest-spring21/home>

Since 2018, The Writing Center@PVCC has been hosting the Walt Kehoe English 111 Personal Essay Contest to celebrate the voices and stories of entering PVCC students. We are pleased to share with you the 2020 winners. These essays were all submitted as assignments in English 111 classes in the fall, summer, or spring 2020 semesters. Entries were read and scored anonymously by Writing Center tutors. This year, since the vast majority of the PVCC community are working and learning remotely, Writing Center staff designed a website in order share our winners' stories. The four winners and the six additional finalists are published here. We had many wonderful entries and selecting even these finalists was challenging. The eventual winners won us over through creative use of language, inventive storytelling, moving story, and distinctive voice. We invited the winners to meet with us prior to publication; otherwise, the essays appear here as they were submitted and reflect the work of developing writers. We hope you enjoy them.

WINNERS

The following four essays were selected by the staff of the PVCC Writing Center out of the nearly 30 essays that were submitted. Each essay is preceded by an introduction by a Writing Center tutor. The essays appear in alphabetical order. Accompanying art is by PVCC students.

I am She. She is Me. – April Oliver
I Am Only Thirteen – La'Tasha Strother
Outside the Lines – Zoe Hall
Post-Squirrel Sighting – Justin Pineda-Pirro

FINALISTS

The following six essays made it to the final round in the Writing Center's third annual 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. The essays below are listed in alphabetical order.

A Blast in the Park – Gidon Rosenfeld
Checking Yes – Anna Heetderks
Just One Bit – Kimberley Sweigart
Peeling Back the Strata – Logan McConaughy
Tear Down – Esther Eigher
What Are the Chances? – Rene Hounshell

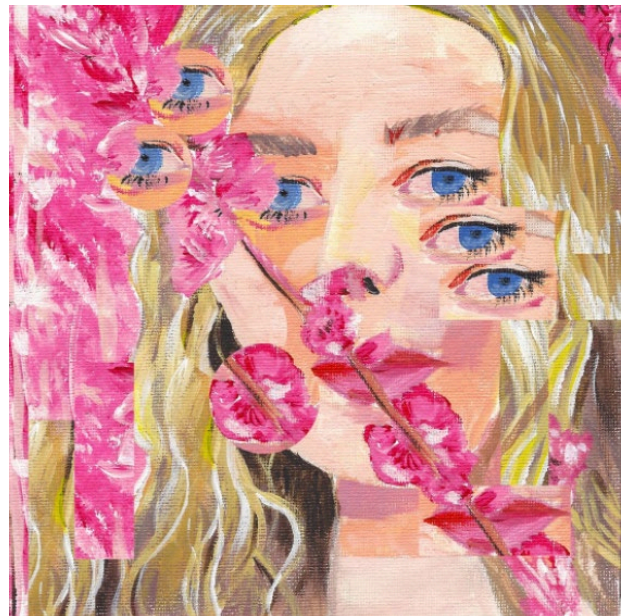
I am She. She is Me.

WINNER

By April Oliver

Foreword by Bret V.

WINNER – *In this courageous and affecting story, April Oliver depicts the destructive influence of shame and shares the wisdom gained through overcoming isolation. With a voice that is analytical yet vulnerable, she explores themes of regret as well as the pain of a missed opportunity. In doing so, she arrives at lessons that are both personal and universal. April's story reckons with empathy as not just an emotion but also as an enabling condition, asking how we as individuals can use our compassion to connect with others despite our fears and defenses.*



In the Peach Blossoms by Kelly Emerich

The lobby was fairly empty as I glanced around the room taking in the all too familiar scenery that I had become so accustomed to over the last few months. Remnants of Christmas decor still lingered leisurely throughout the space as if it had not already come and gone. The bright red poinsettias that adorned the tabletops and the glittery snowflakes that dangled from the ceiling exuded a sense of excitement, while the lighted tree in the corner of the room invited you in and insisted that you feel welcomed here. An aroma of warm vanilla sugar filled the air creating a coziness that engulfed you and persuaded you to feel safe. I, personally, liked it here and even though in recent times I had been coming quite frequently, it never grew old because I looked forward to the experience.

I slowly walked over to the registrar to check in for what may be my last visit and was greeted by Ms. Ruth with the brightest, most contagious smile ever; it caused me to smile back. She was always so kind and excited to see me which in my world was a rarity so I appreciated every encounter with her. “Hi April, how are you feeling today?” she asked with such genuine concern and I, not wanting to overwhelm her with the burdens of my truth and fighting the urge to explode into a river of raging tears, merely responded with “I’m ok.” She proceeded to check me in and instructed me to sit in the waiting area assuring me that someone would be out to escort me to the back shortly.

As I sat down and began rummaging through the pile of parenting magazines strewn about on the table, I could hear the clinical staff giggling behind the big,

sliding glass windows that guarded the registrar's desk and I couldn't help but envy their outright display of happiness; these days I wasn't allowed to be happy instead I was just supposed to feel the constant shame of my past transgression. When I finally stumbled across a magazine whose cover read, "Top 10 most frequently asked questions by teen moms," I picked it up and began flipping through the pages. Reality is, I had no idea of what I was doing and no one was interested in teaching me but I was determined to use every resource available to me to learn even if it was just an old crumpled up magazine at a doctor's office.

In the lobby there were two other young ladies who weren't too far removed from my age. The first, accompanied by an older woman who was possibly her mother, was engaged in a joyful conversation; they too laughed. The other, however, sat there quietly like myself staring off into space as if she were in deep thought; I recognized that state of mind and I empathized with her. I could see the bugle beneath her shirt and I wondered about her story. How old was she? What was she thinking about? And is she having a boy or a girl? I said nothing though and nor did she. We just sat there, waiting. Neither of us ever cracking a smile. Both of us remaining alone, isolating ourselves from the outside world for fear of harsh words and unjust treatment. Both of us just trying to protect the little bit of sanity we had left.

In recent years, working as a Peer Recovery Support Specialist, I have been awarded the opportunity to assist other young ladies that have shared this same life experience and learned how so many of us walked that journey out alone. I think about that girl and how much we may have had in common if we had only been courageous enough to talk. I ponder the many facets of how that conversation may have went and speculate on where she is now. I wonder if she went on to accomplish great things or if she was defeated by the bitter realities of life. I contemplate the many ways we could have supported each other on that journey and if she's using her story to empower others too. I, then, think of how we sat there in silence that day, never making eye contact, afraid of connection and holding tight to the defenses we'd developed from unspoken experiences, and I wonder if she ever overcame.

I Am Only Thirteen WINNER

By La'Tasha Strother

Foreword by Ruth Y.

This haunting essay reveals the strength and vulnerability of a thirteen-year-old girl. La'Tasha Strother refuses to cover the ugly truth in pretty words, instead using sparse language and frequent repetition to build tension. Her anger and indignation are palpable throughout the essay, but even more important is her determination as she stands up for herself, first with her "cold face" and finally by leaving "the predator" behind. While her young cousins and even the predator's wife seem oblivious, Strother exposes his nature and her own strength so that readers cannot remain unaware or indifferent.



Serendipity by Mikayla Thompson

"You should come take a seat beside me." I hesitate. I can sense his motive. I look over at the table in the left corner. My cousins are laughing. I want to laugh with them. He repeats his request, asking as if he cannot see the look on my face. "You should come take a seat beside me." I look down at my plate of food; it no longer seems appetizing. He has ruined my appetite. His wife looks up and smiles at me. Doesn't she see my hesitation? As a woman, does she not recognize this face? This face is the face that every woman makes when a man tries making unwanted advances. Is she oblivious to this situation? Why is she not coming to my rescue? I'm only thirteen, and I can identify a predator. She married a predator. The first lady of Rock Hall Baptist church married a predator. Now he is asking me to take a seat beside him. I took one last look at my plate of food then I watched my child-sized feet walk me over to the chair beside him.

This predator has a name, Pastor Beasley. He smiles. I hate his smile, so like always, I refuse to smile back. If I smile back, he might think I'm weak. He might think I won't tell, so I make a cold face. I make the coldest face a thirteen-year-old girl can make. His wife smiles again. I wish I could wipe the smile off her face. How does a woman smile when a predator is in the room? With the fork in my right hand, I push my food in a playful way to the left side of my plate. Then I glance over my right shoulder. My cousins have forgotten about me. Do they

not see me sitting beside this predator? I see them sitting beside each other. I see them chatting with each other as if there is no predator in the room. I wonder if the predator has asked them to take a seat beside him. Does the predator only like young ladies? My cousins are young, but they are not ladies.

Would the predator have asked me to take a seat beside him if I was a young boy? Am I not safe in this girl's body? The predator must think so because he begins to coax me into a trap. "You're growing up; it's time for us to consider what role you want to take on in the church. We should have a meeting and discuss this matter." I look at him. I look at him with the face you give when you know someone is lying. I'm only thirteen, yet I know the Pastor is lying. I know the predator wants to take me into his office alone. I know the predator wants to see what I look like alone. I want to see what the predator looks like exposed. I want to expose the Pastor for who he is. I want to stand up in the church dining hall and make an announcement. I want to say, "Excuse me, the man that you call pastor is really a pedophile." I want to expose the man of God before he exposes me.

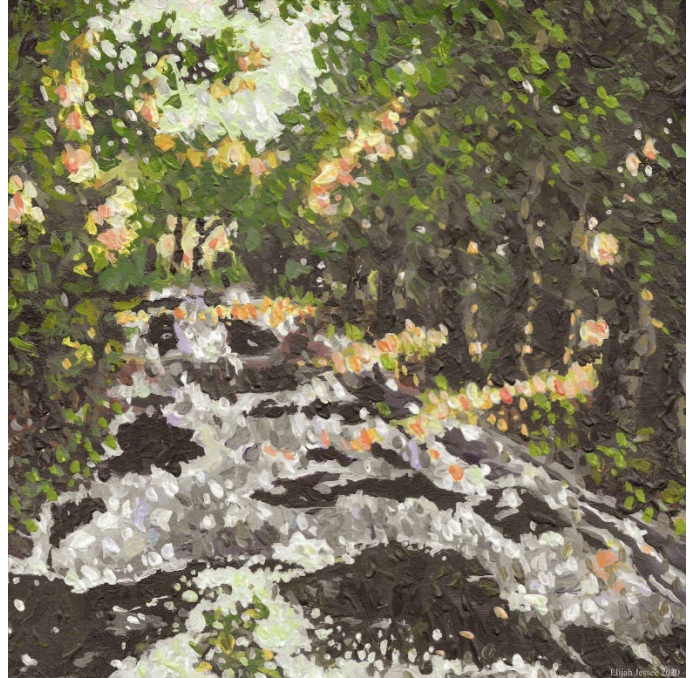
I am only thirteen, but I still know when a man wants to do things that your body is not old enough for. The predator brings his elbows to the table. I watch him raise his hands to the left side of his face. While blocking his wife from seeing his next move he then blows me a kiss! The pastor blows three consecutive kisses to a minor. How often does this heinous act occur in religious settings? How often do spiritual leaders abuse minors? How often do girls and boys make cold faces to scare away the predator? I look down at my plate. Somehow the predator's kiss has made my appetite return. I square my thirteen-year-old shoulders while lifting my chin. I look directly into the predator's eye, and I glare my truth. Without words I make known my appetite for justice. I am not your victim. If no one else will fight for me than I will fight for myself. This thirteen-year-old body belongs to me. I gently pick up my plate of food while authoritatively standing up from the dining hall table to join my cousins in laughter.

Outside the Lines WINNER

By Zoe Hall

Foreword by Emily K.

In “Outside the Lines,” author Zoe Hall considers her connection to art and perfectionism. She describes the stress of her childhood coloring and compares this to her dad’s loose and carefree painting style. She explores what watching her father paint taught her about art — and about life. “Outside the Lines” is notable for its use of language, which is both playful and intricate. The scent of crayons and splatter of paint are captured vividly, as are the author’s thoughts as she takes in these different artistic worlds. Indeed, the reflectiveness of this piece is another of its strengths. Hall carefully captures her changing attitude towards creating art, leaving readers with a unique and thoughtful takeaway. We see how Hall grows as a person through the piece, how she is shaped by her father and his art as she comes to view the creative process as a freeing — rather than stressful — endeavor. With its descriptive language, its subtlety, and its thoughtfulness, “Outside the Lines” wowed us.



Sun Rays on a Rainy Day by Elijah Jessee

Snap. Another crayon broken. Lying on my stomach, my body tenses as I firmly draw in my animal coloring book. I always press too hard, careful to thoroughly color inside every line. My mother constantly explains to me that my muscles will suffer if I remain this tense. Regardless, I continue to stay there on our carpeted floor, stiff as a brick. I push aside the fragmented pieces and reach for a new color, inhaling a whiff of the waxy smell as I do so. I return to my drawing, determined to finish completely and accurately. My father is an artist, and as the daughter of an artist, I ought to properly color my kittens.

In the evening, I tiptoe around the corner leading from the kitchen and into the study, peeking my head into “the studio.” I silently hoist myself into the towering chair by the entrance. It creaks as I clamber up the rickety beams and situate myself towards my father. Surely he notices my presence, but he continues to focus on his painting. I leave behind my world of perfectionism and

broken crayons and enter the paint splattered and rock music filled world of my Dad's. His canvas stretches across the entire wall. The floor, littered with paint drips, appears to be art itself.

I found no method or pattern in his work as he squiggled line after line. His acrylic filled solo cups lined his desk as he switched from color to color. Occasionally I piped up, inquiring about or commenting on his brushstrokes.

"Why did you cover up all the red? That looks like a Z!" Oftentimes he explained his artwork without me prompting him.

"See how I trace these lines? I do it with a smaller brush each time. I just keep going back over them again and again."

I came to realize that he did indeed have a method, but unlike me, he remained relaxed and at peace. His placid approach allowed the paint to flow freely from his brush. He created the lines. He painted outside the lines. And when he didn't like them, he covered up the lines.

I later returned to the coloring book and set out to create my own lines. I selected my favorite Crayola colors; I always held them with great caution, lest I break them too. Among the few were "Inchworm" and "Blue Jeans," two colors unfit for the kitten I had flipped to. I continued despite that, outlining the cat with my vibrant colors. I filled the entire page, willing myself to relax as I did so. Relief washed over me, and the creativity began.

Genuine art does not come from trying to be perfect, but from being at peace. My father consistently demonstrated this truth. A decade later I sit up tall in my own chair, immersed in soft piano music and surrounded by sunlight streaming through open windows. I lay out my pans of watercolors and variety of brushes. Delicately painting my own scenes, I combine both loose colors and intricate details. A peaceful mindset penetrates the room, and all pressure to be perfect escapes. I create outside of the lines.

Post-Squirrel Sighting **WINNER**

By Justin Pineda-Pirro

Foreword by Kyle T.

Justin Pineda-Pirro's "Post-Squirrel Sighting" is a gripping, action-packed narrative that will leave you on the edge of your seat. What starts as a typical night in a local dive bar quickly turns into an all-out brawl that wouldn't be out of place in a Hollywood blockbuster. Pineda-Pirro's vivid descriptions of college nightlife — the thumping music, flashing lights, and overflowing alcohol — add to the sense of anxiety and urgency throughout the story.

As the narrator finds themselves increasingly entangled in physical bouts, their inner-strength shows through in a way reminiscent of a leashed dog catching a glimpse of a squirrel. When the violence finally ends, Pineda-Pirro leaves the reader out of breath.



*A Creek and Observer Landscape
by Christopher DeJarnette*

Country music stung my ears while I held my drink tighter than I hold onto my dog's leash post squirrel-sighting. Anya and Marie made their rounds, greeting and shaking hands with everyone they recognized. This town wasn't home to me; this music didn't sit right with me; and these people, all but two, were not my friends. So I stood, patiently awaiting their return, trying not to get mad every time someone bumped into me. I was a few feet from the top of a flight of stairs at a corner bar near the University of Virginia. The abnormal amount of humidity in the bar amplified the smell of beer, leaving me with a second-hand buzz and an excuse to drink slowly. The girls, all dressed the same, flocked behind the boys at the bar, leaving those who could dance, but didn't have anyone to dance with, in chairs next to high tables against the wall. The background music, laughter, and distant banter left me all but submerged in white noise.

My friends circled back around to meet me. The country genre of music abruptly changed to hip hop, and as my eyes met with Marie's, our heads rhythmically and simultaneously bumped to the beat. The flow slithered through our ears and down our spines. Alcohol kicking in while we were kicking it made it near impossible to be anywhere but there. Blue beads of light lined the

floor around the bar, favoring those with Air Force 1's, me included. The dark and granulated outlines of people swaying side to side left us with the exact nostalgia we came searching for. With exquisite timing, a young security guard, wearing all black, began to yell.

“HEY! HEY! KNOCK IT OFF!!”

Pulling and tugging led us to the bar where our nervous laughs left us excited to see what lay on the opposite side of the gathering crowd. An orifice, formed by sweaty intrigued bodies, revealed a man in a denim jacket throwing around the bartender. With his head down, Denim grabbed the bartender by his shirt, jerking him back and forth, trying to score a few punches but failing each time. In the midst of the chaos, we watched as Denim knocked and shoved until he made his way towards the bar where I was. I was lucky though. A female bartender watched the men fight their way towards her and, being on the inside of the walls of the bar, was left completely and utterly unlucky. Denim, barreling towards her, clocked the poor girl in the head, knocking her into the oh-so-many bottles of vodka adjacent to the brawling men. She yelped, and I thought of my dog getting her tiny feet stepped on by a careless me who couldn't bother to watch my step.

A taller monster of a man finally grabbed Denim off of the bartender and yelled for everyone to leave, marking what we thought as the end of the night. The girls and I regrouped and trotted over used crinkled red solo cups to check on the female bartender, who was now hunched over holding her head. I placed my drink on a nearby table, and we lifted her over the bar and onto a chair. Standing over her I asked about her head and neck. She shrugged me off and immediately as I looked to my left, you wouldn't believe it. Denim barreled through for a second time trying to get over the bar where we were. He pushed me out of the way and violently started bumping into the female bartender while trying to hop the only barrier keeping him from his target.

“Okay, is this guy serious?” I quietly huffed to myself.

I felt something in my gut. It moved around in my chest and I could feel it freeing itself of cuffs and chains. I didn't quite know what was happening, but I felt something, something big, coming undone inside of me. This beast I had successfully captured and condemned deep within my psyche years ago was knocking down blockades and barriers, climbing up my throat, and trying to take control of my arms and legs. I didn't let him take it. Instead, I just gave it to him: Sweet and absolute permission. I looked at the girl and then back at Denim. In a quick burst, I charged him. All of my years at the gym, all the miles ran, every intense workout during soccer practice could not account for the strength I felt pulsing through my veins. I wrapped my arms around Denim's waist and

lifted this two hundred pound man up into the sky and down onto the same table I had placed my drink not even seconds prior. He quickly got up and threw the cup at me. My own drink hit me above my brow, and not even for a second did I blink. My eyes were piercing through time and space, altering reality, beaming directly into his.

“OH SO YOU WANNA DO THIS? HUH?” Denim shrieked.

With Hennessy dripping down my profile, I said nothing. I just continued to stare. He looked scared and, quite frankly, I was beginning to feel frightened myself. Reality swept through the building and nestled into that crumpled-up cup Denim threw at me. Adrenaline fled my body and cowered away next to the female bartender. I wanted to look back and say, “HEY! Where do you think you’re going? We’re not done yet!” But I knew if I broke the stare, Denim would know that whatever bravery I might’ve had when I initiated the fight was now definitely gone. Speaking of things that were gone, I was genuinely curious as to where Hulk the security guard went. Oddly enough, his big head peaked over the steps I spent the majority of the night next to. He scanned the room and carried his eyes through the bar until he met the back of Denim’s head. His eyes widened, his brows arched inward, and his upper lip scrunched showing his long, horse-like teeth.

Thank Jesus, I thought.

Hulk grabbed Denim by his jacket and relentlessly dragged him down the steps. My shoulder felt warm, so I looked to see a familiar hand followed by a crazed voice, “Yo, that was wild bro! You were great, dude! What the hell was wrong with that guy?”

“I don’t know, Marie, but let’s get the fuck out of here.” I followed with a soft laugh as I let out all the air I was holding hostage in my lungs. “Where’s Anya?” I looked around to find her talking to the female bartender. I walked over to the injured girl in the chair. “Hey, are you okay? I hear an ambulance. Is that for you?” I said sympathetically, looking down at her.

“I’m fine,” she muttered.

Not that I was expecting a “thank you,” but I was definitely not expecting THAT. “Yo, Anya.” She looked over to me. “Let’s skedaddle.” She hopped up from her kneeling position, fixed her jacket, and nodded at the both of us to leave.

“So much violence, I feel tainted.” Anya smirked at me with squinted eyes. I bumped her lightly but hard enough to make her step off to the side.

“Shut up! That shit was crazy, you really threw that n****, huh?” Marie smiled ear to ear, jealous she didn’t get into any fights.

“Yeah man, I just didn’t wanna see that girl get more hurt than she already was. I don’t know what came over me if I’m being honest.” But I did. I looked down, almost embarrassed I showed that side of me. We walked down the steps and outside to find a well-lit street flooded with cops and an ambulance. As we walked, I saw black men being questioned. I saw black men speaking to the cops, black men that weren’t even in the bar. I saw cops grabbing black men by the arm to ask them if they knew the perpetrator. As if every black man knows every black man in Charlottesville, Virginia. I squeezed my eyes shut but could still see the blue and red lights. I opened them to see Marie turned my way trying to show me the video she took of the fight.

“Yo look, I was gonna post this, but if the ops get their hands on it, it’s wraps. So I’mma just keep it for myself.” She chuckled looking down at her phone, holding, in her mind, what seemed like a million dollars.

Cops stormed up and down the street carrying notepads and pens. I kept my head down, trying not to bring attention to myself. I thought about Denim. I wondered if he got away safely. I questioned how he got himself into that situation. I thought about his beast and if he had successfully locked him away until today. I thought about how that could have been any of us, and I got angry at myself for feeling empathy for a guy who had just gone on a tirade in a local bar. I felt more empathy for him than I did for the rude girl who got bonked in the head. I felt more empathy for Denim because while staring in his eyes I saw my own. I saw fear and I saw pride, and if we weren’t just looking in a mirror, then I’m not quite sure what we were doing.

Country music blared in the background and brought me back to existence. The overwhelming sound of sirens fell over us like white noise. I held both their hands tighter than I hold onto my dog’s leash post-squirrel sighting, and we walked. We walked through the chaos. We walked through the fire until we got to the other side.

A Blast in the Park

FINALIST

By Gidon Rosenfeld

Walking through the park on a warm summer day is a common weekend activity for many Israelis. My family and I, having just moved to Tel Aviv only a few weeks ago, figured a walk through the park would be a good way to acclimate to the Israeli lifestyle. The park was beautiful; dozens of families filled the green grass, admiring the breathtaking scenery and listening to the chirping birds. The Mediterranean sea could be seen from the hills, sparkling as the sun's rays pierced the clear water. Being an average 13 year old, I loved everything it had to offer. I had yet to adjust to my new home, but the park was a warm welcome.

The day at the park came to an abrupt end soon after we arrived. The wailing of sirens filled the air, sending the happy families running towards the nearest bomb shelter. As we ran with them, an old man sitting on a park bench motioned for us to come sit with him. He assured us that the sirens were nothing to fear, and that they were likely a false alarm or a military drill. But the sight of the frantic families running to take cover said otherwise, and we followed them. Upon arriving at the bomb shelter, a small basement in a run-down apartment building, explosions could be heard from far away. Contrary to what we assumed, the explosions were only the rockets being intercepted by the Iron Dome — the IDF's advanced air defense system.

Inside the shelter, everyone huddled together, conversing about what could be happening outside. Only weeks before, three Israeli teenagers had been kidnapped and killed by Hamas members — causing Israel to conduct an operation with the goal of arresting Hamas militant leaders. The rockets, they assumed, were coming from the Hamas-occupied Gaza Strip. We later found out that the sirens marked the beginning of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, a seven week long military operation which resulted in thousands of casualties. Being too young to understand the gravity of the situation, and too busy observing the roaches crawling on the shelter walls, I stood there in fear hoping we would make it home safely. I wondered if the man on the bench was safe, and if he had decided to take cover.

The sirens eventually died down, and we exited the shelter. As I stepped out of the darkness, I was struck with rays of golden sunlight, immediately warming my entire body. The families returned to the park, the children resumed their game of soccer, and people went on with their day. It was as if nothing had ever happened. As I walked towards the park, I saw the old man, still sitting on the same bench. He waved to us and began to smile. "Welcome to Israel!" he said.

Checking Yes FINALIST

By Anna Heetderks

The Colorado air wafted around clear and fresh, and the sun bounced brightly off the snow-capped Rockies as Uncle Mark cruised ahead of me on his mountain bike. Too far ahead of me for my liking. Worried I would lose him, I coasted fairly quickly down the hill, until I came to a curve in the road. It really wasn't much of a curve. In fact, it wasn't much of a hill. But all of a sudden my instinct for caution rudely interrupted to tell me that I wasn't going to be able to take the curve going that fast. I hit the brakes. Both of them. Turns out the front brakes were a little stronger than the back brakes. The bike, specifically the front of the bike, stopped very quickly. I kept moving. I slid across the sidewalk and into a gravel lot, landing right in front of a mildly shocked-looking Scout troop. Self-conscious and more than a little stunned, I quickly picked myself up, leaving a lot of my skin on the pavement.

Guilt-stricken Uncle Mark (it wasn't his fault, but he's sensitive about his sister's kids) guided me away from concerned onlookers over to the Safeway across the street, where he took me in the bathroom and helped me to clean off the blood and dirt. Blood. Lots of blood. It wasn't until I started to clean up with those rough, brown public-restroom paper towels that I realized how beat up I was. Nothing serious, but a lot of skin gone in a lot of different places. I started feeling light-headed. I pitched forward, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting outside the bathroom door. My three-year-old cousin appraised me, concerned. "You have a lot of boo-boos," he remarked, slightly awed.

The accident resulted in nothing more than a trip to the emergency room, a few lasting scars, and a lot of family jokes, until about a year later as I sat in the DMV, filling out the application form for my learner's permit. Do you wear glasses or contact lenses to operate a motor vehicle? Nope. Do you have a physical or mental condition that requires you to take medication? Nope. Have you ever had a seizure, blackout, or loss of consciousness? I paused. Well...there was that time last July... In my desire to be scrupulously honest, I tentatively checked "yes." Unsure, however, I ran it past my dad. "No, you didn't," he told me. "That doesn't count." So I scratched out the check mark in the "yes" box and checked "no." No problem, right? Our number was called and we marched over to the window and handed the form to the DMV lady. She scanned it critically, pausing over the medical section. She pointed to the scratched-out box. "What does this mean?" My dad explained, emphasizing that it wasn't a big deal. Not enough. The lady informed us that I would have to go to the doctor and get a check-up, and the doctor's office would have to sign a form saying that

I was physically capable of driving, and then, and only then, would I be able to come back and try again for my permit.

My dad wore his “you gotta be kidding me” look on the way home, gently but firmly explaining to me that you “never give the government a chance to say no.” We couldn’t get a doctor’s appointment for three weeks, and I tried to hold back my frustration. I was already sixteen; most of my friends already had their permits and would be able to get their licenses soon. I “cleared” my check-up, but the doctor’s office said they would have to have a copy of my treatment record from the hospital in Colorado before they could sign off on the form. Between that hangup and my dad’s busy work schedule, it was a few weeks before we could return, requisite form in my dad’s briefcase (along with all the other papers and certificates we might possibly need), to the DMV. I sat in one of those plastic chairs that is neutral in both color and comfort, doing homework and slightly raising my head each time a number was called. When it was our turn, we went up in slight trepidation and explained to a different DMV lady what had happened and gave her the form. “So actually the doctor’s office has to fax that form up to our headquarters in Richmond,” she told us. This time I wore the “you’ve got to be kidding me” look. “I can call and see if they have it?” she added sympathetically. So she went back and called, but no, the office in Richmond didn’t have it. We’d have to wait until they processed the form, which would take a few weeks.

Sighing deeply in frustration, once again we returned home. My dad and I cursed the government in general (without actually cursing, of course; my dad wouldn’t do that), lamenting in our indignation the cluelessness of all those people who think the government should run the healthcare system. It was November before the DMV had processed my form and my dad had cleared a window to take me back (we’d started in July). At that point, I was pretty sure I was suffering from DMV PTSD. This time, we were sure we had everything in order. And we did. But the DMV didn’t. As we waited, a voice came on over the loudspeaker to announce that the computer system was down. We asked how long it would take for the computers to be back up, and the lady said that the last time it happened, it took them a week to get the problem fixed. My dad took me to Chick-fil-a and bought me a consolation milkshake. I’d almost stopped being frustrated because the whole thing was just so silly. We came back a week later, and I was almost in disbelief when I passed the test and got the certificate that would allow me to finally, legally, drive.

I still recount the saga of both the bike and the DMV, usually together, since they’re interconnected. The most profound effect the whole situation had on me was the instillation of skepticism of government involvement in everyday life and a strong contempt for bureaucracy. I’d get upset when my friends and I

would debate government-run healthcare (yes, my friends and I do debate things like that; we're nerds). "See how well it works in Europe?!", they'd say. "That doesn't mean anything," I'd retort. "Our existing bureaucracies in the U.S. are a MUCH better indicator of how well government-funded healthcare would work here. We aren't Europe. Go to the DMV [here I'd practically spit the word] and consider how you would like those people running your healthcare." Bureaucracy was, and still is, one of the reasons I'm suspicious of the government getting involved in areas of my life such as healthcare.

Since then, my thoughts on the issue, like my thoughts on many other issues, have softened. When I took that tumble off my bike, my uncle didn't think twice about taking me to the ER. The bill came out to around \$900, but we had a health savings account and were able to afford it. But not every family is like my family. Some people would have to think twice before taking themselves, or their niece or nephew to the ER. I still have a scar on my arm, but if I were someone else, the piece of gravel might still be in there, too. Maybe there are people who would gladly get healthcare through a bureaucracy than have no healthcare at all. As I thought about my story more, I started to see two sides to it, two sides that were contradictory but at the same time complementary. Like my mom would say, the world isn't black and white.

Just One Bit

FINALIST

By Kimberley Sweigart

The iron skillet was hot. Butter was sizzling in the pan. The air was heavy with a delicious aroma. Who would have thought that one bite of venison would impact my life in such an astonishing way? It was tender, juicy, flavorful, and best of all, it was organic and free.

My roommate, Josh, grew up hunting, and to him it was just another day in the kitchen. For me, it was a new experience. I knew that if I wanted to partake in more of this goodness, I needed to learn how to hunt.

I am obsessed with eating healthy, organic, free-range meat, and buying it in the grocery store is somewhat expensive. The thought of being able to go out and fill my freezer with healthy, lean, free protein was very exciting.

I was not planning on being Josh's roommate forever and didn't know anyone who went hunting. So, I asked Josh to teach me how to hunt. I had to beg and beg for him to teach me. A few weeks later, he reluctantly agreed to take me hunting with him.

I had no idea that hunting is such a thrilling adventure. Josh purchased a two-person tent, which is called a blind, for us to sit in. Picking the spot to put the blind is part of the fun. There are so many options on the farm. Should we set it up in the woods, in the tall grass in one of the fields, by the stream, or hide it in the pine trees? The choices are endless. Strategy and planning are involved. We ended up setting the blind in the middle of a field that was about 250 yards from the back porch of the house. This field had been cut at the beginning of summer, so by the end of October, new tender grass called fescue had grown. The deer love to eat this dark green grass. We had often seen deer grazing in this field just before dusk, when we would look out the sliding glass doors from the living room.

We set the blind up a few days before we went hunting so the deer would get used to it being there. We sat inside making sure all the windows were open enough for us to see out, while still being camouflaged. We took two buckets that were laying around the shed, turned them upside down and put cushions on them for us to sit on. Josh made sure my bucket was sitting off to the side, as I was just an observer and needed to be out of his way for him to shoot.

I was so excited when the day finally came to go hunting. We snuck out to the blind about an hour before dusk. It was still a little warm outside for October. I

was apprehensive with anticipation. All I knew was I was on a new adventure. Being out in nature, smelling the fresh air and the grass in the field, and feeling the warm sun on my face before the sun disappeared was delightful. I could see the birds flying nearby and the squirrels playing as they chased each other up and down the trees. For such small creatures, squirrels can make a lot of noise. The sound of them chattering made me laugh. They had no clue we were there, watching them.

As it started to get dark, we saw about seven does off in the distance. They were over 70 yards away, and out of reach for Josh's muzzle loader. Josh had to remind me to sit still and be quiet often. I loved sitting there, just watching the deer eat the grass in the field. I had never experienced nature like that before, and it was exhilarating. Suddenly Josh said, "Don't move," I was looking out one side of the blind, and he was looking out the opposite side. I had no idea what he had seen, but I did not move. Within a second, my ears were ringing from the sound of his gun going off. I continued to sit still until Josh spoke. He said, "I just shot a big buck." My heart was racing! We couldn't see the deer. I said, "Come on, let's go." The anticipation was overwhelming. Did he really kill the deer? Did he miss? I was hoping that it wasn't lying there, injured and suffering. After about 20 minutes, Josh said it was safe for us to get out of the blind.

As Josh and I walked over to where the buck had been standing, I started to feel anxious. I didn't know what to expect. Thankfully, it was a perfect shot, and the deer had run only a short distance before falling over. As I approached the deer lying there, lifeless, I felt an overwhelming sadness, and tears began to roll down my cheeks. It was such a humbling experience. I leaned over, petted its fur, and said, "Thank you." I had been buying my meat from a cooler in the grocery store, not giving much thought of the lives that had been taken.

Four years later, I am an avid hunter. I do not enjoy taking a life but am grateful to be able to fill my freezer. Every time I go out into the woods or fields, it is a new adventure. I have spent hours sitting in the darkness waiting to feel the hot rays of the beautiful sun on my florid cheeks. There are moments when I have felt my heart race a mile a minute. More than once, a black bear has meandered past. My nose and fingers have been cold and numb, while gigantic, fluffy snowflakes fell from the sky and formed a glittering, white blanket over everything. Vibrant, colorful leaves have fallen all around me as I swayed back and forth amongst the trees. These memories that I have made are truly magical, and my life will never be the same because of that one bite of that savory, tender venison.

Peeling Back the Strata

FINALIST

By Logan McConaughy

I can only catch glimpses. There are two people between me and the window and both are pretty grumpy, but I look out anyway: craning my neck to see over this lady's shoulder and outside of the plane. It looks like another planet, with the dry, desert hills flowing into dusty mountains. Alien, foreign. Sunlight moves differently across this kind of land. I'm entranced.

I get off the plane and walk across shiny floors into the Las Vegas baggage claim. There are walls lit up with screens, billboards glowing with manicured women and the twenty-foot-high twinkling curves of perfume bottles. It seems so much in contrast with this desert, but maybe that's part of the appeal. An oasis of luxury in a sea of sun-bleached heat. I feel like the odd one out; my face is one of the few without layers of makeup coating my skin and I have no brand-name plastered to my body. No heels on my feet or two-inch-long nails gracing my fingers. What I do have is a desire to get out from under those neon lights and flashing, laughing faces. Painted lips dole out pasteurized smiles like coins dropping out of old slot machines; they tell me to buy, buy on credit, buy with interest free installments, buy their games and buy their bodies. I shake my head to clear it of all these plastic promises. Focus, I tell myself, focus. The glamour is a distracting fiction. My suitcase rolls by and I swing it out and away from the lineup. Off I go.

Vegas rolls by, too, outside my car window. It is dried up: a husk of a city cored out by fear of the pandemic. Trash blows past. By the time I get fully out of the city, it is well past dark. I see silhouettes of mountains taller than skyscrapers begin to block out the sky and the air feels different out here, somehow. It feels wide, clean.

I sit on the front porch, mesmerized by the dawn light painting the sky. It is morning and misty and the sun gilds the brush, makes the desert sand glow, lights up the contours of the mountains in ways that make them seem like they're moving. Maybe they are. I had thought everything was just uniform brown, but I'd been wrong. The desert is shades of gold when the sun hits it, shades of white when the sun burns everything else away, shades of red, sometimes; clay red soaring into the bluest of skies and geological strata painting lines into the mountains like the earth is an enormous canvas.

I came to the desert for a lot of reasons. Practical ones. They gave me excuses to validate going after dreams, and I'd dreamed of these areas for so long. I thought about what the air would feel like and how the wind would move. How

the quietness of it all would wrap around me, how I could relax into the stillness, how I could sink down into my body when nobody else was around and have my facial expressions be whatever I wanted them to be. "Smile more, look inviting. You have to seem friendly. Not like that, friendlier." Their assessments move through my thoughts on a persistent undercurrent and I want to be rid of that phone voice monologue. I want to be in an area where things are real: outside of the customer service face mask that gets dropped as quickly as it takes to walk back into the breakroom, past the carefully honed happiness that emerges as soon as the client walks in the door, and far beyond that required smile and vocal uptick. You're here! We've been waiting and are so excited to serve you. Amusing then, that I came here. Maybe I needed Vegas to serve as a bridge into the openness of the desert; a transition to allow me the contrast I needed to remember how silly it is to pretend to be things I'm not.

It was an odd, tingling feeling in initially leaving the town boundaries. The sign tells me to 'travel safely' and going into a place called Death Valley— I felt that well wishing. It became necessary to travel safely. No cell service for directions or maps other than hardcopies, no water other than what I brought. No aid if I did break down or break a bone. The visual harshness of it all left little option for impetuous decisions or silliness. I can understand why people are drawn to doing marathons and ultras here. It seems like it would try to strip a body bare— not out of malice, but just because that comes with its territory. An intense test of self-awareness and resiliency in an environment that leaves few other decisions available, outside of quitting the race.

And now I am here, standing in the bleakness of Death Valley. I found the silence I've been looking for. I feel it in the middle of this great swath of land with tiny mirages shimmering in the distance, surrounded by mountains so enormous they seem close. Bone-white grasshoppers springing off the hazy, cracked desert floor. Wind sweeping the tree branches clean. The quiet comes in the brief lulls of the wind and the space is so extensive that there is every bit of room for the widest of openness. The sun pounds down: a dull and relentless pressure. It would have been piercing, too, if I didn't have a long and fringed fabric covering my skin. The heat feels so close to the ground: the soil reflects it, bounces it back up and away. A sky sun above and the heat of an earth sun below. The harsh, blunt air feels like a kind of truth that emerges out of hours-long conversation in the dead of night; no masks here. There's no point to them really, since they'd just burn away. I feel open. There is enough room here for me to expand, to feel emotion, to release emotion, to be something new, and something that is true to myself. I am grateful for it.

Tear Down FINALIST

By Esther Eigher

My grandmother's house was built one year after the neighbor's, but you would never know looking at it. It is by definition a tear-down. Unlike her neighbors, grandma lost the will to take care of it after my grandpa died. The exterior which had once been a crisp white has peeled and browned through the decades of neglect. My sister used to say, "This house is cursed. It has bad juju." The interior was just as run down as the outside, but it was just harder to see. It had always been dark inside. Overgrown garden bushes covered the windows and blocked what little light might have found its way in. The only room that had enough light to read by was the living room, and that's where my father's cracked leather chair sits empty.

My sister and I sat on the couch staring out onto the immaculate golf course. Its pristine cut grass hills always provided a stark contrast to the overgrown weed covered lawn of grandma's house. "I'm never coming back to this fucking house" she whispered to me. Tears streaming down our faces, we both knew that it was a lie. A lie that verbalized the aching emptiness we both felt. I had lost all of my words. I wanted to tell her that I hated this house just as much as she did, but my words were swallowed before they could pass my lips. All I could muster was a half-hearted nod, so we sat in silence. A silence made even more deafening by the fact that he was missing, and that we would never hear his voice again.

I was so tired, but I couldn't sleep. I laid my head on the couch cushion, the gold threading on the damask was worn and frayed. My father used to love this couch. You could usually find him lounging on it after a long day. When I was little, I used to crawl up onto his belly while he napped. Nestling into his warm chest to hear his heartbeat. I tried to deeply inhale the fabric but all I could smell was the old house. It hadn't held his scent or his warmth, and my sniffs became guttural sobs. I so wanted to feel closer to him, but like the house he was fading away. All of our memories were tainted by the peeling wallpaper and moldy stench of a forgotten home. I used to laugh at my sister but maybe she was right, maybe this house is actually cursed.

Any reasonable person would look at this house and know that it isn't worth saving. Even I will begrudgingly admit it. Like my father, the house has past the point of fixing, the mice and mold have undermined it like the cancer that ravaged him. I used to love this house, even the parts that were falling apart, because it was the one place that I could see my father. But with him gone that love has faded and twisted into anger. I hate this cursed house. I hate walking

through its dark rooms and seeing its empty furniture. But most of all I hate how it reminds me of the pain and suffering that we all went through on that day summer day.

Now that he's gone there's no reason not to sell the house. Though the neighbors are "sad for our loss", you can tell they are counting the days till a crew can come in and demolish it. Who can blame them? It would certainly bring up their property values to get rid of this crumbling mess. Yet, I feel a different pain at the thought of it being reduced to a pile of bricks and dust. Even though I hate this place, I respect it as the last place my father took his final breaths to whisper his love for us, his family. It is a place that holds many memories, and for that reason alone I will be sad the day it is sold and torn to the ground. As I make the long drive back to my own house, I can't help but hope that the old hovel will stand for a little longer. Maybe just enough time for me to patch the cracks and put myself back together.

What Are the Chances?

FINALIST

By Rene Hounshell

It was February of 2006, and I was sitting in my living room talking with my husband and mother. I was thinking about my father, whom I had never met. I wondered if he knew about me or thought about me. How would he feel about my new marriage, or knowing that he has grandchildren? I had asked my mother a few questions about him over the years, but I never showed interest in knowing about him. "What is his name?" I asked my mother. When she told me, I quickly jumped up, sat at the small desk, and went to Whitepages.com. I typed in my father's name and the last known city of residence and pressed enter. "Today was the day! I was going to find my dad," I thought.

There were over 200 names and addresses of my potential father. I had no idea where to begin, so I wrote down the first fifty names and phone numbers. The excitement of my new decision was still lingering, but now my stomach felt heavy, and I was getting nervous. I dialed the first number and listened to the ringing from the other side. After a short minute, an answering machine started speaking to me. I did not think about what I was going to say if someone or something answered. Once I heard the beep, I quickly blurted, "Hi, I'm looking for my father. Please call me back if you knew my mother" and stated her name and the return number to call. After I hung up, I knew I was not ready for this process, but I kept moving forward. With shaking hands, I dialed the second number on the list. I received a loud screeching sound, and the operator stating that the wireless caller was no longer available. I felt a bit of relief. Maybe I was not as prepared to meet him as I thought I was.

By the third call attempt, my husband could tell I was second-guessing this idea. "Would you be willing to call some of the numbers for me?" I asked. He must have felt sympathy for me as he responded "Yes" while grabbing the phone from my hands. He dialed the third number on the list, and a woman answered. My husband explained that he was calling for his wife, and we were looking for her father, and gave the woman my mother's name. The lady responded, "Please wait one moment." That one minute felt like a lifetime to me, and I kept thinking, "Could this be my father, and does this lady think we are crazy?" My husband started talking with a man next. I will never forget the drop in my stomach when I heard my husband say, "Yes, I think that she would like to speak with you too." I could not believe it. "This is it," I remember thinking, "We found my dad."

I said, "Hello," with a trembling voice. Were the walls closing in on me, or was it just my tears making it hard to breathe? He was very emotional and could

not stop crying himself, so he asked if he could call me back the next day. He needed a little time to “get himself together.” I talked with his wife for a moment, and she said, “I’ve known about you since our first date, and we’ve waited for you to show up on our doorstep for 20 years.” To know that he was just as emotionally unprepared for this encounter was shocking to me, but it made me feel so loved and wanted.

We talked the next day for over an hour when he called. We asked everything you could ever imagine. He wanted to know how I grew up, what kind of grades I had, where I lived, and what type of person I was. I wanted to ask if I had siblings, what his wife was like, and if he ever thought about me. There were a lot of tears and emotions on both sides. I never knew something was missing from my life until that day. Now, we talk all the time and have planned to meet in-person by next summer. I cannot wait to hug my dad and talk face to face. We have waited a long time to finish the connection that we found 14 years ago.