

You Can Lead A Horse To Water
But You Can't Make Him Think:
A Collection of Essays, Poems,
and Short Stories



by Robert H. Stonik

Foreword

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Dedicated to Ms. Rohde
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At 17 years old, I'm not even going to act like I've been through it all. I can admit that I don't have it all figured out. I know I'm not the best anything, though I aspire to someday put my name amongst the stars of entertainment. Still, 17 years is a long time to do anything by my terms, and I can't help but reminisce over the fact that I've spent that long on this planet.

I can remember back to my earliest memory, shortly after my third birthday. I can recall the ambience set by the soft yellow light in my mom's room as I grinned with pride. I reeked of maturity as I slowly raised my fingers: *one, two, three*. I had seriously felt so old until I realized that my age didn't even equate to a full set of fingers! Of course, now, I can laugh at how young I really was. I'll probably laugh at my first paragraph somewhere down the road, but hey, I'm on my way to two hands and two feet.

The point is that I had always planned to write my autobiography at age 10 and title it, *Full Set of Fingers*. Seeing as I'm going to have to borrow somebody else's appendages soon, I dropped the ball on that one. Not that it would've been a best-seller anyways. Oprah's Book Club salivates at the chance to endorse the true story of an over-privileged ten year-old with no conflicts or problems whatsoever. Really, nobody wants to read that.

So I learned how to write. I started to exaggerate, then bend my stories, and then just plain make stuff up until it was entertaining. In eighth grade, I started writing funny stories just to entertain my classmates, and I absolutely loved it. In

ninth grade, I started to get serious about it. I kept a notebook on my at all times, and whenever I had time during class, I wrote. Many of the original stories in that notebook are in this book today.

Yet, there was still one problem. The recurring problem with my writing was that I was never able to finish anything. I never wrote anything longer than four pages. Whenever I started writing a novel or even a short novella, I would come up with a new idea before I finished. Finally, I came up with my greatest literary idea yet, *You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can't Make Him Think*. Using a title from one of my ninth grade English essays, I was going to combine all of my short stories and poems to make one big book. I was going to take all of the incomplete scraps of my books and polish them until they were stories worthy of publishing. I split the book into three significant parts and categorized my stories into them: Meaninglessness? Despair. Purpose!

It may not be an autobiography, but it is the story of my life. *You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can't Make Him Think* is the exaggerated, twisted, made-up story of my life as a boy from Michigan, going through the public education system and willing to share everything he's learned from his life thus far. Maybe, just maybe, you (the reader) can learn something from it too.

-Robert H. Stonik

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You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can't Make Him Think (Bittersweet Success)

Bittersweet Success was a purebred horse lined up for success. His father was a three-time winner of the big race. The only reason he didn't win a fourth was because of a blown-out hind leg, or so he hears. Bittersweet Success's father was put down before his birth. Most say it was best to put him out of his misery, but Bittersweet Success will never know for sure.

His mother, on the other hand, was a competition horse. She supposedly maneuvered over, under, and through obstacles, looking naturally graceful in the process. But Bittersweet Success will always remember her for her graceful way with words. His mother had always comforted him, whispering in his ear during times when his owners began physically testing him. He was pulled away from his mother when he was a year old, but he still imagines her soothing whispers and a better time when he could burrow in a crescent created by her warm, loving body. Now-a-days, all he had was a bed of prickly grass to heal the soreness from his vigorous training schedule.

It all started after the first year of his life blurred past him. His mother had said it seemed like they were starting earlier and earlier. His trainer's first action was to put light weights on him, observing how he handled the stress and loosely judging him as he trotted around the track. As was expected, Bittersweet Success was a natural, running circles

around the other colts as the trainers increased the weight put on him. It was for this reason that he graduated early. They saddled him up and he was ready to go.

Bittersweet Success started off his career by winning a series of small races. He wanted nothing more than to enter the big race, but he was still too young. A while past, and soon, Bittersweet Success's accomplishments didn't feel significant anymore. Every race he entered, he was expected to win. So Bittersweet Success began to dominate his races. He would finish impressively in double digit strides ahead of the other horses. Undoubtedly, it was time for his owners to enter him in the big race, where for the first time in his career, he lost.

Bittersweet Success was determined not to end his thus successful career there. He kicked into a competitive drive that got him entered in the big race in the first place. He trained hard for an entire year and the next time he entered the big race he won. Then he won again. And again. Bittersweet Success had matched his father's accomplishments and it was time for him to establish his own legacy. He wanted to become the first four-time winner of the big race.

As he trained that year, Bittersweet Success couldn't help but think more and more about his dad. He thought about how his dad pushed himself too hard. He thought about how his dad blew out his leg, how he never met him, and how he never would've had time for him if he had lived on. Bittersweet Success thought about what his mother would say to him right now. He was being foolish overworking himself, he was

overly-competitive, and he was going to end up just like his father. Just like his father. If he kept up this rigorous pace, he was going to blow out his own leg, his owners were going to put him down, and leave his child without a father to raise him.

Come to think of it, this whole racing thing was just him running in circles. How could you get anywhere when you were running in circles? Forced to work by owners that didn't even care about him, Bittersweet Success let his competitive drive get the best of him. He was competing in a race that didn't even matter to him. He never did what he wanted to do.

He never went back to thank his mom, see her in the stable he was raised in. He never got to go beyond the fences of that farm he trained on, where he always promised himself he would venture one day after his success. He never got to go back and see the children of his own, the ones his owners had bred from him.

All these feelings rushed through him at once one day as he ran around the track. He slowed down as his owners whipped him. He raised his hoofs aggressively and bucked the jockey and saddle off his back. No more weight or stress was holding him back as he ran off the track.

He was doing what he wanted to do. The stuff he was never able to accomplish with his "achievements" in the way, the goals he never got to complete as he raced to bittersweet success in those races that didn't mean a thing to his life legacy.

Meaninglessness?

Everything he writes cannot have purpose in it.

Everything is not filled with emotions, despair.

Is there a meaning to everything in life?

Or are we hopelessly searching for answers when the world is full of meaninglessness?

Dreaming

GOAL! GOAL! GOAL! Robert Stonik is on point today with his ball-handling and striking. He's doing things with the soccer ball that we have never seen before. I am on and looking good doing it. Swiftly maneuvering around all the defenders in a silky smooth fashion, my shots are hitting the back corner of the net every time, even with my non-dominant leg. I'm a natural-born leader for my team, and my face is visually synonymous with our jersey's vertically oriented bars of the light blue on the map of an ocean and metallic silver stripes, all covered by the sponsorship Kraft food logo. I'm moving so quickly that I can't even see my teammates any more, but I can see the blur of the crowd, and I hear them chanting.

"Rob! Rob! Rob, wake up!" The voice is hazy yet familiar, with fluctuating volume and tone that cannot come from a voice in my head. I know now that I am dreaming and my father is calling out to me, begging me to wake up. I can't, but I should have caught that I was dreaming earlier. I hate soccer. Let me rephrase that. I dislike soccer because I'm bad at it. There's so much running for so few goals achieved. But if I was good at soccer, I imagine it going somewhat like a good dream, winning the adoration of all of Europe and eating a fancy European dish of my favorite, macaroni and cheese.

"Rob, wake up!" I can't Dad! I've tried and it hasn't gotten me anywhere. My father's voice is notably straining and it brings me great pain that I can't respond to his plea now.

Baseball was always more of my sport and I was surprisingly good at it for my non-athletic build. I could hit the ball really far, and I almost never struck out. Running the bases was easier than running a full-length soccer field and catching a baseball was second nature to me. Yes, baseball was definitely the sport for me.

"Rob, wake up." But I would never be a professional baseball player. I couldn't even make the high school team. No, perhaps writing was for me. Yes, writing is my sport. Ever since I was little, I wanted to be an author. I used to love writing books with dialogue and little character interactions, borrowing the characteristics for my characters from everybody I knew. My father...

"Wake up, Rob." It wasn't my father's voice anymore. With a blank sheet in front of me, I wrote:

Sometimes a person can trick his or herself when in deep sleep. Sometimes ghosts can visit in dreams. Sometimes a dream can pursue like a new life if the person is smart enough. Sometimes I can recognize I am dreaming. Sometimes I live in my dreams because I am smart. Sometimes I get messages in my dreams. Sometimes I tell the future. Sometimes my dreams don't make any sense. Most times I wake up. I dropped the pencil.

"It's time to wake Dad up." I focus my eyes in and out, blink three times, shut my eyelids tight, and then open them wide. I open my eyes to a blast of sunlight from the open window shades. My wife stands at the foot of my bed. She is

the soothing voice I have heard at the end of my sleep through my awakening, golden hair draping down her neck and across her white robe. Our daughter lies across my wife's left arm, staring at me curiously with wide green eyes and twisting her light brown hair between her lips. Our son stands so his round face is just above the foot of the bed, grasping in his hands a bowl of my favorite Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. A few tears of joy escaped my eye as I wisely recognized I am living again in a dream. This is one of the few I'm not waking up from.

Follow Me

The stupidest people I've ever met.

Behold the dullest tools in the shed.

I'll take you all out of this dull period.

Follow me children, follow me kids.

I'll take you all out of this dull period.

It's easy to fool these dull-sided tools.

These kids are as dumb as they get.

Their feet move so slowly, their voices speak dully,

Don't know that they move towards their death.

Small brains can't grasp it, but I'll change their path,

They'll be heading towards prosper instead.

So follow me children, follow me kids.

I'll take you all out of this dull period.

Sheep

The shepherd coos his bittersweet music to his sheep as they follow in line.

But the sheep listen. And the sheep listen. Those stupid, brainless sheep.

They don't understand the shepherd's haphazardly strewn, arrhythmic melody.

All of the sheep follow. Those poor sheep.

And the black ones follow too. With his weird walk, and slightly-off baa, but he follows.

And the pink one follows. And the blue one follows. And especially the red one follows.

All of the sheep follow. But of course, they're stupid, brainless sheep.

Gold in America

Rakim went down to one knee in sorrow. There was his father, lying on the ground only two feet away from his face and laying on his death bed. Rakim cursed and the camel that Rakim and his father rode seconds ago ran away towards the sunset. The sun reflected off the pyramids to give off a glorious, yet solemn golden color that Rakim knew he would never see in the United States. The golden color shined on his father and color returned to his face. Alas, he spoke his last words.

“Rakim, my dear boy, my only son,” said his father, “Tolerate differences and work towards the common goal. That is the only way to a brighter future.” Rakim choked up as his father closed his eyes. The sun stooped below the pyramids and Rakim began to sob. His father lay below him, motionless in the dark, still night.

Rakim repeated his father's last words and let them ring true throughout all of Egypt. Rakim had to tolerate differences and work toward the common goal just like his father did. Then he would see a better tomorrow- a bright future, where the sun shines every day in a way that the pyramids glow and people worldwide can cooperate.

His father's dying wish became Rakim's new dream and he boarded the plane back to the United States with a completely new attitude.

Though for others, Rakim's father's words are not taken to heart. Terrorism runs rampant through the Middle East and the two sides were never able to see eye to eye about something that could've just been talked out.

A band of terrorists took down more than just the plane while the only thing Rakim could feel was spiraling down to a crash. The hijacking became a national tragedy. In memoriam, the United States built a golden statue, and it glimmered every morning when the sun rose.

Eclipse

Flat sun decorated the day sky.

The light came from the palm trees and reflected off into the ocean.

The milk of an innocent coconut, polluting the beaches of Miami.

Polluting the beaches of the world.

The coconut's ecliptic timing was all too perfect.

And for once all the werewolves in the world were quiet.

Writer's Block

Every step I took echoed around the small, empty house. The unforgiving brick walls forced me to hear my every move, and my thought shifted back to a selfish state for a brief second. I took my coat and boots off and left them by the door, readying myself to scan the house. The now-empty house had belonged to a friend whose name I was never sure of. He was a writer, an intelligent, manipulative one who shared his work with nobody but me.

I remembered the first letter he had sent to me:

Greetings from Somewhere,

I write to you this day as an aspiring author in need of readers. I have sent this to a random address, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was never read. If you are there, mail yes to the return address.

-A. Washington

I remembered my curiosity piqued from that letter. It was mysterious and peculiar. It was the exact kind of thing that sucked me in to a person, and I remembered sending back "Yes" within two days. I think that was the only word of mine that he had read.

That was twenty-seven weeks ago, and I had received an envelope from him every Monday since then. As for whether I responded or not, he seemed indifferent.

Each envelope I received contained two papers. The first paper was a poem or story, and it was different every time. The second paper, on the other hand, always started the same.

Greetings from Somewhere,

It was always with a capital 'S'. He wrote to me as something different every time.

I write to you this day as a...

He had written to me as a resident of Somewhere, as a lonely soul, and as a human being. Every time he updated me on his life, the well-being of Somewhere, and he always included a literary work that corresponded with his writing. Most recently, he had written to me as an only friend. I was never quite sure, but I believe that I was his only friend.

Greetings from Somewhere,

I write to you this day as an only friend. I have written everything I have to write, and you have read everything I have written. Never have I read your writing, but I see you as an only friend.

-Z. Jefferson

Every time, he signed off with a letter A-Z and an ex-president's last name. I suppose it was his ever-changing pen name. His last letter was accompanied with "The Ending", an appropriately titled poem describing how everything must

come to an end. I realized that it would be the last envelope I would get.

So I took a trip to Somewhere, and I found his small brick home deep in the woods. Now in the stillness of his home I realized there was nothing to see. The door let in to one room where there were a few pots hanging on the wall. A tiny, square table sat in the middle of the room. It couldn't seat more than one person.

I was about to leave when something in the corner caught my eye. On the floor was an old notebook. When I opened it up, there was only one story left in it. It was obvious that it had been a rather large notebook, but most of the pages were ripped out. Pushing disappointment aside, I looked back to read the last story. Despite how little I knew about this man, the thought of his writing still captivated me. Light came in from the house's only window, and I could feel its ultraviolet beams shining on my right arm and chest. I pushed all vulnerable feelings aside, and read the title.

Writer's Block.

Death to all Dolphins

Raul swam back and forth, pacing. His formerly smooth gray skin now seemed rough and dirty, which seemed impossible to Raul considering they lived underwater. It was now one hour until the dolphins' judgment and Raul only got more nervous as it approached.

Though next to Pinky, Raul was calm. Pinky lay in the corner motionless, except for his fins, which were having spasms again. Raul was scared, but he knew waiting was the hardest part. Pinky did not yet know what to think.

"You guys better get going." It was Daniel, one of the most popular dolphins in the sea. It's no shock he made it through the judgment. "Comrade's eating those who show up late without judgment."

Comrade- the name infuriated Raul. Comrade, the biggest, fattest whale in the whole sea and de facto dictator. It was his order- death to all dolphins. It was Daniel's bravery that allowed them a judgment day.

"Thanks." said Raul. He and Pinky departed, heeding Daniel's warning. They got in line and waited for what felt like weeks until finally it was Pinky's turn.

"What is your name?" Comrade asked Pinky in his deep voice. Pinky was shaking uncontrollably.

"P...Pi...Pinky" Pinky studded.

“I DON’T LIKE THAT NAME!” shouted Comrade. He slammed his mouth shut, engulfing Pinky. And Pinky was gone, though it was clear Comrade would have never allowed a weak, stuttering dolphin to pass judgment.

Raul was up next, and he knew the first question coming.

“What is your name?” demanded Comrade.

“Raul” he said confidently. He didn’t want to come off as weak like Pinky had.

“Raul, I like that name. Is it Pacific?”

“Atlantic, sir, Gulf of Mexico. I swam through the Panama Canal to get here. With passport, of course.” Raul pulled a passport out of his pocket and displayed it to Comrade.

“So far, so good.” Said Comrade, “I like you Raul. That’s the good news.” Raul could hear sincerity in Comrade’s tone. It was evident from his look that Comrade truly liked the way Raul carried himself. Comrade continued down his list of questions, “But how can you contribute to our new society?” It was the ultimate question. It left Raul dazed and he didn’t know how to answer. What did he do again? Well he couldn’t stay silent.

“Uhh...” Raul said. SNAP! Darkness.

Tamed by a Beast

Leonardo lay in the tall grass, stalking his prey. The dark hole in the sky opened and meat dropped down. Leonardo oriented his body close to the ground. His mane tickled the dirt and every bone in his body was still. *Damn it, dead again.* Leonardo thought.

Everything had changed since the settlers. The Great Land was now so small. Walls surrounded him everywhere but one place, where he could see humans through a window. Perhaps they were supposed to be his pets, but Leonardo disregarded the humans.

Leonardo was more concerned about the darkness, which arrived at the same time as the Americans. It surrounded him. All he heard was whooshing water and his own roars. Leonardo supposed the water flooded the rest of the Great Land. But that didn’t explain why Leonardo saw no water around him. Except for his water bowl, which refilled itself every time Leonardo was sleeping. This New World was puzzling, indeed.

Leonardo let it pass by today, but he knew this looming dark feeling would follow him for the rest of his life.

Jaylen's Room

I can still remember that move from so long ago.
Dimly lit by a garage sale lamp in the corner.
Two beds lay side by side- I still don't know why because he
was an only child like me.
And in my room I had bunk beds. Weird...
The television sat in between the two beds.
Pixelated box though it was the 21st Century, crackling every
time it made a sound.
We still squinted enthusiastically to play games on a square
foot screen.
A nail stuck out from my bed on the left.
A nail that was supposed to hold the soft, accepting mattress.
And somehow I always got that nail in my foot instead.
His mother would give me a band-aid and apologize lamely
Yes, his mother was black, but his father was blacker.
Their skin color didn't matter then.
All that mattered is that one night a week,
I took the nail bed and walked home with a bloody foot,
Leaving a trail of blood from Jaylen's room to mine.
And I lie in my bunk bed thinking about how
I haven't seen my first best friend since 2006.

Questions

He was never the type to question anything. He never
questioned why he was so successful, why he made decisions
for his business, and why he never had that nagging guilt
knowing everything he does has an impact on the entire
universe and everyone in it.

But Mr. McGee was not your typical cold-hearted boss.
He had recreational hobbies to de-stress. Racquet ball was one
of his favorites. He liked swimming and hiking, but today he
had settled on biking through the woods. Treachery surrounded
the beaten path that Mr. McGee biked across as his eyes fixated
on the beauty of nature, thinking happy thoughts.

As he reached his maximum comfort level, Mr. McGee
was tackled off his bike and into the dirt. He roared profanities
at the still man who wore only sunglasses and plain, casual
garb. The man walked away as Mr. McGee brushed off some
dirt and turned his head to see it- the treachery: ruthless
potholes, sharp rocks, ruthless potholes, pointy branches, and a
whole tree trunk that lay in front of his path, blocking the exit
at the forest's bright opening. Mr. McGee took one last
gracious look back at the mysterious man with the heart behind
the sunglasses.

Mr. McGee smiled; he laughed for the first time he
could remember in a long time. The exhausted bike walked
itself alongside Mr. McGee as he returned to the entrance of
the forest. He didn't know if he would go back into the woods
or if he would take a different trail, maybe make his own trail.

It was not too late yet to go back and restart. Mr. McGee never had so many questions in his lifetime.

Right Writers Write Writing

Has anybody written about writing before? Certainly.

Sometimes I wonder if all the topics have been taken.

Taken like my scattered thoughts by this sport of writing in which I can never be original.

And I can only write with a paper and pencil now.

Because a world of notifications waits on my drowsy computer.

My mind can take care of it all on a blank sheet.

But my biggest inspiration and interruption will continue to be our computerized world.

Conversation with the Reader 1

“I like the stories that go full circle.”

“What?”

“You don’t understand.”

“I do understand.”

“If I have to explain it to you, you don’t understand.”

“I do understand.”

“You don’t understand.”

“What?”

“I like the stories that go full circle.”

God?

I spend sleepless nights talking to Him. Perception is reality, they say, and I still search for evidence that He is out there somewhere listening to me. I wonder to myself if there even is a God, but I will never say it out loud in case he hears me.

“I want to go to heaven,” I say. I think that I am as selfish as the other people. I want good things to happen to me, though I’ve never seen it come from him. I still thank him for giving me my strength

“Thank you for everything,” I say. I think that there is no way he didn’t make me. There is no way he didn’t make this all of it, the universe we live in.

Oh my god. Is it real? I think. I say, “Oh my, God, is it real?”

“God?” I say. I think. No response from him.

Despair.

When he writes to make the reader feel emotions!

When he finds his depression and anger!

The reader can sense the darkness.

*The reader can feel the ultimate pressure of a world
full of a despair.*

Nightmares

“How can I sleep when I don’t have dreams? I just have nightmares.” Always lying in my bed, I have to see the truth. What did I do today? Nothing. What should I do tomorrow? Everything, including what I didn’t do today. At least I can escape through sleep. Or not. Nightmares. Everything I fear becomes real while I sleep.

I am scared of the unknown people and places. A shadowy unknown man stands ominously outside the window to my house. A hood masks his face, and I know he has bad intentions to break in and take everything that is mine. When he sees me, he realizes he is caught and makes a sprint for the street. I chase after him. I am so angry that he was trying to steal from me that I lose sight of the fact that he actually stole nothing. I want to catch him this time around so he will never invade my sleep again. My possessions, my stuff, mine. He is no longer there when I turn the street corner. I am still foaming with fury, but I realize now that I shouldn’t be that mad because everything in the house is my parents’ anyways. I walk lost around the unknown streets of my neighborhood until the sun rises again at six in the morning. I could never find my home in the dark.

I am scared of animals acting out of nature. Fish and other oceanic creatures surround the air around me, floating in the air with resistance as thick as the water they are used to. I shrivel in fear at the sight of the animals that have made me avoid saltwater for 17 years. The fish’s scales brush up against

my legs as a tentacle swipes across my vision. No more, I say, and move on to the next nightmare. Snakes, lots of snakes dart around the comfort of my home. I have to pick them up and put them back in their cage in the garage before my visitors arrive. Their scaly bodies are equally discomforting as they distort their many muscles to surround my hands and feet. When I take the nightmares to the forest, everything attacks me. Dogs, coyotes, jungle cats, and bears are all very typical in this setting and I awake only after I let their teeth sink in to me. All of the animals are acting with the intent to harm me and make me feel as uncomfortable as possible in the process.

I am scared of losing control and hopping into a car that never stops. My kodiak brown Ford Escape never fails me, until I take the car to my dreams. Every intersection I try to stop at the car skids across disobediently. I can't keep the vehicle centered in the lane. It's as if I'm intoxicated trying to drive like a normal human being. I awake from this dream only when I get caught at an intersection, and a semi-truck uses all of its force to take me and my car out. But there are still bigger fears.

I am scared of not being good enough for other people. My crush from two years ago sits across the room at a party. Needless to say, it didn't work out. We haven't talked in a long time, but she was a friend to me. She looks as beautiful as ever in her sun dress, and I want to talk to her. She mustn't want to talk to me as I get the silent treatment even when yelling her name. I'm two feet away, yet a part of me feels like I'm not there. This dream never goes away.

I am scared of embarrassing myself of effort. When I put everything into a project, when I put everything on the line, and that's taken from me. There is no vision for this dream. But I hear laughter, and I can feel all the embarrassment from those who think it's funny that I can't always talk right and that I can't always craft my words to mean the infinite expression I am trying to get across to the world. And I failed again. How many is that now?

Five nightmares is enough to take me through the night, but only because I spent so long reflecting on the failure of a day before a horrific night. My fears may come to life again while I try and tackle the day tired.

Don't Think Freestyle: Question Everything

Why is it so much easier to write a poem about despair than purpose?

17 years into this project and the despair poems stack up.

Every time I feel like it will never go away, this feeling:
sadness, madness, depression, despair.

I wonder if despair is always there, and I can ignore it
or if it just comes and goes

It seems to pop by every day now.

I need sleep. But why can't I write an anthem of happy poems?

Believe me, if I could have, I would have by now, like that was
my only purpose.

It seems the world could use a little cheering up now.

Reflection

Oh when you look in my direction,
Why don't you see your own reflection?
You seeker of truth,
Our knowledge is one.
Yet somehow I've always seen better than you.
I wait and wait in the mirror of fate.
And every morning you come looking the same.
You say you don't know what life brings today.
And every time I repeat the phrase.
But inside I know what you can't admit.
A darker truth, that life's a trick.
You'll forget what you set out for.
And give it up for love.
She'll just ignore you, all the same.
And that's when you'll come back to me.
And give me one more look.
Remind me that I'm always right,
As a tear drops down your face.
Your smile leaves and it's serious now,
You tell me you're moving on.
But I still see you there every day.
Guess we're not one after all.
So when you look in my direction,
Why can't you see your own reflection?

A War Without Winners

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The alarm went off, but his eyes were already open. They had been all night. Ryan Thompson was about to go to war. He was about to leave the sweet safety of his home and join the battle on the streets outside.

Until now, he was in denial. His wife and kid who never returned from the grocery store, the screams outside the bolted window, and the news reports- it all flickered away from reality. Ryan took the boards off the door and cocked his pistol. He knew it was time. It was time to leave the house, time to leave life as he knew it.

Ryan kicked down the door and went outside right into the enemy. Yet, it was an old friend that he first encountered. Christian now stood over Ryan with authority, a rifle pointed towards Ryan's head. Ryan looked over at his old friend, remembering he was now the enemy. He was on the side who wanted this war, when all Ryan wanted was an end to it.

Ryan shot Christian in the head and Christian fell to the cement side walk. Bright red blood rolled off his dark skin and tainted the cement. Ryan rolled over and spun around. He looked across the street. There were more enemies travelling in a pack of five and now they were aware of Ryan.

Before they could converge, Ryan assaulted them. He killed four of them with five bullets. The fifth one put up a fight, so he beat him mercilessly with his pistol until the man

was knocked out. He reloaded the pistol without thinking and shot him through the lungs.

Ryan searched for more enemies and found one. He shot the enemy through the heart before he was even aware of Ryan. Ryan's instinct took over again and he shot the enemy a few more times for good measure. He looked around again for more enemies, but there were none this time. It was just himself.

He, who had now participated in the war he was firmly against, had become the enemy. He looked up to the sky, but there were no other answers. He watched as a variety of birds swoop by: a dove, then a hawk, followed by a mockingbird, and a raven. There was no other answer; he shot himself, bleeding out an impure blood as the birds circled like a cyclone above him. His last hope was that his death was the end of a war, for that was the only way the war could be won.

Rising Up

Justin's ears perked up, and for the first time in a while, he heard nothing. The strange new silence filled the room. It was the first thing he noticed about what he formerly knew as his home. The next thing he noticed was how still it was. He was the only thing moving and everything around him was an inanimate object. After this, he determined that all of his senses were stimulated in a different way here.

His eyes adjusted to not only the stillness, but also how dim it was without the sun beating down on him constantly. Without the sun, it also felt cooler, and with this cool air came a sense of moistness around him. The air felt heavier and the long beard he had grown out now seemed to weigh him down. His nose shriveled up at the smell of civilization. He was no longer in the fresh air that he had come to love. It was all so different, but the weirdest thing of all had to be the taste of the air occupied by others.

Justin stayed in this trance for a while identifying everything different he would be forced to get used to. His mom identified this, and approached him slowly with as much care as she could.

"It's just like you left it, huh?" She asked calmly. She had been like this ever since she found him again. Like she had to be careful or she would lose him again. Maybe he would leave her again, but in the end, he knew it wouldn't solve anything.

"Sure." He responded with a tear dripping down his cheek. She mistook this as a tear of happiness and embraced him in a big hug. Justin determined at that moment that this was the worst part. She didn't understand anything about him.

Untitled

Night fell, and the children grew older. Hair grew upon their faces.

They were dirty. Mud dripped off the children and fell onto the soft grass.

The air was polluted with cuss words, dirty mouths with no more soap to clean them.

The air was pitch black. It was scary.

Yet it seemed okay to everyone. Everyone but me.

Don't Think Freestyle: It Isn't Fair

"It isn't fair!" I cried.

It isn't fair that we bathe in it while they struggle to find a sip.

It isn't fair that we throw it up when they're starving: they don't eat.

It isn't fair that we watch their problems on a flat screen color TV.

It isn't fair that "more money more problems" is something we say not think.

And it isn't fair that we think happiness is bought like a basic human need.

You ungracious human beings.

Why People Don't Go Outside the House During Scary Movies

A dingy, tattered-looking house, a female lead that can make horrifying expressions and sounds, and special effects. It seems this is all you need to create the haunted house scary movie of today, and yet, people across all age, gender, and cultural divisions will pay \$10 to see something that will fool them into staying up tonight in fear of something that absolutely does not exist. Christine, our female lead, breathes heavily as we've told her to do while looking around a corner that has absolutely nothing. She sighs in relief, but then screams. Later, we will use special effects to make a demon or ghost or something that comes out of the ceiling. Our efforts will make the audience scream too, as Christine will scurry across every room in the house, just to realize the ghost, demon, or something worse is there too. Our haunted house scary movie has netted us millions of dollars. We spent thousands, and I with the other logical people will wonder how this worked. I, with the other logical people, will wonder why Christine never just left the house, went to the free outdoors or to a less-haunted house, maybe a friends for some coffee.

Here is my logical counterargument. We've established that Christine is in her new haunted house, full of ghosts and demons among other creepy things with ill-intentions to hurt Christine. But what if, suddenly, Christine is sick of being in a haunted house? She makes the decision to leave the house altering the plot of the whole movie. What if Christine breaks

the interior standard *and it's worse outside?* There are demons floating everywhere from her house and others. She tries to run away, but they follow her. When she seeks shelter at a friend's, they follow her promptly and haunt her friend. When she tries to find a new home, they follow her to each new home, slowly destroying every new life she attempts to create for herself.

This is my and every logical person's biggest fear, that it somehow gets worse when you leave the house. Christine lives in the scariest movie of all time because there is no escape. Our audience screams and loses sleep for the rest of their lives over the unescapable demons.

So why don't people leave the house during scary movies? Somehow, I fear, I know, like Christine, that it turns out that living in a haunted house full of demons is the best option for her. At least then she is the only one who will have to live in this introverted nightmare. The audience will watch but never truly realize what it feels like to be Christine.

The Window

Rain rolls down the window like a trickling tear.
I may be silent, but I'm still here.
So let my tears release for now.
And these tears symbolic to the thing that started it.
A downpour on me,
I'm neither loved nor hated.
I have no enemies, but no friends either.
Ignored or invisible, when I am so clearly in trouble,
Why does nobody help the window?

The Silence of the Crickets

The sunset has always been that clichéd symbol that represents the end of something beautiful, because that's what the sunset essentially is. The sunset is something that ends the light of a day, each day beautiful in a unique way. But the sunset also ushers in a shorter, yet equally beautiful, thought-provoking night. I think night brings out this brutal form of thinking in me. When darkness has gone on for long enough, one forgets about the light. I forget that at the end of night there is a sunrise, and another day with consequences of what you have done the night before. By no means is night ugly, but it is definitely a difficult time.

Well in many ways, I think August is the perfect representation of summer's sunset. The perception of summertime can be embodied in one phrase: fun in the sun. We picture sunny days, beaches, bright clothing, enjoying time with friends, etc. We act like it doesn't get dark in summer. In those August nights, though, it becomes apparent. I'm lying in bed during one of those August nights right now.

As another school year approaches, I hear the crickets outside every night before I go to bed. Without silence, I can't sleep, and without sleep, I can't stop thinking. I begin to notice how much I love this life, how precious every second is that I spend with the people I love. I notice how much I hate the thought of going back to school and how overwhelmed I get thinking about being around people that don't seem to care

about me at all. Or those people who do care about me but only enough to talk to me while confined to a classroom.

I notice that summer folder I placed on my desk back in June, filled with all the assignments to be completed for next school year: books to read, papers to write, applications to fill out so that I can go to more school? PROBLEMS TO SOLVE? How am I supposed to solve problems in Math and Physics when I can't seem to figure out my own problems? The crickets' chirps begin to get louder.

"You know, you should go volunteer more, it'll look great on a college application, AND you really need to help out those that are less fortunate than you." Don't you think I should worry about helping myself, getting a little more stable before I work on helping others? I love the people that share this planet with me, but sometimes I think I need to worry about myself first. I know I'm being selfish, but is that always a bad thing? The crickets' chirps continue getting louder.

"I think you should get a job. You could really use the money. AND you really need to learn the value of hard work and stop being so lazy all the time." I put all my time into school and extra-curriculars! I thought you said that if I let my grades slip, I wouldn't be able to go to college. Aren't I going to college to get a good job later in life? Robotics is my job now. I've poured all my blood, sweat, and tears into that. Actually, the tears are being wasted into my pillow now. I'm completely sobbing now, eyes looking straight into the plush,

white memory foam, trying to silence the crickets. The crickets are screeching into my ears now.

"You're a kid! You get to run around and have fun all day, and you're whining and crying about your life. IF YOU THINK IT'S BAD NOW, it's only going to get worse from here." I'm crying too hard to even respond to that. The crickets' stridulations have reached such an obnoxious level, their limbs fall off, settling between thick blades of grass. After the madness, there is finally a clear silence in the air.

I hate being a teenager with passion, but I love these August nights. They force me to recognize that I'm a teenager, which is significant enough. Somewhere in my mind, I think that it's better to realize how moody and ridiculous I can be. Sure these problems are all serious enough, but perhaps I'm blowing them out of proportion.

Back in my room now, I lay flat on my back, looking at the ceiling. The crickets outside seem to be chirping at a normal volume level, but I turn the TV on to drown out the noises they continue to make. The crickets have succeeded in keeping me up long enough tonight. They can come back tomorrow night. They will continue to come back every night, at least until I spend enough days of restlessness and hard work to silence them.

The Smart Ones

I always thought I was one of the smart ones.
Until that one week when they all got in and I didn't.
And now those strange, smart creatures laugh in their little
secret group.
Laughing at me. They're making a mockery of my efforts.

And I always thought I was one of the smart ones.
Until that one day when I made so many mistakes I couldn't
count them.
I couldn't count and I couldn't even speak.
14,532 garbled sentences. I forgot everything. No words.

But I always thought I was one of the smart ones.
Until that one moment when I gave up all hope and stopped
trying.
And they were right to laugh at me.
Because I was NEVER one of the smart ones.

Graduation

(my AP English Last Minute Journal)

In the summer of 2013, as a self-induced creative writing exercise, I decided to keep a journal every single day of what I did and how I felt, attempting to describe every entry perfectly for the sake of practice. At the end of summer, the day before senior year started, I took two hours to read every entry and reflect on the summer I had, ranking the best moments. It was then that I decided I wanted to keep a senior year journal, which I kept for three weeks before dropping the ball on.

I feel like I dropped the ball on a lot of things throughout high school. A couple weeks ago, I received my letter from eighth grade, including a paragraph with a quick checklist of three personal goals I was supposed to accomplish. One out of three isn't bad, right? In actuality, I am so proud of myself and everything I've accomplished in high school, especially in this last year. High school will be most memorable for senior year and my improvements in all sorts of mental, physical, and emotional categories. I'm a lot healthier than I was entering high school. I have a much easier time talking to people, and I'm a lot happier. I have a lot of academic achievements, but I pride myself most on my position in robotics, back-to-back Chairman's Awards, and being able to deliver Cavalcade literary magazine to the high school for my junior and senior year as well. Simple things like that prove to me that all the hard work is worth it.

I'm not too happy about the college I'm going to, and unlike the masses, I'm very unhappy to see the end of high school and the dawning of change. I know I'm going to miss it, and I'm so horrified to take on these responsibilities. How many times have I asked my mom for help in the past week alone? But I guess that's what it's all about. College scares the living crap out of me. For years, I've seen the seniors celebrate these moments, excitement building across the whole last week. That isn't me. In 2011, I sat on the window ledge of my seminar, watching seniors in the east lot sprint out of the school joyfully. I am not that senior. In 2012, I saw seniors in my debate class chanting their graduation year. I am not that senior. In 2013, I shook hands with a senior in my seminar, he said his final words as a high school senior to me, and I saw nothing but the chilling look of worry in his eyes for the unknown future. He walked out of the seminar, then out of the school. Maybe I am that senior. I imagine 2014 going something like this:

I am sitting in my seminar with my hand cupped over my mouth, taking deep breaths, looking dead ahead, feeling sick to my stomach. I'm surrounded by two of my best friends throughout this school year, who I've met only by coincidence and sheer luck to be in Silak seminar. Nico is a senior like me. Megan will not experience this feeling of sheer horror until next year. I am not talking though I hear excited rambling from the other seniors around me. The PA system rings. I don't have to listen to the announcement to know what it is.

Suddenly, everything is like a bad dream, an absolute blur around me. I feel like I am the only one in the school who is human with real thoughts and feelings. I feel absolute fear as it dawns on me. This is the end of life as I know it. This is the end of my life where I go to a school for seven hours every day, I see those people I grew up with, and I live in a home with my parents in a room of my own. This is the end of my life in Northville with minimal responsibilities and privileges as a spoiled teenager. When I walk outside, the sun rages against my pale skin, and I go to my car, where, like every other day this year, I wait patiently until the parking lot is clear of the line of cars. What the hell just happened? I drive up to the light, turn left towards the senior picnic, and prepare for this summer, which I haven't yet decided will have a journal attached or not.

When I get home, I know I have to try. *Summer Journal 2014*. I scribble across the top of a blank sheet. "*If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.*" That's a good subtitle. *Today, I graduated. It went about how I expected, but I had a great time at the picnic. I think this is going to be a good summer. I think this is going to be a good thing.* This is going to be a good thing. I don't know if I'm saying it confidently or if I'm still trying to convince myself.

Conversation with the Reader 2

“Hello again,”

“Are you going to explain it to me now?”

“Nope, reread it.”

“Reread what?”

“The whole thing, the entire book, *You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can't Make Him Think*,”

“That’s a lot of pages. What should I do after that?”

“Reread it a third time. You are condemned to reread it until you understand it entirely.”

“Why can’t you just explain it to me?”

“Because you will not get the same things out of it as I do. Everybody’s experience is unique yet equally enlightening.”

“Are we still talking about the book?”

“I don’t know, are we? I’m just telling you what I know.”

Please God

God doesn’t hear my prayers. God doesn’t see my tears. God doesn’t sense my worry. He hasn’t responded for 17 years. No congratulations after first communion, confirmation, graduation. He is no better than an abandoning father.

Please God. This is one thing I won’t do by myself. Don’t let me wake back up. Let me go to heaven. Please God. And I crack a little bit every day when I wake back up and realize he missed my message again.

Purpose!

If readers can't decode my stories, I'm the one that's screwing up?

Is purpose the whole reason that I'm writing all these poems and stuff?

The answers will not decode themselves!

The people must search harder to find the answer in a world full of purpose!

Daydreaming

The integral of e to the x equals e to the x plus c, right? Yes. Right? Yes. Got it? Yes. Got it? Yes, shut up! Ugh. I let my mind wander. I could be doing homework right now but you had to make us clear our desks. I let my mind wander to happier things. A ray of sunshine breaks through the window and lands on my arm and back.

Wow, it's really nice outside right now. I think all the snow melted in my backyard. When I go home, I could totally go outside and play basketball. I can bring the rim down to seven feet and pretend like I'm a player in the NBA. That sounds so nice right now. My head droops down.

I wonder what class my crush is in right now and if she's sitting there thinking right now like I am. Today, I'm going to make a move. I know she's been sad lately. I'm going to write her a letter to cheer her up and tell her I love her. And then she's going to say that she's always loved me to. And I'll say I wrote this poem for you, it's called "Diamond-Plated Warrior." I start crafting my letter in my head.

Someday we'll kiss. I know someday we'll kiss. We'll be sitting on the couch, venting about the tribulations of daily life. I'll comfort her, she'll comfort me. We will embrace in a hug as her head rests against my shoulder. And when I look up, our eyes will meet, followed by lips. We will not kiss with lust, but with passion and love.

I can't see myself marrying anybody but her. I just can't. Someday I will bring her to a romantic dinner with rose petals, candles, and other stereotypical romantic mood-setting items on the table. Then I'll find some creative way to ask her. I have a while to think about how I'm going to do that. The best thing that could possibly happen to me would be getting to live with her every day. I've always seen the ability to do anything, even the most boring thing, with somebody as the highest form of love. We'd talk, tell jokes, watch TV together, go on walks, go shopping, cook together, everything. I could do anything with her and be happy. And someday we can have kids. And I'll get to see everything I love about her and me in one human being.

When I get home, I'll start writing that letter. And we'll be on track to the best possible life for me. As for my job, I don't really know what I want to do exactly, but I can look at it like an adventure. I could be an author or own a business, I definitely want to be my own boss. I want to own a publishing company so I can help others spread their stories while I spread mine. Life could be perfect. Life will be too perfect.

Robert? I look up on the screen to see the integral of e to the x. E to the x plus C I say. This school stuff really isn't as hard as they make it out to be. Life all comes easy to me anyways.

Diamond-Plated Warrior

She sits encapsulated behind her shield of beautiful, hard-rock diamond.

She has somehow presented herself as a target to the ways of the world.

But my diamond-plated warrior never knew how much she means to the world.

She never knew how much she means to me.

And to me, she has begun to embody the very hard-rock jewel that protects her.

How I hope she will shed her armor and reveal her diamond personality to the world.

How I hope I can be there with her every day to put a smile across her cheek, whatever the circumstance.

Though her fragility has not yet been tested, I know she will make it with her diamond shield.

And the diamond girl can shine light on the entire world like she has on mine.

A Respectable Girl

Three laps. I signal the count on my fingers for lack of a better system. It was only recently I had started running to lose weight. I got fake symptoms of the runner's high that people talked about; though mostly, I was just trying to convince myself that I liked running hard and sweating like a pig over a roaster. Most people liked to run away from things as a stress relief, but I ran circles around the old elementary school track.

As I passed the school side, my eyes met awkwardly with the girl in the jungle gym. Her gaze locked on me for a brief moment in time as her arms locked around some guy she had just met. Her stare seemed so high that it looked down on me, though their bodies were so low on the ground of the jungle gym. Her eyes walked back as she returned to her business. Eyes shut, lips locked, chests rubbing, arms wandering along each other, and tongues following sloppily. I could see them struggling to remove their clothing.

This wasn't the first time she'd done this. The first time it had been me as the boy she just met, when we shared our first kiss on top of the jungle gym. For her, many more followed since that day in elementary school. Unlike so many others she hadn't changed, and that was exactly what I respected her for.

Don't Think Freestyle: Where have all the good people gone?

Where have all the good people gone? When school is done and the bell has rung, they scatter to their separate homes. While I find those diamonds in the rough that never peep. They never talk. Am I their only friend? To those people who don't pretend, who don't disappear when all the other people scatter. No they're always present. My present to them is my presence, and I'm flattered by theirs as they are mine. So here's to all the good people who've helped me through tough times. I'm glad I found you all.

Don't Think Freestyle: When Color Didn't Matter

I can hardly remember when color didn't matter, and when my crew consisted of Jaylen, Anton, Daron, Luron, and Darian. When I didn't have to worry about racism, I had to remind them that they were black because in elementary school, everybody just blended in. It wasn't meant to be offensive, it was just a fact, but I feel bad about it now. It was more diverse and less dark time because I was surrounded by these incredible African-American people. We played together and had fun. While now, I fear every day that I'm losing that sense of open-minded judgment.

To Be or Not To Be

To be or not to be- that is the question:
One of those expressionless players in life's play,
Who never wears his emotions on his sleeve.
Though nobody cites him as their favorite player,
He never has to act or pretend, yet gets a role.
He gets to bow at the end of the play.
He gets a standing ovation at the end of the play.
And nobody ever asks him if he is fine.
Just cheers, yet he does nothing.
I will never again have to pretend.
I will do nothing. Yet I refuse.
My dear love, life, let us dine on my everyday failures.
And I understand now that you can't dedicate your love to me every day.
But I hope I can continue acting in your play for another 30 years,
As one of those players that sheds a tear, shows his teeth, and earns his cheers.

More Money, More Problems

“It’s just not fair.” I cried to my parents, “Not fair, not fair, not fair!” They gave me this look of sorrow, with an underlying vibe telling me that it was beyond their control.

“It’s not our fault we’re rich, sweetie.” My mom let out, trembling over her words. It was amazing that she could sit here and deliver those words to me at all. A mother should never have to admit something so terrible to her child.

“Not our fault? Can’t Dad get a lower paying job?”

“Well, not exactly.” Dad butt in, “You know I worked hard to get up there with the executives! I’m certainly not going to quit my job after all it’s done for me. You know I get a lot of attention with it! And, work can’t pay us any less for all the work us executives do.”

“But you’re not seeing the bigger picture, Dad.” I interrupted, “Why do we have to have so much money? Why can’t we give some of it away? It’s not fair that families like us get all this weight put on their shoulders while other families only have to worry about simple annoyances, like eating.”

“It’s beyond my control.” Dad said sternly, “And that’s final.” He added with an eyebrow raise, a sign that things were going to get real serious if I didn’t retreat from this argument now.

A stiff shake of the shoulder rattles me awake. Again, my worst moment in life has been erroneously transferred to my nightmares. I look into the eyes of my new friend and listen to his calm breathing, complementing the rhythm of the rain, which pitter-patters on the roof of my box home. I can smell by his breath and clothes that he’s been drinking booze, smoking weed, and more I’m certain, but I’ve never let illegal substances and drug abuse get in the way of making a new connection. To me, mental clarity is as important as anything else in this dismal homeless existence. My ability to think is infinitely invaluable. Never have I achieved more mental clarity through doing drugs. I tried them early on in my street days but have avoided them since then.

My new friend seems to disagree with my drug rules, though I’m sure he barely knows what’s going on. He grasps on to my arm, and I return the favor. We hold each other tightly, as I glance down at my now-tattered Nike jacket. It’s a reminder to me where I came from. This man’s sweaty palms and untrimmed dirty finger nails don’t taint my jacket any more than they already were. This is another thing that is important to me: human connection. I value the ability to connect with other humans, demonstrated through our physical link, arms grasped together. Yet there is much more of a mental link between us. We have different stories, but we link at the moment. Both of our stories end on the streets.

That’s why I don’t judge this man. I don’t know where his story began, but I imagine it as a dark place. I’d probably have to do drugs to get out of there too. I sit here knowing this

is the life I chose. Back when my rich parents tried to push me towards owning their company, I recognized the corruption that money had brought me to. I recognized that I'd had more wealth in my childhood than most people would have in their entire life. With that in mind, I don't use any money now. And I hope the money that would have been mine is going to the poor people in the community.

Rain

When I was little, my mom used to take me outside at night to watch storms. It was one of the little mother-son bonds we shared. Some people are scared of storms, when the rain comes tumbling, thunder rumbling, and that night-time lightning that lights up the earth like it is day again. Those flashes were always my favorite. Now, I always go out and venture into the storms by myself, sometimes playing in the rain like the little kid I will have inside me forever.

Rain, rain stay all day, teach me how to love and play.

As a kid, I thought that the rain was just water, but my 10th grade English teacher taught me that it means so much more than that. Her words ring in my ears every time I sit out in the rain: "It symbolizes change, rebirth." These are words that I remember every time in the Michigan droughts. I remember that no matter how bad I screw up, I can wait for the next time it rains and sit out. I remember how much I love the feeling of sitting out in the rain.

Rain, rain, stay all day, give me second chances.

I let the rain drench me, weighing down my sleeping shirt and pajama pants. This makes it so much more difficult to go back in and dry off. The water seems to cleanse my body and mind. I get this fresh feeling that I could never get under the sun's harsh rays. When I go back inside, I feel like a new, pure person.

Rain, rain, stay all day, wash all of my sins away.

Now inside, the rain is piling up. I should be scared, but I know I can't be. The rain has only helped me thus far.

Rain, rain, stay all day, embrace our circumstances.

This I Believe

Every day, I'm forced to wake up in the reality of a world that revolves around one thing. I can always feel the incorrect ideas of the people surrounding me, shouting out, "It's people! It's appearance! It's money!" Well, I'm actually more optimistic than that. The world is a generally good place full of some really great people, if you give them a chance. I think that the only time people become bad is when they are trying too hard to get their way.

Get rid of everything you've been taught for a second. The world is a flat map, and the people in it are dots on the map. Their desires are vectors, scattering across the map in all different directions. The vectors are doomed to cross paths, but that shouldn't discourage us as human beings. That shouldn't discourage dreamers from dreaming, as long as they wake up every day and realize the root of it all. Once I did enough thinking, I realized that the root of all our desires and wishes is happiness. Happiness is what the world revolves around, and the more I think about it, the more perfect it seems.

People make all of their decisions on happiness. It's not a theory: I see it every day. I see it when my mom switches jobs because her old job stresses her out. I see it when I take my little cousin to get ice cream, and she hands over her allowance to get a sweet treat, putting a smile across her face from cheek to cheek. I see it when that kid spends stacks of money for the Beats™ Headphones because the sound quality

reminds him of that happy time he listened to the artist in concert.

For some people, it's that simple. Nice things make them happy, so they work hard to get a high-paying job and they get money. Money makes them happy. Are they selfish, greedy, and materialistic? I don't think so. I wish to embrace this world of happiness.

I want to spread the word of what I've learned from the world. I want people to read my words and be inspired. I want to own a big publishing company so I can get my words out, and help like-minded people do the same. I guess you could say that's what would make me happy. The best thing that could happen to me today would be going to sleep tonight knowing that I impacted somebody in a positive way. When they read that essay and wake up the next day in the reality of a world that revolves around happiness.

The Spirit of a Falcon

“Hi there, neighbor.” I say with a slight smile. It wraps its talons around the gate and opens its beak slightly, as if to smile back at me. I throw him a dead mouse I found in the barn and he opens his beak wider, smiling even bigger as he scarfs down the mouse like I would a spoonful of rice. I hear Pa shout in the distance.

“Jenny! Dinner's ready!” The Falcon flies away at this unfamiliar voice. It's only used to my carefulness and gentle voice. Anything else startles my feathery friend back to the air.

“Good afternoon, Ma. Good afternoon, Pa.” I say, “Good afternoon, Devery.” I try not to sound surprised, seeing he has joined us for dinner today. Devery is a colored man who works for us. He has long been free, but has nowhere to go so he stays here and works for us. He lives in a hut out by the barn and usually keeps to himself there.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Jenny.” Devery responds. I guess he's used to calling me Miss, but every time he says it, it irks me. I guess Devery overall makes me feel upset, but I never got why. I get my plate from the kitchen and fill it with rice, peas, and steak. A cow must have been slaughtered last night.

I sit at the table and finish my dinner quietly, contemplating why Devery makes me feel so depressed. Devery has a happy life and he loves working for our family. So why am I so sympathetic for him?

Roscoe lays by my feet. I set the plate on the ground, and he licks it off. I anticipate his tail wagging, but it never comes. Even with his treat, Roscoe looks as sad as I am. I take Roscoe to my bed, and we sleep together, comforting each other's sadness.

I awake the next morning feeling better and refreshed. The falcon flies by my window, carrying what looks like ten worms. I sigh, the falcon flies so awake and free all the time. I'm jealous, but I know I must get on with my day. I take Roscoe with me to the kitchen table and I drink my tea and eat last night's leftovers in preparation to go outside and start my daily chores. Pa walks into the kitchen still wearing his pajamas.

"Hey sweetheart, you were just about to leave and do your daily chores, right?" I nod. "Then can you go into Devery's hut and give him his jacket? He left it here." He holds up Devery's jacket that we bought him back when he was a slave.

"Yeah, no problem," I say hiding my feelings. I haven't been to his hut since before the change when Devery lived there with his brothers and sisters. Where did they all go? And why didn't he go with them? I shrug it off and drag Roscoe along in an attempt to make things less awkward.

I walk back to the hut and knock on the door. Devery answers it quickly.

"Howdy, Miss Jenny! What brings you to my home?" He says with a smile.

"You left your jacket at dinner last night." I say, handing him his jacket.

"Oh my, I did! Well thank you. Come in now for a second, I was just getting ready to go out for chores." Devery waves me in and I check it out. In the corner is the bunk bed, where now only Devery sleeps. The corner where the other bunk bed used to be now contains a hand-crafted, wooden rocking chair with a pillow for a cushion. In the middle of the room, a wooden table sits with a matching chair, both hand-crafted in the same manner as the rocking chair. There is a new stove by the window which I assume Devery bought with his own money. The room gives off a homey vibe.

"This is a very nice home, Devery." I offer quietly, but kindly. Maybe this is why he doesn't mind staying here, working for us.

"Well I'm very grateful for all your parents give me. Why, look at this jacket! I've been working in it for near ten years, and it's as nice as day one!" Devery slips on a sleeve of his jackets as he stomps his way into the boots my parents bought him around the same time.

"Well, ready to go out and work?" Devery asks. I look around the room again, at all the things Devery has crafted himself. Then my eyes move back to him, scanning up and down at the apparel that my parents bought him so long ago.

The working clothes remind me of the collar on a dog, a symbol of ownership that Devery slips on willingly every morning.

“Why do you stay with us?” I blurt out. I don’t mean to, but it’s the only thing on my mind. “Sorry,” I say blushing, but Devery just laughs.

“Sometimes, I contemplate these things too, Miss Jenny. But I’m happy here. My brothers and sisters- they weren’t happy so they left. I stayed because I’m happy. Sometimes I think of buying a nicer, newer jacket, but this one makes me happy so I keep it.”

“But Devery,” I complain, “You could leave and get an education! Get a better job!”

“If ever there were a day that I woke up, and I wasn’t happy, I would give your parents their stuff and leave that day.” Devery says, smiling just thinking of his life.

“So you just do what makes you happy?” I ask doubtfully. It’s too simple to weave into the complications of everyday life.

“Miss Jenny- live your life, just do what makes you happy.” Devery advises me. And now I get why I’m so depressed. I’m not happy doing chores on the farm every day. I’m not happy trapped in this cursed gate. I’ve dragged my feet across the ground one day too long, waking up so early in the morning to please others when I need to be happy myself.

“You’re right.” I say to Devery. He smiles, realizing I took the point to heart when I turn around and trot back home. I take Roscoe with me and we take a nap because it makes us happy.

I wake up. It’s now noon and nobody is in the house. I remember I’m still supposed to do chores and slip on my coveralls and boots. I immediately walk towards the back of the barn. My first job is to get hay and feed the cows.

I walk by Devery’s hut which I see in a completely new way. On top of his hut lies my falcon friend. Upon further investigation, I realize it is in a nest with its babies.

“Note to self- the falcon is a she.” I say. She sees me now and squawks happily, but I have no mice for her. “Don’t worry, girl.” I say softly, “I’ll come back with some mice later.” She nods her head like she understands me and moves to show me her babies.

“They’re beautiful.” I compliment, “and I’ll make sure to bring some worms for them too.” She opens her beak and gives me a wide grin. And for the first time in a while, I smile back.

“Note to self- dig out some worms later.” I say quietly. I walk away and go towards the piles of hay in the back of the barn, but the portion for today is already gone. *Why is that?* I think to myself, when I see the last person I want to see, my

father and he's angry. I turn to run, but it's clear Pa's already seen me.

"Well look who decided to show up." He says pulling a cigar out of his mouth. It's clear to me now he's more disappointed than mad.

"What's the deal sweetheart?" he says, "Devery told me you showed up to drop off his jacket then you went right back home. He's already done all of your morning chores for you." I gulp, I've NEVER missed my morning chores. I couldn't pass off as sick. I was never sick either. Maybe a couple of years ago, when I had the chicken pox, but still.

"I don't wanna be a farm girl." I blurt out. Pa looks stunned and I realize what I've said. This whole blurting things out thing seems to be working for me, though, so I keep going, "I want to get an education and be something more intelligent. You can't trap me in this gate!" By this point my statements of defiance and feeling have turned into a screaming, pleading for my father's help.

"Sweetie," he says sympathetically, "you know we can't afford that." I frown and I think I understand now. Maybe there are barriers to happiness. Not everybody's requests for happiness are as simple as Devery's. Then, like a switch flips, Pa begins to sob. It's clear he's been holding this back for a while.

"I just wanted you to marry and keep the farm in our family." He says, "I knew it was too much to ask of you. I just want this place in good hands."

I sigh. So my father has raised me like livestock. I will realize many years down the road that my father was just trying to do what made him happy, that maybe I should've cooperated more, but my happiness is the most important thing to me right now. I've been depressed for too long, and I'm infuriated now.

"Try adoption." I say sarcastically. I don't care that my father is sobbing right now. I don't think he truly cares about me, so I'll return the favor. I begin to walk away.

"I can't." I hear him say, "They won't let people with guns adopt kids. Ever since Tim shot his damn kid when he was out hunting!" I keep walking and I go in. I realize I'm in Devery's hut.

"Oh well," I say and lock myself in. Away from all those who don't understand me.

It's hours later now, and there's a knock at the door.

"This is my hut Miss Jenny." It's Devery. No worries there. "You'll have to let me in eventually!" He shouts.

I force myself out of his rocking chair and let him in.

“Thanks,” he comments not so thankfully, but rather for the sake of good manners. “Looks like you had a good day.” I haven’t seen myself, but I imagine I look clean and well rested.

“Devery, I’m not happy.” I say.

“I noticed, Miss Jenny,” he says, “I noticed.” Devery yawns, and before I know it, he’s sleeping. I climb to the top bunk and soon I’m sleeping happily too.

I awake with a roar. I go outside of Devery’s huts and see the baby falcons. I remember I haven’t fed them yet and go to dig up some worms. I find a mouse for her and go back to the hut.

She squawks appreciatively when I give her the food. We both smile. She delivers the worms to the baby falcons. All of the falcons are fighting over worms except for a junior in the corner, who is nibbling on the portion of the worms his mom gave him. He looks satisfied nevertheless. After everyone finishes their meal, mama bird flies away.

“What is she doing?” I think aloud. It’s not very evident, but I figure it out. She is teaching the little falcons how to fly. Mama bird flies back to the nest and one by one drops them out.

The little falcons begin to fly around the hut. After a while, they get used to it and fly in circles, leaving the gate occasionally. Mama bird begins to fly away, confident that her

little ones will survive. I gaze after her and she squawks happily, smiling characteristically my way.

“Bye.” I say to her. I have lost my best friend, the only one who understands me on this wretched farm. The little falcons begin flying away too. One-by-one they fly past the gate until almost all of them are gone. The last one flies past the gate, but awkwardly shifts back, turning around and situating back in the nest. It’s the one I saw eating alone earlier. It must be the Devery-bird.

Yet not every bird is satisfied in the same way as Devery-bird. I watch the other falcons fly off, almost out of sight now. Devery’s words begin to ring through my head.

“Just do what makes you happy.”

I take off into a dead sprint and dive over the gate. I am free. Free of all the worries and responsibilities of the farm. Free of the nest that I was trapped in for all my life. Sprinting alongside my falcon friends, it all makes sense to me now.

Only she gets me- I am not happy contained, my spirit is free. I have the spirit of a falcon. My mouth gapes open naturally in a wide grin gifted to the falcon-like spirit who follows the most powerful force in the world, happiness.

Epiphany

Every day, I have minor self-realizations that compare somewhat to the literary device epiphany. I have an epiphany when I realize I forgot to do my homework or forgot I had homework completely, but there are much bigger epiphanies than that. One of my biggest epiphanies came while reading Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers, specifically the 10,000 hours rule. I realized that I'd never practiced anything for anywhere near 10,000 hours. I would never be an outlier, and I'd never reach masterly level of anything.

Admittedly, my epiphany is overly negative, dramatic, and depressing regarding a book that is supposed to be positive and life-changing. However, Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule calls for 10,000 hours of practicing whatever you want to do in order to become a master. The book goes on to explain that mastery is the first step at becoming an outlier, or exceptionally successful individual in a certain field.

This epiphany continues to impact me daily when I see or hear something that reminds me of Outliers. For example, in watching the Sochi Winter Olympics this past year, NBC has introduced me to numerous teen athletes in figure skating, skiing, and snowboarding that spend their lives practicing their profession and realizing their dreams. NBC even did a bit on speed skater JR Celski and rapper Macklemore, two Seattle natives at the top of their profession. Celski cited Macklemore's song, "Ten Thousand Hours" as his inspiration, which was actually Macklemore's nod to Gladwell's theory in

Outliers. Pretty cool how that went full circle, huh? Anyways, the song has a totally different meaning to Celski, an entirely different tune compared to the teen athletes mastering their sport. JR Celski is in his twenties, old by Olympic standards, and even almost retired after 2010 in Toronto. Inspired by Macklemore's song, JR has practiced vigorously for Sochi over the past year.

This brings me to an entirely new Gladwell-based epiphany inspired by JR Celski and Macklemore. You're never too old to get in you 10,000 hours. Celski and Macklemore both reached mastery in their twenties and I'm not even there. At 17 years old, I'm never going to be a child prodigy, but I still have a chance to be an outlier. I still have time to practice writing or business or whatever I want to do so I can achieve mastery and become famous for my work.

Fugitives

(An excerpt from a novel in progress)

Chapter One

We were like fugitives but not really. The love of my life and I were about to embark on a journey, an escape really. We were not your typical fugitives. We did not run from the law, nor did we run from anything remotely bad, unfortunate, etc. We ran from outside pressures: school, family, and other stresses we were just tired of dealing with. I was about to run away from everything and become independent, the dream of almost every teen. I would be the envy of everyone in school. While they were trapped in the self-imprisonment of public school, I would be on the open roads with my girlfriend, Julia. It was like we were going to be adults, but not quite. Later, I would realize what an un-adult decision this was. It was stupid, careless, and immature among other things, but that wasn't going to stop me. I was going on this trip, and nothing was going to stop me. There was just one problem...

“Money,” she said sternly.

“What about it?” I asked. This was the first time I had introduced the idea to Julia and I thought I had made it evident I hadn't really planned much out. ‘Looking before leaping’ was definitely her forte, not mine. It was irritating at the time, but I was sure that her planning and foresight would save us later.

“Yes, money, the number one reason we will never do this.” She replied, sitting down next to me on her bed.

“Number one?”

“Numero uno.” She replied, “Comprendes ahora?” She flashed one of those brilliant smiles that made me fall for her in the first place.

“I get it, so there are more reasons?” I asked, stuttering a little after the smile. I was still a nervous teenager after all and Julia's occasional conduct made me realize how good she was for me.

“Yes, but let's start with the money. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I only have five-hundred and sixty-three dollars to spend, and you have just short of eight hundred. Tie up the loose ends, and that leaves us at most fifteen hundred, likely closer to thirteen.” Shit, she was right. “That wouldn't even get us to California.”

“Who said we were going to California?”

“Nobody,” she said, “It was just an observation.” I glared at her knowingly. “Well, maybe I would like California.” She admitted.

“I think I'd like seeing you in a California bikini.” I said grinning. Julia blushed, her cheeks deep red. I couldn't tell you if that was a good or a bad thing.

“We're getting off track.” She said, pushing her long hair to the side. She revealed her cheeks again, and they slowly restored back to their normal coloration. She looked back into

my eyes as she again prepared her winning argument. “What about our families?”

“Reason number two,” I said. The fact that I was counting showed there was a barrage of reasons to come. “What about them?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think it would be a little weird if my mom came to wake me up for school one day, and I just wasn’t there?” I was fighting a losing battle. Every time, I looked up to Julia and locked eyes with her again, she had another good reason. It felt like forty-five minutes before I interjected. I put my arm around her and cuddled up next to her like a puppy, assuming the typical role of the smaller one in the relationship despite the fact that I was at least four inches taller than her. I had to bring out every ounce of charm and cuteness in me to make this work.

“Babe, now is not the time for reason.” I said in my soft voice. She started laughing at me. Slightly embarrassed, I decided to stick with the original plan. “You work so hard, you’re so stressed out, you deserve a break. I want a break, too. I’m offering to take you on one.” She looked back into my eyes again and gave me a sweet look this time.

“Look, I’m not trying to upset you. I just don’t want you to do something stupid. And I especially don’t want you to drag me into something stupid.” She gave me a quick kiss and stood up off the bed, heading towards her desk. She looked back to see if she really hurt my feelings and quickly repealed her first statement. “Sorry, sweetie. It’s not a bad idea in

theory, I just want you to see how much can go wrong and how little can go right.” That was it- my dream dissolving in front of my eyes. “Now, get your butt over here and let’s do our Spanish homework like civilized people.”

“Yeah,” I said lightly. That was my excuse for coming here in the first place, and Julia’s parents would get upset if it wasn’t done by the time I left. I pulled up a chair next to hers as I sarcastically exclaimed, “The reason I live, español.” Julia looked into my eyes sympathetically for the last time that night.

“You know that wasn’t easy for me either. It’s really hard to argue against a cute guy.” I smiled at her, joyfully embarrassed. She rubbed her soft fingers across my cheek. “But really, the puppy dog act?”

Chapter Two

After a night filled with Spanish homework, I retreated home from my unsuccessful attempt to get Julia in on my escape plan. Those were the worst possible nights, when Julia and I were more focused on translating verb conjugations than decoding the complex language that was our relationship. Our eyes were locked on sheets of paper rather than the other person. That was us though. It was a testament to our relationship that we could spend nights doing horribly boring things and still be in love. I guess that’s what love always meant to me. You love someone when you can do the worst activities with them and still enjoy yourself.

Still, I spent every day dreaming about talking to Julia in an environment without these constant, horrible pressures. I wanted to live out every kid's dream. And if you think I'm exaggerating how bad school is, you clearly didn't live through the same school I did. While Julia cruised through school, I only dreamed of cruising out of school on my beloved road trip project. For every test she got a seemingly effortless A on, I struggled to get a low B. And for every problem I encountered academically, I encountered an equally troubling problem socially.

Somehow finding friends in that school was more difficult than finding x in the equation. The rare x gems were hidden in a maze of exponents, roots, and other factors. If this math analogy isn't making sense, then I'm explaining it right because for whatever reason I couldn't understand how Julia made so many friends. The only thing that kept me going through this particular day was the thought of bringing up the concept of escape to Julia again. We were never in the same classes, but I always sat with her and her friends at lunch.

"Hey," I said walking up to the table, as I set down my usual lunch bag and pulled out my usual peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"You're so boring." Julia said affectionately with a kiss on the cheek. A kiss on the cheek always meant more to me than when we kissed on the mouth. It symbolized that she loved me enough to kiss me on her own. It showed that she

loved me, whether I loved her back enough to give her my mouth or not.

"And good afternoon to you too." I said with a half-smile, "Hello ladies." I said to her friends. I was trying as hard as I could to get close to Julia's friends. Most of them gave me an awkward half-hearted smile. I could tell they didn't really appreciate that Julia used her first round draft pick on me. Sometimes, I wanted to tell them that I didn't get it either.

Fortunately, her best friend Hannah was starting to take a liking to me. I think Julia had talked to her and told her this was for real a couple weeks ago. Things were maybe getting better slowly.

"Hey!" She practically shouted, letting out a cute giggle, watching the other girls continued reaction to me. Hannah was one of those cheerleading girls, who put on that really fake smile through the whole routine, then she walks off the mat, and she still has that fake smile. Then you see her smiling at lunch, and you realize it's not a fake smile. Hannah was just a genuinely happy person, with a big, beautiful smile on her face all the time.

"What's up?" I said, smiling back. I couldn't help that her happiness was contagious, and she was just beaming at me. She almost seemed like she knew something that I didn't.

"So, hun." Julia said, gazing at me, "Let's let the lion out of its cage."

“The what?” I said, taking a bite into my sandwich. I didn’t like this expression one bit, disregarding the fact that I didn’t know what it meant.

“Do you think Hannah’s cute?” Julia blurted out. She didn’t mean it. All the girls at the table started laughing, Julia included, as I could feel my cheeks turn red. This was their typical everyday table game of “make me feel as awkward as possible because I’m the only boy at the table.” Today, it seemed particularly awkward as my girlfriend gave me the excruciatingly uncomfortable choice between telling her I think another girl is cute and insulting her best friend.

“Yes, but I think you’re cuter.” I said smoothly. Sometimes, I managed to pull something off that surprised even myself and got me out of the awkward boyfriend role for the day. The table managed an “aww” in unison. The focus of the table seemed to finally shift off of me like the spotlights on a stage, untangling the beams of light as the girls returned to talking amongst each other.

“Hey babe, I’m going to go buy my lunch now.” Julia said, “Thanks for being a good sport.” She whispered the last part, planting a light kiss on my cheek. In my embarrassment, I find that I forget why I love her so much.

“It’s no big deal.” I said blandly. It was kind of a big deal. My continued role as mockery of the table was one of the reasons that I wanted to leave the school. And currently worse, Julia’s five minute absence from the table was the worst part of my day. She always tried to wait until the line was shortest, but

it still took her awhile to decide, select, and buy lunch, one of my many pet peeves about her. It was vital for me to stop thinking about her flaws though. Bringing up cracks in a relationship with a near-perfect girl wasn’t a winning battle for me in any way.

(END. To be continued at some point in my life...)

Conversation with the Reader 3

“I see you finally made it.”

“Yes! Is this the chapter where I get an explanation?”

“Kind of, only if you promise you’ve gotten some stuff of your own out of the book.”

“I promise.”

“The first thing you need to know is that I do everything for a reason.”

“Okay. Are you going to explain everything?”

“I can’t explain everything. I can only explain what’s in the book.”

“You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can’t Make Him Think?”

“I can go to school and learn about English, but they can’t make me write. I can write a book, but you don’t have to read it. You can read it, but you don’t have to understand it. You

can understand it, but you don’t have to have the same interpretation that I intended when I wrote it.”

“That’s deep.”

“Yes, and that’s what the whole book is about. You can see it in Bittersweet Success. This whole book is about me, my life, and what I’ve learned. Hopefully, you’ve learned something from my lessons.”

“What’s the biggest lesson?”

“My biology teacher once said, ‘Technology doesn’t work unless it’s plugged in.’ That’s probably the biggest lesson.”

“Does that have a deeper meaning?”

“My parting words- a person is only worth how much effort they put into life.”

Dear God

Dear God,

I come to you for forgiveness. That you forgive me for not being sure what to believe in or not believing in you at all. That you forgive me for asking for too much and complaining when I get too little.

I come to you in hope that I can make a religious letter a work of art. That my writing doesn't come off as stupid. That my work makes everyone take their hats off, but I don't spend my whole life on the exact wording.

I come to you a sinner. Though I know it's going to take more than rain to cleanse me. You have gifted me with a perfect form, yet I struggle with adequacy issues. I doubt your work. And I wear a cocky veil to cover my scars.

I come to you in hope that you can't help me. That you don't help me, but you help my friends, my family, my father, and I can watch all of them be happy on some distant screen while I sulk by myself.

I come to you in hope that I don't forget you. Because you let me live every day just for this. Even those days I prayed to die in my sleep and you let me live. I knew I had purpose.

I come to you in hope that repetition is the answer. Because it's all I've been doing my whole life.

For better or worse,

-Robert H. Stonik

About the Author

As of June 1st, 2014, Robert Stonik is a graduate from Northville High School and will be attending Michigan State University in the fall of 2014, majoring in some form of business. He wants to start a publishing and entertainment that will help people spread their stories and entertain the masses through creative expression and art.

He wrote "You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can't Make Him Think" as a way to practice writing, release his stories, and show that life is about more than what school can teach you.

He wants to thank anybody who took the time to read his entire book and welcome them to email him at robman96@gmail.com. A boy can dream, right?

