
The Write Stuff



Virginia High School League Creative Writing Competition

*2016-17 BOOKLET
OF WINNERS*

2016-17 VHSL CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST RESULTS

Folder

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Appomattox Regional Gov. Sch. | 5. Woodbridge Senior HS |
| 2. Albemarle HS | 6. Charlottesville HS |
| 3. Thomas Jefferson HS for S & T | 7. Harrisonburg |
| 4. Tazewell HS | 8. George Washington HS |

Essay

- First: "A Letter on God, Tortured Youth, Anxiety and the Kitchen Sink", Courtney Cline, Tazewell HS
- Second: "How to Write a Poem", Bianca Rodriguez, Appomattox Regional Gov. Sch.
- Third: "Relativity", Christian Ellis, Woodbridge Senior HS
- Honorable Mention: "The Way My Father Loves Me", Sahara Sidi, Appomattox Regional Gov. Sch.

Short Story

- First: "Flight of the Hummingbird", Ashley Clark, Charlottesville HS
- Second: "Artie", Janet Malzahn, Thomas Jefferson HS for S & T
- Third: "G3nesis 17:10", Martin Beck, Harrisonburg HS
- Honorable Mention: "Gouter avec la mort", Shane Kushevski, Chantilly HS

Poetry

- First: "presentism has no room for souls", Baylina Pu, Albemarle HS
- Second: "When Women Knock", Rhiannon Edwards, Appomattox Regional Gov. Sch.
- Third: "Ghazal for the Navajo Man", Leah Gaush, Woodbridge Senior HS
- Honorable Mention: "Love Song of Alice Delaney", Marcus Younger, George Washington HS

2016-17 VHSL CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST RESULTS

Total Entries – 30

S = Superior, E = Excellent, G = Good

| <u>School</u> | <u>Sponsor</u> | <u>Essay Ratings</u> | <u>Story Ratings</u> | <u>Poem Ratings</u> |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Albemarle HS | Charlotte Wood | E + G | E + S | S & G |
| Appomattox Regional Gov. Sch. | Cindy Cunningham | S & S | S + E | S & S |
| John S. Battle HS | Jennifer Daniel | G + S | G + G | G + G |
| Battlefield HS | Jared Bridges | G + G | E + S | G + E |
| Blacksburg HS | Matthew Spring | G + S | G + E | E + S |
| Chantilly HS | Nicole Lehman | G + G | S & E | G + G |
| Charlottesville HS | Brian Kayser | G + G | S & G | G + E |
| Clover Hill HS | Barbara Bingham | G + G | E + G | G + G |
| Dinwiddie HS | A. Scott Brockwell | G + G | S + E | G + S |
| Falls Church HS | Rachel Olarinde | E + S | S + E | E + G |
| Graham HS | Debra Tabor Brewster | G + S | G + G | E + S |
| Grassfield HS | Taushia Haist | S + E | E + S | G + E |
| John Handley HS | Star Friend | S + E | G + G | S + G |
| Harrisonburg HS | Richard Morrell | G + G | E & S | E + S |
| James River HS-Buchanan | Melissa Eckstein | S + E | E + E | G + S |
| Thomas Jefferson HS for S & T | Jennifer Seavey | S + E | S & E | S + G |
| Loudoun County HS | Toni Rader | G + G | G + G | E + E |
| Loudoun Valley HS | Julie Hildbold | E + E | S + E | G + E |
| Madison County HS | Kane Kashouty | G + G | G + E | E + G |
| Manchester HS | Rebecca Lynch | G + G | E + S | S + E |
| Oakton HS | Susan McLain Sullivan | E + E | G + G | E + G |
| Patriot HS | Amy Morrill | S + E | G + E | G + G |
| James W. Robinson Sec. Sch. | Crosby Mouzavires | G + G | E + G | E + E |
| South County HS | Troy Ketch | E + G | G + G | S + E |
| Tazewell HS | Robert McGraw | S & E | G + G | S + G |
| Virginia HS | Brad Hutchinson | S + G | E + G | S + E |
| George Washington HS | Sharon Leigg | E + G | G + E | S & S |
| James Wood HS | Rhonda Lancaster | G + E | G + E | G + E |
| Woodbridge Senior HS | Catherine Hailey | S & G | G + G | S & S |
| York HS | Cary Radcliff | G + G | G + G | G + G |

A Letter on God, Tortured Youth, Anxiety, and the Kitchen Sink

I blew into this world in a spit of blood and fire, and on the wings of a terrible cold.

That's a good first line, isn't it? Nice and dramatic. Edgy and ominous.

) STRONG
SENSE OF
VOICE

Really, I was born in a hospital, around 6:15 in the evening, naked and covered in gross stuff, just like most of the rest of you. It was January, so I suppose I got the cold part right, but my mother has informed me that the weather had actually been quite mild for January, and that the only thing remarkable about my birth was that I was extremely fat¹ and that I was supposed to be a boy, so they had to come up with a girl name on the fly². I have informed my mother that this is easily the least remarkable thing I have ever heard, about anyone, and that she has singlehandedly ruined my nice, ominous first line. But I wanted to throw this in here because this story might get kinda rocky, and I wanted you to know that, even through all this, you can always remember that my birth was extremely unremarkable and that I was named after a drive-thru worker at Dairy Queen, and have a good laugh.

Dates and times get very mixed up with me, so I'm sorry if things get a little jumbled.

But that's how it all happened, everything in me, everything I felt came out in symbols and words. Things that didn't translate.

When I was young, my mother told me I was burdened with too sharp a perception. I've

¹ Almost 11 pounds

² Courtney was the name of the girl who handed them their celebratory ice cream sundaes when they stopped at Dairy Queen on the way home from the hospital

✓ Funny detail

always been especially smart about things that weren't good for me. That's what my problem was, she said, my brain understood things that my heart couldn't handle. I feared the things that afflicted the kids I saw on Degrassi, when my sister watched it in the afternoons, and on Lifetime movie specials. Pills and pregnancy and razor blades. Abuse, rape.

Please know that not a single one of these things has ever happened to me. That's what confused me. I feared things like my sister hurting herself, my parents getting divorced, even without the slightest hint of proof it was happening. It was pointless. Without reason. An act of senseless violence against myself.

I hated church. My grandmother is a fierce Christian, long skirts and long hair, tight lips and scolding words and buttoned collars³. Nearly every Sunday she'd force me into a god-awful dress and itchy socks with tulle ruffles at the top, and uncomfortable shiny black shoes that I was wholly convinced were made for boys⁴, and take me to her church. It was a very rich church, one of those full of clean-cut old ladies with disapproving faces and red velvet-looking carpet and oiled wooden banisters and those preachers that yell when they really get going.

When I asked my grandmother why he was screaming, alarmed as any child would be, she gave a small laugh—a teeth-flashing one that was more to benefit the people around

³ She and my mother once got into a screaming match because I was a huge fan of Harry Potter and the Chronicles of Narnia, and while both of these are very child-friendly, and the Chronicles of Narnia is, in itself, a Christian series, she upheld that witchcraft was for the devil and that if I were worshipping anything, it should be the Real Jesus and not some fictional lion character

⁴ I am now wholly convinced that they never looked good on anyone

her. 'Poor thing, isn't she funny?' That's what the smile said. It was not there to reassure me.

People were crying and nodding fervently, jumping up and shouting when they really felt moved. You know how you feel at a concert, when everyone's moving to the same tune, and you all feel connected by ebb and flow of the music, that welling in your chest?

That's what I'm guessing it felt like to get saved. I don't think I ever got there. Leastways not with Jesus. And maybe I still haven't.

For a while—I think because I was so insecure in my belief in God—I tried very hard to be the perfect Christian, like it was a job I just had to do. I tried to pray every night⁵. I went to church with my friends even though sometimes I got so nervous in church it would drive me to panic attacks, because what if they could smell it on me? That I didn't really believe? That I was made of skepticism that Did Not Belong Here. What if the preacher used his yelling for more than praising His name? What if the tight-lipped old ladies gave me that unkind smile? But I had vowed that if I couldn't truly believe, I was going to play the part better than anyone. I even set out to start witnessing to people, because the Sunday School lady told me I had to, but I tried to witness to a girl in the 8th grade, with light eyes and a wide smile, and I think I may have loved her instead, in an 8th grade kind of way. And if that wasn't a cruel twist of irony then I don't know what was. Especially since she moved away a few months after that, and I never saw her again.

STRONG
Reflection

⁵ In the same way that, as a child, you vow to start *really* brushing your teeth every time your mother asks you too, or *really* doing your homework instead of watching the Power Rangers TV show that seemed to come on *every time* you gathered your books and papers together

Right at the beginning of middle school was when the panic attacks got bad. I was quiet. I'd never had any really close friends, or close siblings, and I was getting just a bit too old to spill all of my secrets to my grandmother⁶. My only explanation for whatever ailed me was that, when you spend so much time folded inside yourself, your demons sort of make themselves.

My mother used to sit with me for hours trying to guess what was wrong with me because my breath was catching so hard in my throat it hurt me. Sometimes she would get so tired of being patient with me she'd almost start crying herself. Sometimes she'd get so afraid for me that it came out in anger, and she'd demand to know what was wrong, or she'd drag me to the doctor when I was too scared to go to school and demand for him to explain. He didn't know. I didn't either. And I don't blame her for being scared, or angry. I never have. She knew as well as I did that whatever was happening to me was not of my own design. I just remember being terrified that not even my mother seemed to be able to help me, and feeling so guilty for upsetting her that for a long time I convinced myself I didn't need help at all.

I remember one night in sixth grade. My siblings and I had been sent to bed. In the daytime I could rely on music and daydreaming to take away my fear. At night, though, there was nothing to hold it off. And I remember laying in bed waiting for the sinking feeling in my stomach that always told me what was coming. And I remember trying to

⁶ Whom I still consider my best childhood friend, the only one that ever mattered

keep my breathing steady and my crying quiet because I did not want to wake my big sister, or my little sister, or bother my mother who was already dealing with too much.

This particular attack, thought, was a bad one. I remember how bad it was because I remember closing my eyes and asking God to help me. And I'm not a person who bends for things they don't believe in, even as a child, but I was so close to breaking it seemed the only thing to do.

Give me comfort. Give me something. I want to believe, I really do. I'll keep trying.

And sure enough, Old-Testament-style I felt a sudden calm wash over me. Quieting my rambling mind. One would think that would have been it. The culmination of my inspiring path to Christianity. *The Hour I First Believed*. And it was not. But it was one of the rare nights I slept easy, and though I still don't consider myself someone who bends, I somehow found a way to be grateful to the God I couldn't believe in. ✓

I wear my hair back now. I have better friends than I could ever ask for. I own four pairs of high-heeled black boots and frequently wear them to school so that my very walk is a challenge to the girls and boys I was once so afraid of. Who, though they were never as mean to me as they were to the other kids, used to make me so ashamed of myself just with the way they looked. Or I go without makeup at all and I'm not afraid of what will be said about me, who will find me attractive and who will not. I'm not afraid anymore to ✓ great details

roll my eyes, or to spare a disparaging look—which some might say is not quite a good thing but, God, I've lived without a voice and a sense of self for so long I was half afraid it would tear me apart.

The point is, I'm better. I'm telling you this from the flipside, as it were. Or maybe not quite there but somewhere close.

Once, sitting in the third row seat of our car, on a very long ride⁷, I glimpsed a billboard, one of the VBS posters that dot the highway a dime a dozen in the summer time. *Three Easy Steps to Salvation*, it said, but we passed it before I could see what they were. I craned my neck to see. I'd have broken it if it meant getting answers. I was still made of questions. ✓ I love the voice in this piece so MUCH!!!

For a while I actually blamed that for my failure as a Christian. I actually thought it was three easy steps. Like fixing a TV dinner or something. ✓ha I have a tendency to over-rationalize things like that. I figure now if it were that easy, it wouldn't be so special. I wished it was though. My mind was so filled with worry by that point that I'd have taken the TV dinner version of Salvation. Funnily enough though, I never came to resent God. That's always what happens in the movies, you know. It never happened to me. If we're being honest, I don't think I was ever brave enough to hate Him. At some point I just came to the conclusion that God and I disagree on a lot of things, and that's how we stayed. Polite acquaintances.

⁷ The setting of some of my best and most coveted Thinking Time

As I moved further into high school, I gained more and more knowledge. More opinions, more viewpoints to consider. And while I loved it, I'm sure you can understand: As someone who already tries to look at things from about 150 different sides, it only made things more difficult. It wasn't bad though. I knew I was growing, and I was pleased, even if it meant I was only made of more questions than before.

My anxiety became something of a sleeping bear. It was livable, so long as you didn't poke it, prod it, make too much noise, or breathe too loudly in its direction. But it was sleeping and I had friends and I was in *high school*. I was certain about a grand total of *negative-zero* things in my life, but I knew as a high-schooler I was a good 30% cooler and smarter than everyone else on the planet. ✓ Even if my hair was fuzzy and I only wore Converse~~s~~ and t-shirts for rather crude and profane music that I didn't enjoy listening to *nearly* as much as I enjoyed sporting the edgy band logos and snubbing my nose at pop music like I was special. But this was *The Start*. *The Best Years of My Life*. I was gonna get a car and go out at all hours of the night. In some grand epiphanic gesture, I would know what I was going to do with my life.

Exactly none of these things happened. Exactly none of these things *have* ✓ happened, even as I'm writing this, three months from my graduation day. My friends went out and drank. My friends got jobs, got cars, got more friends. I was wholly committed to myself. I understand that either sounds beautiful or wildly selfish. Sometimes it was both. Sometimes neither. And I didn't do it because of a need for self-discovery. I did it

) J.K. Rowling
Reflection

because, mostly, I felt as though I didn't have a choice.

Just as in my childhood, I was reserved, helplessly so. Chained inside myself, carefully folded within like a fitted sheet. Immaculate. I was programmed for a few generic words, to be thrown out when someone caught me off guard, but not many. I was not good at letting words get away from me. My soul was bared to the rest of the world in pictures, t-shirts and buttons with sayings. My room was stacked to the rafters with things I liked, things I loved, things I believed were pretty, were part of myself. I bared my soul in doses, so it was revealed to people like chapters in a book, layers in sediment, so I never had to put it in spoken words. No one has never gotten to the end of the book, down to the bedrock. Although I suppose I haven't either. Even my best and closest friends perceive that I haven't revealed everything. And I haven't. And I won't.

The point is, I hadn't changed much since childhood. Except, maybe, for a gain in confidence. And yet my anxiety subsided. And without panic attacks forcing me to call on God for comfort, I didn't need him around much. But—I convinced myself it was for scholarly reasons—God still interested me. After all, politics interested me, and I live in Southwest Virginia⁸, so a great deal of my time was spent trying to reconcile three things which cannot be farther from opposites:

1. The political views I was developing (without much information to back them

⁸ For those of you who do not live here, and have never lived here, my more cynical self would first like to congratulate you, and encourage you to keep up the good work. The rest of me would like to inform you that the majority of Southwest-Virginians are very fiercely, very publically religious, and fewer (although still quite a lot) are less than politically savvy

up⁹)

1. True Christian values, and
2. The things I found many people spouting angrily under the guise of moral Christian high ground whenever the touchiest of political subjects came up.

I found that Christianity and politics seemed inseparable, especially where I live, and that the way I looked at things made it difficult for me to take any kind of firm stance, on anything. People, to me, became such complicated creatures, and the world such a complicated place that the version of Christianity that came from the mouth of my grandmother and other people in my life seemed far too narrow-minded to encompass a universe of people and situations as complex and infinitely expanding as itself. And as someone who was still (albeit secretly, even from myself) trying very hard to uphold Christian values, but who morally could not bring herself to condemn things that so many of the Christians in her life did, I was struggling. Because if you cannot separate God and politics, you definitely can't separate God and *morality*. And how was I supposed to tell *God* I didn't agree with some of his moral judgments? More importantly, how could I believe in a God I didn't agree with?

None of the things that used to scare me as a child did anymore. All that stuff I mentioned about abuse and self-harm and pills. Which is good because, for all the suffering I didn't endure, it seems it just piled on top of the people around me. In eighth

⁹ Because it's worth noting that, as a tenth grader, I too was less than politically savvy, and was mainly looking for reasons to argue with my father, and things to scowl about at my staunchly conservative family functions.

grade I found out my best friend was hurting herself. In one bleary-eyed, three AM sleepover confession circle, I found out I was the *only one* of my friends who'd never hurt themselves. None of us were crying yet, but we all started when I admitted that I'd flirted with the idea before. It shocked them, I suppose. I'm supposed to be the one friend who doesn't have issues. I'm the friend who *listens* to the problems, the secrets. I'm not supposed to have any of my own. After all, my father didn't get drunk, my mother didn't yell. I didn't spend nights listening to my parents fight. As far as external influences went, I had absolutely no reason to consider harming myself. It gave me yet another reason why whatever I was struggling with was completely pointless, completely without actual cause.

Nevertheless, helping other people with their problems became my main distraction. And it brought me back to God, in a strange kind of way, because though I didn't consider myself a huge believer in God, my friends did. So, I prayed for them. I can't tell you how many times I've whispered apologies, curled up in bed at night. *I'm sorry. I know I'm no good at believing in you but they do. So help them. They believe in you with everything they have, even when it's not much. And they're hurting. And I'm not sure I can help them anymore so you have to. If you're up there at all, you have to.*

In fact, never was I led to be angry at God for my own ailments. But I have screamed at him, cursed him, damned him for allowing the people around me suffer while I went on with no more than what I thought were a few simple anxiety issues and a serious aversion to social interaction. I couldn't understand how He could just sit up there, how my friends

could keep believing in someone who clearly loved and cared for them so little. I resolved, defiantly, that if God wasn't going to help them then I was.

I became especially adept at Listening. And sometimes I gave advice but I found that mostly a lot of people just need to be heard, and not told that they're crazy or weird or wrong for feeling what they feel. So I became the Listener. It became my biggest responsibility, and my biggest cross to bear, as it were. But as far as I could tell I was good at it and, in the end I think it's what might have saved me.

I came into high school a mess. I had no clue what I was doing, or what I'd been doing, or what I was going to do from there. I came into high school trying to think as little as possible about myself or what kind of problems I was dealing with, or how I was feeling. And sometimes I still struggle with that. But I keep plants now, and I'm learning write *about* myself and my life, rather than writing to escape it. And I've accepted the fact that I don't like talking to people any more than I have to. And I'm wholly committed myself not because I'm not good with other people, but because I've discovered I quite like Me and I've been ignoring her for a long time already. And I've learned that soul mates don't have to be romantic partners. Perhaps they're the plucky, awkward girls you met in middle school, who've supported you and been there for you from the very start. Even if they didn't totally know what was going on.

In a more recent memory, my best friend dragged me to her church. I hadn't been in years, but it was the only way her parents would have let her stay at my house the night before, and I'm no snitch, so I went. And there was no great epiphany. No beams of light,

or burning bushes, or water into wine. But I went to church and I wasn't afraid. That's how things happen sometimes. Sometimes things are slow, and silent, and they happen without you even knowing it. Sometimes you wake up and a weight you've grown so used to that you don't even notice it anymore has come off your shoulders. Sometimes you look up in the middle of a sleepover and realize the only people you need have been sitting in front of you for nearly eight years now.

When Leonard Cohen wrote one of the greatest songs in history, he said, "The world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled. But there are moments when we can reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that's what I mean by Hallelujah." I was so caught up in how finding something to believe in was *supposed* to feel, I didn't realize that I'd found it. I found God a few times, piece by piece. I found Him in the strength I had to find within myself to keep going, and to be there for the people who needed me. I found Him in music and poetry. I discovered Him as I've discovered myself, layer by layer, page by page.

Those are two things I think you've got to do all on your own, finding yourself and finding something to believe in. But it helps to have people around you who help you reconcile and embrace the whole mess, because that's all life is. A mess of people doing great and terrible and unflinchingly Human things. A mess of people just getting by in the best way they know how. I think it's fundamentally important in life to realize that no one knows how to get through it any more than you do. We're all lost and found and spinning in circles, and all the people who came before us were too, and they seemed to do alright. I've been blessed with friends who've helped me see that. They're who I really owe it all to. They're the ones who saved me even more than God did, although I

suppose I've got Him to thank for putting them here. And I am grateful for that. No matter what, I always will be.

Finding the faith and keeping is difficult, and I don't know if I'm totally there yet, or if I ever will be. But I think I've found myself, and I still know a grand total of *negative-zero* things for sure, but I figure, at least I'm in good company. That'd be my ultimate advice to you. Find some great friends, and try to keep the faith.

All the best,

Courtney

Ashley Clark - Flight of The Hummingbird

Flight of The Hummingbird

Jenna Langston was seven months shy of eighteen when she started going to the psychiatrist's office—perched on the hushed side street just off of downtown—that smelled of Clorox bleach. That being said, it was most certainly not clean. The walls themselves were peeling off, paint chipping and landing on the bulbous beige couches, each sporting different stains that could have been blood or vomit or snot or piss; it was hard to tell which in a place like this. All the girl could really decipher was her discomfort.

She knew she had problems. That was obvious. She bit her nails until her fingers bled and would pick at her skin, she would have breakdowns where her whole body would freeze and she'd be stuck staring into nowhere. She would start crying uncontrollably for reasons she couldn't explain. But if she really truly thought as hard as she could about it, the only possible reason she felt she had to have been there was because of the boy. She kept having these moments where her mind would betray her, flickering scene after scene where the boy would kiss her and hold her down and hurt her, and she wouldn't sleep and would start to twitch.

The twitching scared her mother and sometimes it scared her too. It scared her when she would start gagging and panicking. Her lungs felt like they would collapse in on themselves, all the while her heart would skip beats and flutter, thumping on the off-beat in her chest. She liked to imagine her heart as a hummingbird with a broken wing, still trying to fly as fast as it could, but breaking down over and over again.

↳ great world building. Drew the reader right into the story

It made her cry sometimes to think of her heart as that hummingbird, trying so hard to keep beating for her, championing self-reliance, keeping itself warm even when the world around it was so cold. Even when she cried and cursed her own skin.

There was something terrifying about becoming aware of your own heart pumping blood through your body, of your own lungs sucking in oxygen, of your own eyes blinking away dust and dirt. In the past months, the girl had become painfully aware of her own body.

She had always been observant, but mostly just of other people. She didn't like looking inward. It never showed her what she wanted to see.

This was the first time she had been to this psychiatrist's office. Her mother had dragged her inside, holding tightly onto her hand; sucking in her tears and her pride. She sat just outside the doctor's door as her mother spoke to the man, trying to give some sort of background to this strange and unfamiliar situation.

"She's broken," her mother had said, voice bobbing up and down like a buoy on the water. "Please—she was never like this before. Something's gone wrong."

Jenna stopped listening. She didn't particularly enjoy her mother describing her as broken; like the busted dishwasher everyone was telling them to replace. She didn't want to sit and listen to her mother beg a doctor to fix her daughter. Instead, she focused on the stains on the walls. Some mimicked the ones she would find scattered about her body after the boy would leave; callused fingertips pressing into softer skin, dollops of violet in the morning in hidden places. A few were shaped like clouds, one in particular looked like the crooked nose of a witch. She cringed when she remembered the way his nose bent. She became used to staring up it when he would lean down and kiss her, grabbing her by the arms and forcing her to stand still, as if her movement would somehow shatter the moment he'd crafted so carefully.

great job conveying the girl's emotion and showing the relationship between mother and the girl.

She could never close her eyes when they kissed. Instead they would cross as she focused on the evident lurch in his nasal structure. She would count the freckles near the corners of his eyes. Once he'd pull away she would close her eyes as if they had never been open in the first place. She couldn't understand why she spared his feelings so often when he had no regard for hers. Her mother said it was because she was so empathetic—that it was a good thing.

It didn't feel like a good thing.

When her mother had left the closed-door office, she had smiled softly, pressing a kiss to her forehead and smoothing down her hair.

“Everything is going to get better, sweetheart,” she promised, scrubbing the tears away from her own cheeks. “This doctor is very nice and he's going to take care of you. We're going to fix this, okay?”

She wasn't quite sure when her mother started talking to her like she was a child. She spoke slowly and softly, like if her words were any louder they would crack into her mind and break things up even more than they already were.

*

The couch was continuously squeaking beneath her thighs as the doctor asked her how she was feeling that day and whether or not her new anxiety medication was helping. The uncomfortable silences were lasted a bit longer; accentuated by the squealing of the faux-leather couch. It was July--three months had passed since her first appointment--and the air was thick and hot. Her shorts showed too much of her thigh for her liking, but her mother insisted she would overheat in pants. She didn't think that was quite true. She was cold more often than not.

The air conditioner was cranked to its highest level in the office that day, blasting through the vents and making Jenna shiver every other minute as she tried to move as little as possible on the couch.

“You’re shaking,” the doctor said, observing her closely.

“I always shake. And it’s cold.”

“It’s not cold enough to be shaking.”

And Jenna shrugged, staring down at her fingernails turning purple from the freezing air and her poor circulation, before she dug them into her thighs, urging her body to stop shaking. It made her too conspicuous.

The couch in the doctor’s personal office had to have been the most uncomfortable one in the building. What it lacked in stains it made up for in squeakiness. Every movement Jenna made seemed to be magnified by the springs beneath the stiff cushions; squealing like a newborn baby and she would cringe each time, painfully aware of her own body. She wondered if that was some tactic, if this doctor wanted to see how she would react to her own body’s movement, if it bothered her.

It wasn’t that she disliked making noise or that she disliked her body’s sense of mobility, it was just much simpler when she took up as little space as possible. Jenna didn’t mind hunching over, ruining her posture, so long as it meant she was a little less broad. So long as there was a little less body to notice. It wasn’t that she wanted to be dainty, but she just wanted to be small enough to disappear into thin air without a second glance.

→ great way to show the emotion of the girl.

The first time she recognized just how badly she wanted to be small was when she was stuck in the subway in New York City while they were sending the boy away. She was visiting family, trying to distract herself from the pain she still felt, and found herself caught with so

many people living a million different lives. The girl in front of her had a backpack with a racket sticking straight out of it. Her t-shirt read Columbia Tennis and Jenna had been immediately intimidated. The movement of the train forced the two girls against each other and by the time Jenna began to hyperventilate; unprepared for all of the physical contact the unknown city brought, another body wedged itself between them. Her lungs were crashing in and out, heaving and wheezing; her shoulder blade was pressed uncomfortably against the slippery metal pole; and her feet seemed rooted to the floor, crowded with patent leather shoes and long legs. She found herself collapsing inward, trying not to breathe in the same air someone else was breathing out. Jenna peered through the cracks in the bodies, wishing she could slide through them and search for daylight, but nothing seemed to help. By the time the doors spread open, she shoved her way through, still breathing heavy, and twenty blocks from where she needed to be.

The doctor said he had some ideas as to why Jenna wanted to be so terribly small, but he wouldn't tell her. He would hum, tap his pen to his chin and say, "Not yet, dear. Not yet." Then he would push his half-moon glasses back up the bridge of his crooked nose and smile like he knew her so well. Like he knew her better than she knew herself.

*

Jenna had been going to the psychiatrist for four months now, and he'd been practically begging her to tell him the truth; the whole story, every painful bit of it, but she was still reluctant. It was not a happy story and whenever she told it she got the same lump in her throat and her stomach would lurch inside of her and her hummingbird heart would *thump-thump-thump* against her ribcage. It was not a good feeling, but the doctor seemed to think this was the only way for her to feel better. So he asked her questions to get her started.

"He would hurt you, wouldn't he, Jenna?"

“Yes.”

“And how often would he do that?”

“Every time we were together.”

The doctor nodded his head, jotting down information on his notepad. He paused and stared at her for a moment too long, waiting for her to elaborate but she didn't and the silence dragged on.

“Why did you stay with him for so long if you knew that he was hurting you?”

Jenna glared at the doctor, feeling true anger towards him for the first time in the four months they'd seen each other. The office went silent for a moment, even though Jenna could practically hear her aggression buzzing in her ears.

“It's harder than that.”

The doctor nodded and leaned forward in his seat, resting his chin on his palm, still hoping she might keep speaking.

“Would you be willing to tell me how he hurt you?”

Jenna's eyes welled up with traitor tears. She was *angry*, she wasn't sad. She didn't want to cry now. She wanted to scream and shout and tear the stained carpet from the floor and push the squeaky couch through the window. She wanted to forget every bruise, every tear, every pulled heartstring. She wanted the doctor to hear her the thundering of her heart, she wanted him to feel the heaving of her lungs. She wanted him to know just how much it still hurt. She wanted him to know how badly she wanted to forget it all, but her mind had clamped around every memory, locking it away and delegating different moments to different parts of her body. So when she tilted her head just this way she would remember the way he would grab her shoulders. Or if her hands grazed her knee just so, she would feel his body pinning hers to the floor.

“No.”

“Okay.” The doctor nodded and pushed his glasses up, rubbing his eyes slightly. “Would you ever retaliate? Would you ever get mad at him? Were you ever mad when he hurt you, Jenna?”

“I’m not an idiot. And I’m not crazy either. I was mad. How could I be okay with what he would do to me? I know it was wrong. I’m not . . . I’m not a masochist; I was never okay with it, all right? I was furious, but what could I do? Everyone loved him. Everyone. My mom even loved him, she was so happy for me and everyone kept telling me how lucky I was. So imagine how I felt, sitting in my bed at night, staring at the ceiling trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with me; why he would hurt me. Why I didn’t enjoy it when he touched me. Of course I was mad, I just . . . It was hard. I couldn’t understand why he’d want to. Why—why he would never listen to me. I kept trying to see it through his eyes, how I must have looked to him, what I wasn’t saying properly; but I could never make sense of it.”

The doctor was shocked, his jaw slightly slack as he coughed, viewing her sudden outpour of emotion as some sort of breakthrough. This had to have been the most Jenna had ever spoken in one of their sessions.

“You like to understand people don’t you? You like to stand in other people’s shoes. That’s why it was so hard for you to end things with him, wasn’t it? You wanted to see what he saw first. Do you like seeing things through your own eyes, Jenna? Do you like being yourself?”

“It’s not depersonalization, if that’s where you’re going with this. I don’t just float away. Do you know how badly I wish I could? I would love to leave all of this here in my body and have my mind just float somewhere else, but I’m not that lucky,” she snapped, the suppressed anger still raging and bubbling; catching onto everything in its path. “My mom always says I’m

just empathetic; that I just like knowing people, but it hurts sometimes making up stories for everyone else in the world. It hurts feeling for everyone else. Sometimes I wish I didn't have to feel anything at all."

*

It was going on the fifth month of Jenna's visits to the Clorox office when the doctor suggested she try writing about the boy. She had explained to him that she couldn't write about him or what he did to her; that nothing amounted from it, that it only ended up hurting more.

"I know you can't write about *him*, but have you tried writing about yourself?"

"I-I . . . no--I've only ever needed his explanation"

"I think you should try writing about yourself, Jenna," the doctor said thoughtfully, placing his pen to his chin yet again before jotting down a few more notes. "It would help. And if you are willing to have me read what you write, I would love to."

So they ended their session early and Jenna went out to the store to buy a new notebook. She opened up to the first page still sitting in the supply store parking lot and began to write about all of the pain she felt and her hummingbird heart. She wrote about the way she was afraid of looking in the mirror for a long while, because she wasn't sure if she would look different. She wrote about the way the scratchy carpet felt beneath her back when he would hold her down. She wrote about the violet bruises that would appear on her hips the next day. She wrote about the way the sky was always black; no stars, no moon, no nothing. More often than not she would write about wishing she was smaller than she was; wishing she didn't take up so much space, that there wasn't so much body for everyone to leer at.

She wrote every chance she got, weaving stories of all of her maladies: the anger that had been bursting inside of her, her wasted time, her desperation, her shaking hands, and her heaving

lungs and hummingbird heart. By the time her sixth month with the psychiatrist had rolled around she had become a bit more poetic, losing herself to metaphors. She was the dying star; cooling as she burned through every last element. She was the hummingbird, finally flying home for the night, taken in its torpor beneath moonbeams; ensuring life while still drawing close to death. She was Persephone dragged through hell, or more often than not, Demeter clutching at the cracked soil and ripping the flowers out from the Earth; making a winter from a broken heart. She was Orpheus, daring herself to take glances at the past she knew she must leave behind. She was Odysseus roaming around, wasting away and crying claims of anonymity.

It was much easier to write her mind into a story than to make sense of her place in the world around her.

*

Jenna Langston was half a year older when the psychiatrist finished reading through her book of poems and prose: all telling the same story.

“He made you feel very small, Jenna,” the doctor had said softly. “He shouldn’t be the biggest part of you.”

She thought for a moment, crossing her legs and letting the couch squeak beneath her.

“Do you feel any better, Jenna? Better than you did six months ago?” the doctor asked, taking off his half-moon glasses and setting them on the coffee table beside her book of woes.

“I feel warm.”

*

Jenna Langston was eighteen years old and on her way back home from her very last appointment with her psychiatrist when she pulled her car into a parking lot next to the playground and began to walk home. She trekked over to the bridge perched over the busy road

and looked down at the graffiti marks and nameless stains on the concrete. The wind blew her hair from her face and she began to twirl with the breeze; letting it take her wherever it wanted.

She wore a bright yellow dress that billowed out around her, turning her into something resembling a spotless globe, spinning atop the bridge, with arms stretched out wide, grasping at the air. When she stopped moving, she still left her arms out, her stance broad as she stared off the bridge, looking over the busy road. Some part of her knew if she were to fall she would be obliterated by the speeding cars, all full of a million different lives, and a billion different emotions and she found her mind jumping into each and every one of them; like a hitchhiker, slipping into their past and present and their exponential futures. She knew her hummingbird heart would finally go still, after its countless days of broken beating. But for the most part, she was focused on the fact that for the first time in her life she found herself weaving her own name into their stories. The time they saw the girl, wide and tall, taking up half of the bridge in her bustling yellow dress, and for a moment they couldn't tell if she was just a girl, or a massive star falling from the sky, spinning and twirling above them, bursting at the seams and burning with heat.

This was a great story with a powerful message. Did a great job showing the emotion and drawing the reader in. Kept me wanting to continue reading. All the judges agreed the ending left us wondering if she would jump or not. Congratulations, well done.

Poem

presentism has no room for souls by Baylina Pu

presentism has no room for souls

my best friend is the reincarnation of a byzantine emperor

he wears gold-rimmed glasses, and i wonder how the lenses haven't melted yet.

his skin is raw with *could have been* and the ghosts of bodies

blackening the sea

he wants to carve his own gravestone. always telling me he doesn't believe in a god, that he's only

time's martyr

but he's a liar, because one time at a party i found him in the bathroom vomiting
blood and tiny soldiers,

hands joined together.

i've never seen him sleep, even when our spines click together like gears,

eyes void of prayer atop onion dome cheeks.

i whispered *renovatio imperii* as a test

though i think he pretended not to hear me through the air conditioning,

groaning in its nostalgia like the bones of a monastery.

i imagine cutting him up

placing his heart atop his forehead, fingers against his lips

a mosaic,

the work of an

artful surgeon.

(i've touched a lot of bodies, but his always had the most goosebumps.)

he's not a fighter, really, but a few years ago a boy hit him in the face

and made tears and fireworks trickle from his chin to my lap.

the buses are about to leave. i want to go home.

but i told him i was staying, "and you'd better stick around too"

i'm not going to fight him, he said. quietly, teeth bared like a legacy--

"yes you are, you built this world for yourself and it will collapse on
your feet if you run, and then your knees will be too shaky to walk with me to

school tomorrow. we have a test in history next week, and you're going to fail if

you miss another damn class."

i made his knuckles unravel blue with destiny

till his heart grew cold and wet

and his angels turned evil

and he spat at anyone who disagreed with his cosmos.

(sometimes i feel guilty, but i'd rather have him love his weapons

than his pain.)

his fate glares at me, so orthodox i could have pulled him by his ankles through the pages

of a textbook

and his hands sting in the winter, too old for his wrists
 while the only crosses for me are in the stars.
 i know i'm supposed end up a saint, but for what it's worth, hell looks better from up here.
 people tell me i should stop being friends with him, and they're right
 he's terrible, and his writing is worse
 but i don't have very long before i abandon him and he regrets not kissing his old
 friend from a thousand and a half years ago.
 so i hope, when he turns 82, he'll have a dream about a battle
 and a church
 and an earthquake, and maybe even the plague.
 and then (i imagine this happening) he'll remember
 and laugh, a soft *thhh* on his lips
 achingly there,
 something beautiful to keep him burning
 before his empire
 withers away.

Vivid Imagery! Enjoyed the contrast between an
 earlier era and now. Lovely wordplay that lingered
 with this reader. Unique read