

A High Schooler's Final Response to Death

Written By Julia Rash

Note: This is my final work for this class. It's a single piece -- the first workshop piece I wrote this year. It's been made darker and more dramatic in this heavy revision process I've undergone to polish and extend it. I hope it isn't too dark; though, considering the events of the last two months of my life, it's a little hard not to border on 'too dark.' I know it might be a little short, but I hope my revisions do the piece justice. I'm so thankful that I took this class. Truly, I'll always look back and be glad I experienced this. Time slips away all too fast and this class made me appreciate the little moments and beauties in life. Ah, glorious time.

Tick...

Tick...

Tick...

Tick...

4:45pm: Library, Main Room

Humanity is incredibly diverse, every life flickering across the boundaries of space and time, brinking on the infinite, teetering on that thin line dividing reality and infinity. We're all incredibly unique; we have different pet peeves, different tastes in food and films, and different songs that make us close our eyes and smile. Amidst the darkness of reality we fill our world with lights from cities and campfire sparks. Our stories are told on cave walls, written in dye and ancient paints; they are acted on crumbling stages, sung in ancient songs we still somehow remember. We all have our own ways of dealing with the beauty that lies above us in the stars and the reminders that lay buried beneath our feet. Yet in all of our difference, among all of those small intricacies, I suppose there's one thing we all really do wonder: does every human life really matter?

It would have been nice to have received that as our prompt for this assignment. The room smells like old paint and I can almost hear the rat infestation in the walls. By 2pm, we'll likely hear a little stampede and the lights will swing a bit with the weight of the rodents. But we have bigger fish to fry. Because instead of a glorious prompt such as that, my AP English teacher decided to split that up into 5 separate parts, and I was lucky enough to get this one: *How does death impact us?*

Now I'm assuming Ms. Adams -- with her anger issues and twenty-seven cats back home clawing at her hair curlers at night -- meant the death of *other people*, not us. Because if not, well, I guess I'd have to say we don't have to worry about paying taxes anymore. Hey, maybe that's not so bad...

Twenty minutes later my groupmate Nick slams the prompt on the library table and falls back in his chair, running both hands through his hair in distress. "What does she MEAN?!" He

cries in dismay. He's forgotten that we're in the library, as well as the fact that librarian Laura has been to the joint about 3 times for arson (she was cheap to hire; they're always cheap to hire), and he sets her off.

"ALAN!" She cries out into the room. (She doesn't know anyone's name so she just selects them at random. I don't know why.) He sinks deeper into his chair, looking depressed. About 15 people turn their heads and give him looks of sympathy before returning to their own individually tailored forms of torture. His eyes start to bug and glue themselves to the table and his chin tilts down towards the faux wood. There's a red mechanical pencil in front of him and he looks about ready to murder it when Amy busts through the door and flies over to the table with the grace of an intoxicated pigeon. She slams her fists on the polyester and beams into my eyes.

"What did I miss." I facepalm as she drops an empty can of Monster into the trash and slides into her seat, short blonde hair chopped in confusion and chaos. She turns to Nick and nods quickly. "Hey Nick what's up how you doin' how your parents doin' how's your life doin'?"

Nick doesn't say anything. He just slams his head down onto the table and leaves it there.

I reach over to study the prompt, absolutely exhausted. I just got out of this creative writing class and it's been whooping my ass. I need a vacation.

I can hear Nick's sweet, sad voice mumbling quietly from his lips squished against the wood. "Does she mean *US* or does she mean other PEOPLE?!"

He sounds... very confused. Poor soul.

I cross my arms and slide the paper towards him. He leans back and puts his hands on his head, gripping brown strands and pulling straight out as he stares at it; he seems to have lost part of his mind. It's ok. It's December. We're allowed to be this emotionally unstable. Only problem

is, it's been twenty minutes and this is as far as we've gotten. We've made it to the prompt. The... prompt. Wait actually.. We've only read it. We haven't even... God *damn* it -

"Hey guys what's up." Britney drops her flower patterned backpack next to us and pulls out a Pepsi Zero Sugar. She pops the lid and gets a "Shhhhhh!" From Laura, rolling her eyes in response before raising the can to her lips. "Sorry," she says quietly, jerking a thumb toward the back. "In show choir." She exhales, taking a drink. "*God* I hate show choir..."

She looks across the table and notices Nick looking down at the wood in insanity, eye twitching. She frowns, lowering the can. "Wwwwwhh-what's up with Nick." She looks concerned but not surprised. I shrug.

"Well," I said. "He's pursuing one of the world's most ancient tasks: reading. Reading in his own *native* language."

Amy snatches the paper. "What is this? Lemme know because light isn't registering in my eyes." She holds it inches from her eyes and nods.

At this point in time Nick looks *this* close to full-on cardiac arrest. "What does it *mean?!?*" He cries out in exasperation, and I lean forward. "Nick? What do you *think* it means?" I'm just messing with him at this point. It works though, and he throws his hands into the air in total exasperation. "I DON'T *KNOW!*"

Laura shouts something in German and throws a book at him. He looks up with saucer-sized eyes and swerves to the right, narrowly missing *The Divine Comedy*. The woman's got strength. I'll give her that.

"Well..." says Emma quietly from my right, paper white claw hands squeezing her stress ball like it's keeping her alive, dark eyes bugging out of their pasty, boney sockets. We all jump

upon realizing she's there, and take slow breaths to try to act calm. "...I think... she means other people."

"Or herself."

Britney shrugs and takes another sip of Coke Zero Sugar before pulling out her succulent-patterned laptop case. "...Or maybe she's just having a life crisis. Like me."

It's dark, but the fact is, Britney has a point. Maybe the prompt isn't about other people. Maybe it's about *us*. Maybe it's about how the lives of other people change us -- impact us. Maybe it's a cry into oblivion; a demand to be heard. Maybe it's a promise to make a difference, or the sheer desire to see a purpose in the infinite strings of life crossing and intertwining with every chance encounter. Maybe this prompt is an attempt to persuade us that maybe we do have a purpose after all; that each light dotting our continents has a life attached to it that has meaning. Maybe it's a call to see that maybe our lives aren't so empty after all.

I think we realize this all at once. And within a few minutes we're standing up to move, because we're gonna need some dry erase markers.

5:07pm: Work Study Room 1a: The Hierarchy of Death Based on the Intensity of Grief

We'll go ahead and state that all human life has value, even those who have little widespread impact. We won't throw afterlife into the mess (because it's a *huge* mess, let's be honest). We're just going to say that if you're breathing, you count.

"Where should we start?" Britney asks, receiving a few hush's that she dismisses with a special finger, and I consider it for a moment, looking to the ceiling.

"Well there are probably levels," I say.

If we're going to consider death, we have to place some value on each human life, sort of

like a subjective hierarchy. Everything here will be divided based on our own interpretation of personal value in each life we come across in our own. As high schoolers, I don't know how we'll do this, but I figure we know enough about death to make something decent. "...I mean, if your neighbor drops his toaster in the bathtub with him it'll probably make you less upset than if your grandma accidentally steps into oncoming traffic." Britney nods, turning to the board beside the edge of the table. "Ok. Level One." They start talking about some divisions, but I lose focus for a second. Because The Hierarchy of Death (for short) doesn't start at Level One. I think it starts at Level Zero.

5:15pm: Level Zero

We have to start at Level Zero. I mean, we have no choice, really. Because when you really think about it, the hierarchy of death isn't just a rating of intensity of the outcome of someone's death: the Hierarchy of Death is actually a scale of pain. Because without pain, we don't care. The pain of admiration, of hate; the weight of loss that calls us to remember, whether for good or bad -- these are what form our grieving psyches. So naturally, based on that logic, Level Zero has to cause no pain. Level Zero has to include the lost lives that never hurt us, but ones that we remember without any emotional feelings. They are names on lists, people we recognise but feel no grief for. They are historical figures and old dead guys we love or despise, and they're so far dead and rotten in their graves that we don't even feel sad that they're dead anymore. Rip.

So we have to start at Zero. That seems like the right place to begin. Let's call it something new. Alright, I've got it: Level Zero: The Praised and Unattached Dead.

5:17pm

With the term “Praised Dead,” you might think we’d be sad. The word “Praised” implies intense admiration, and of course “dead” obviously points towards some sort of grief or sadness. I mean, after all, we loved people like the Praised Dead enough to quote and remember them for centuries, sometimes *millennia*. So why aren’t we sad? Everyone’s grandma has probably shed a tear at some quote from Shakespeare or the melodies of one of Mozart’s symphonies (if yours is emotional enough). However at this Level of the Dead -- the influence these past lives have on our own -- is of miniscule emotional attachment.

Aristotle, Plato, Hemingway, Socrates, Parmenides, Thoreau -- these are the people lining the rows of the Praised Dead. They are people we look up to from the past -- people we admire and adore. We might even feel slight sadness tickling the fringes of our unconsciousness upon thinking of them, wishing for the presence of these people in our lives today. George Washington, Elizabeth Cady Stanton; the list could go on forever, full of those we respect but do not mourn. It is the lack of mourning which is central to this level; because we do not mourn, we don’t feel any pain. And because we don’t feel any pain, the Level as a whole is rendered respected but not worthy of lament. Don’t worry; we love and sometimes idolize people on this level too. Yet we do not *feel* for them, and that is how they are distinguished from the rest of the dead. Even so, they have incredible influence over our lives. I mean, where would we be without the brilliance of Edison, Tesla, and Einstein, or the beauty of the works of Mozart, Michelangelo, and da Vinci? There are countless past lives with incredible influence on our world today: brilliant sparks that still shine in the stars above us every night. These lives had value in a very broad and great sense, touching the lives of so many people, and thus, in their fame, trickled

down into the modern age and made an impact on *us*. Still, at the thought of their death, we feel almost no sadness at all. It's a pretty great death. You don't even have to be sad that they're dead.

So yeah, Level Zero is nice. We get to feel the beauty of these people's lives without feeling emotionally attached or drained. Also we can't forget that it was small and insignificant people like us that let them rise to the top of the social hierarchy. We're all winners.

We write it down.

5:25pm

Well Nick just spilled coffee all over himself *right* as Laura the Librarian (I know I don't have to repeat that but it's kind of fun to say) walked in on us. Needless to say, we might not be here for much longer. We hand Nick some patterned napkins (we don't have tissues) and consider Starbucks. It's a little basic (very basic), but Nick is kinda gross and he's only making the coffee smell more appealing which makes me upset. We decide to carpool. Except Nick. Nick gets to drive on his own. We're not getting those white fabric seats brown, no not today. He gives us a little puppy face as we drive past his camo-pattered Toyota Camry. Britney makes a joke that she can only see the wheels. It's funny until we almost crash into him because he gets in our blind spot. Freakin' b -

5:37pm: Level One

We slide into our seats after ordering our drinks and the group starts talking and I start to think of the next level: Level One. I think I'll call it The Unremembered Dead.

Contrary to what you might be thinking, The Unremembered Dead aren't forgotten. Some people are forgotten, sure, and this is an actual tragedy. But the Unremembered dead are

remembered. They're just remembered as part of a collective whole. They are the unfortunate loss of great tragedy; the remains of unfortunate happenings in an unfortunate and often depressing world. How unfortunate.

In short, the Unremembered Dead just aren't remembered by the current "I." We have no names.

This category of the dead includes individuals that we *know* have died, but we can't mourn deeply because of their greatness in number and our unawareness of their unique minds, lives, and personalities. This group includes war heroes and soldiers -- good police, members of the medical field, and heroes during catastrophic events who gave their lives to save other people they didn't even know. This is the *agape* of death. These are the silent lives that died quietly for other people, giving the ultimate gift just to save those they would never even get the chance to meet. This is arguably the most powerful of deaths, for it is the most admirable. It is the *agape* deaths which we never forget. It is the loss of innocent life -- perishing as a savior or dying as a helpless soul -- that we mourn but do not often shed tears over. It is beautiful, yet we cannot mourn deeply. It is here where we experience bordering on the edge of sadness for the first time. It is here in which we take the first step towards oblivion.

5:47pm: Starbucks

These deaths upset us, whether we like it or not. They affect us because they make us sad, kind of like how sad we were when Nick spilled his second drink a few seconds ago. His *coco* privileges have been revoked. Sorry, Nick. No more Starbucks for you.

Maybe this is a waste of time. Britney's scribbling advertisements for Coke on a Starbucks napkin and Nick is craning his neck over her shoulder to get a nice look at some cute

girl that's *way* out of his league as the smell of pine and mocha waft through the dim yellow lights across the ceiling. Huh. I didn't notice how many people were here until just now. I scan the faces, trying to hold onto them.

5:56pm: Level Two

The room gets quiet with the passing of time and we move to the third level of the dead: Level Two: The 'Mostly' Dead. We often overlook the importance of the 'Mostly' Dead because although they change us, their impact is often fleeting. The difference between the 'Mostly' Dead and the Unremembered Dead lies in one thing: a name. An individual identity. We have no names for the Unremembered Dead; they are but nothing more than fleeting blocks of text, lists of words and pictures of faces. They are people but they lack *humanity*. Level Three bestows upon them humanity.

Those in Level Three are the residents of obituaries, or the victims we read about in newspaper articles. They are tragedies, false memories, and feelings of *deja-vu*. Their eyes strike up false memories and signs that point us in a direction of our lives we almost forgot. They inspire stories of the past and create pain in the hearts of those who recognise them. They are children in accidents, teens who made mistakes; they were gone too soon, and if not, we feel as though we almost recognise them as our grandparents. We read about them and feel bad for them, but we quickly move on.

For a moment, we might feel touched by their circumstances. It's sad when another Florida man gets killed wildly and dramatically in some freak accident somehow involving an alligator, but sometimes it's entertaining. Either way, we move on easily. Though we feel a touch

of false nostalgia, we immediately let it slip through our grasp. It's kind of like a tree falling in the forest: we hear it, but we forget about it the second the sound waves go flat.

6:01pm

I don't know how he's done it, but Nick has convinced us that he's worthy of drinking coco, and so he's purchased another cup and is holding it in his hands like a brick of gold. His eyes are twinkling like a coke addict and he's absorbing the heat like it's the warmth of some calming and insanity-inducing nuclear radiation. There's loud ambient noise all around us: the clinking of glass, the murmuring of voices and the roar of machines over the sound of some jazzy rendition of a pop song I can't stand. A lady in the corner of the room coughs loudly. All sound dies and we turn and stare. She blinks once and stands up, slinking out of the room. We look at one another, nod, and return to chattering and business. What an interesting year. We'll probably all remember that lady for a while; she's already made a little impact on us. I swear to god if she's sick...

6:28pm: Coco Catastrophe

So Nick spilled something on himself again. The moment he did, his eyes just freakin' died and all light escaped from his being as it poured onto the tile floor in soft coco. "Nick?!" Britney said, grabbing him by the arm to yank him from his seat. "We're going *back* to the library. You aren't drinking *anything*." Nick looked down sadly at the floor, the edges of his mouth turned down, and nodded like a kid who lost his ice cream cone. "Alright. I accept that."

6:38pm: Back at the Library

I look up at the shelves of books and think about the thousands of stories and lives that line the paper pressed together in those books; the imprints these people made with their works. God knows no one can read them all; not even close. But the mere fact that these souls attempted to make an impact (and that some succeeded) is pretty freakin' admirable. I wish I had the guts to write something and publish it. My grandma might see it though. God I'd never want to see that woman again; I'd die of shame.

6:47pm: Level Three

Now we've reached the fourth level of the Hierarchy of Death. This is where it actually becomes real. This is the part where things start to leave a lasting mark. This is Level Three: The 'Oh' Dead. These are the faces we actually recognise.

We often underestimate the power of The 'Oh' Dead; the power of the loss of a life we didn't realize we valued. These people are called The 'Oh' Dead because that's what we say when we hear that they're gone. There's a mix of shock and a feeling of being stunned. Surely they're still alive. Surely these people are still out there, planting seeds of memories at the peripheries of our eyes that will soon fall into our hearts. However, though it is a weak stage of pain, it is at this level in which we encounter a term that is arguably the most powerful non-existent word in the English language: sonder.

Sonder isn't a real word, technically. But it does exist and it has a definition. The term was created by John Koenig, the author of an online dictionary of made-up words called *The Dictionary Of Obscure Sorrows*. And the word itself means something beautiful. For sonder means living your life completely and entirely aware that each and every random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. It can be painted out like this:

The city lights dimly flickering above in skyscrapers as you hold your umbrella up and walk through the rain in the evening, each window a single breathing soul. Sonder is the chatter of stories and drama, of worries, frustrations and pain that you hear at a restaurant or out by a smoke-laced bar room. Sonder is the fear you recognize misting over the eyes of your taxi driver, the understanding that a million neurons are firing, pulling memories, emotions, thoughts and fears from his life as he flies down Michigan Avenue. Sonder is the understanding that every life you come into contact with -- every shoulder you brush against on your walk to work, every honk of a horn -- holds within itself a life so vivid and complex that you can't even fathom its depth and intensity. Sonder is accepting that the millions of souls flickering across your consciousness each contain dense and powerful purposes. Sonder is understanding *humanity*. Sonder is understanding *us all*.

Maybe that's why death in Level Three of The Hierarchy of death is so intense. The man we used to see ordering a coffee in his trenchcoat; the lady with her pomeranian dog; the student that walked close to the lockers with his head down, and the girl who always laughed too loud in the choir. You see, upon the beach of our conceivable reality there lies an infinitesimal number of threads. They cross and intersect, weaving among themselves before pulling apart. They fall and strike; they lace and shy away. It's impossible to try to pick apart which string is who, or how each one possibly comes into contact with the others. The only thing we can do is study the strings, and be glad that such impossible chance encounters led us to so many incredible people.

We underestimate the power of sonder. We underestimate the value of each chance encounter in this infinite complexity that is human life. We often fail to recognise the beauty in the strings. We close our eyes and hear the waves of the ocean crashing against the beach instead of reaching out to brush our fingers against the threads that lie at the edge of the water. Life is

such an incredible and impossible thing. The chances of your existence are the result of millions of chance events that could have gone any other way.

And even so, we have such little light to fill the void that stretches across our continents. Yet we do. We have a light. We have sonder.

7:00pm: Break Time

At this point, I need to take a break. That was a little too intense, and Emma has something in her eyes so she goes to the bathroom for a minute. Across the hall someone sneezes and I can hear the sound of coffee being brewed. Wait. We could have gotten coffee *here*? I turn toward the noise and notice it's my english professor. He nods and I nod, slowly turning back to my seat while biting the side of my cheek. Dang it. Now he'll *know* we procrastinated.

7:06pm: Level Four

Soon enough we're back, but Britney looks a little empty inside. We're running out of names and she shrugs when we ask for the next level. "Inception of Pain" she says. "I think that about sums it up."

It must be stated that Level Three is kinder than Level Four, just as Level Four is Kinder than Level Five. But there's a noticeable difference here, because these lives actually start to hurt. We'll call them what Britney chose.

This is the Inception of Pain. This is where reality seeps into nostalgia and creates tension and denial. Those that lace the edges in the "Inception of Pain" category are people we recognise from our television screens and news outlets; they are the loss of those we sometimes idolize, though we never met them in person. The reason these deaths hurt more than the ones present in

sonder is because it is these lives which we first have the illusion of true personal loss. My grandfather used to listen to David Bowie. He loved the guy, claimed to have a sort of emotional connection with him. When he died my grandpa had a hard time for a while. He didn't get off his chair and wasn't interested in reading or watching tv. I could see it in his eyes for a bit; that sense of loss, of never coming back. It was sad to him. It actually hurt. But within a few weeks he was back to his normal self. He knew he had to move on.

What people often forget about people they've never really met is how close they can become with them. It's at Level Four in which we finally start to feel a sort of lasting pain. Even looking back, my grandfather had this melancholy voice when describing Bowie after his passing; there was this happiness but it was tinged with sadness at the loss of a voice that could never return. Bowie spoke to him; he was someone of value. And then he was gone.

In a general sense, these souls in Level Four are the shimmering voices we hear. They comprise a collection of well-known and adored personalities with whom we feel emotionally attached and have a hard time letting go of. We have followed them, studied them: our knowledge of them can range from mere recognition or respect to manic obsession. When these people die, it hurts us. It hurts because, to an extent, we feel as though we truly knew who they were. In many ways, my grandfather truly mourned for the loss of Bowie. He truly hurt. The mourning can last a few weeks -- maybe even months -- simply because we have attributed parts of our identities -- even if they are small -- to these people. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Marilyn Monroe, Elton John, and Barack Obama (the latter two still living) fall under this category of people. Many living souls have been inspired, lit up with the fire of these famous persons, and, to an extent, they have the capacity to feel a great degree of sorrow for their loss. Level Four is the first true heavy tragedy.

It is *crucial* to note that those in the lower levels are in some cases mourned more deeply than celebrities. We must note the immeasurable power of sonder. But unfortunately, reaching that state of understanding -- that level of knowledge -- is difficult to attain. It is rare, and when it does happen, it does have the capacity to have a weight that leads to sadness at loss. However, the magnitude of the people affected by the loss of celebrities is so great that it must be raised above even sonder. Sonder is far too difficult to attain to be generalized to every human mind, no matter how badly we want it to be. And also, these members of “Inception” are sometimes glorified, wrapped around the minds of others. People don't just *recognise* them; they feel as though they *know* them. You can't mourn unless you feel as though you know. “Inception” is the first step to truly knowing.

7:26pm: To Britney's House

We're at the end of Level Four when we hear a “*crash*” and look over to see that Nick knocked over some hand-crafted pottery in the basement of the library. Within minutes we're bolting to the car and we fly towards Britney's two-story condo in the sunset. I've never gotten whiplash from a stop sign before.

We shrug off our coats and turn on the lamps lining the warmly decorated living room. Britney throws her bag onto the sofa and walks to the fireplace, turning on the gas to start the flames. A small white cat pads down the stairs and looks at us before meowing and bolting straight for the mantle. I reach out instinctively and grab the soft cat, cradling it like a little baby as the fire starts, and we all just sit down then and there. I can hear her purring.

“What's the password?” Nick asks, opening his laptop. Britney raises her eyebrows and shrugs. “Oh, I don't have wifi. Use Mark's. It's free.” We all slowly look over to a window to our

right and catch a glimpse of a man dancing to some swing music. He knocks over a vase and the flowers tumble to their deaths. Emma purses her lips and points with a bony finger. “Look, Nick. It’s you.”

7:34pm: Level Five

It’s level Five in which things start to become intense. Because only at level Five do we start to see permanent damage. Only at Level Five does death start to strike us at our core.

Though Level Five only claws at the strings of our consciousness, it grasps and sometimes snaps a few strands, leaving a break that can’t be sewn back. Level Five is the “I Think I Might Have Loved Them.”’s This is because we don’t really know. There are memories and bits from firing neurons in our heads, but we can never grasp a full understanding of who these people were enough to mourn them to the point of emotionally crumbling. This is often where the grandparents come in. But not always.

My first experience with Level Five was about seven years ago, back when everything was easy. It was 2am when the phone rang, echoing through the dark house. I didn’t know any better. I thought it was spam, or someone from China telling us our computer needed to be fixed as long as we gave them some credit card digits. No. It was my cousin. It was... *about* my cousin. I remember how he taught me to cast a line and reel it in. I remember his smile, though I’ve long since lost his voice. He was kind and compassionate, loving and brave, and he loved archery, just like I do.

He crashed into a tree. They were all intoxicated. They just... didn’t make the turn. He died on impact. He probably didn’t even fully know. I guess it’s a blessing; just not the part where his brother pushed open the front door with wide eyes and told my aunt the news. My

mother sobbed. I held her hand at the funeral. We looked at his body, all taped back together. It didn't look right. I guess they never look right. They're missing their heartbeats.

I cried about that loss. Also the loss of my grandfather from cancer a year later. The last thing I did was hold his shaking hand as he told me that he loved me. I suppose it was good to know. Then again, I have so little of him left. I might have assumed he loved me anyways. After all, isn't that what grandparents are supposed to do?

The funerals for Level Five's are strange, if you do so get the chance to attend them. You hold your head and try to respond the way everyone else is, not overdoing it but not under doing it, either. You know how you feel -- that sick, heavy feeling -- but you know you have to respond in the right way, just like everyone else. Response is dictated by sonder. Response is dictated by an understanding of every other person's pain.

It's strange at first, when they lower the coffin or tell you the news. At first, you might not even really care. But as the years go by you start holding tighter to those few memories you have of them: the way he always flashed a smile at you before he reeled in something big; the way the jazz rolled across the walls of his 1972 house and into his wrinkled smile. The "I Think I Loved Them"'s are people we truly do love, because as time goes by we start to have this fondness for them that grows a little more every day. Because with the little fragments of your shared memories you create a book; you sew an explanation. You must convince yourself that their life was significant; you must remember that it was their time to go, even if they were only 23. Yet you have to understand that the threads crossed briefly for a reason; that they were meant to only affect you in a small way. You find meaning in their lives and in it find a bit of meaning in your own. You think you loved them and, after time, you'll find you do. It hurts a bit, but just a bit, and that's ok. That's ok.

7:38pm: Cry Break

The group has reached their breaking point and Britney slams down her fourth empty can of Pepsi Zero Sugar onto the table of the Chick-fil-A we went to because Nick got “hungry thinking about all this sad stuff.” Emma is sobbing as she holds her sandwich, Amy has crashed and passed out in a sugar coma, and Nick is doodling special parts with the Expo marker he stole from the... library *dang* it why does nobody watch him more closely? It’s like he needs a *baby* sitter dear *God*. A waiter walks by, shoots him a look and motions to the door. Yeah, I guess we should hit the library one last time.

This is so depressing.

8:15pm: Depression Sets In

Another thing that’s depressing is how little we’ve accomplished in this long period of time. Also the heater. It doesn’t seem to be working right anymore. And the fact that we squeaked into the parking lot on an empty tank of gas. I gather the info and revise, scrolling on Britney’s laptop.

“Alright, we have enough, right?” Britney asks as she stares at me, eyes completely empty. But she knows we have one more level to do. Nick’s asleep in the corner of the room (how did he *do* that? We shake him awake and he mutters a ‘hmm?’ before realizing he’s about to get his ass whooped) and Emma chews her 16th piece of gum in the last 20 minutes. Amy is out for the count. But we’re not quite done. We need to do the last level. We need to do Level Six.

8:47pm: Level Six: They're Gone

Level Six is excruciating. Level Six doesn't let you forget.

In a biblical sense, the number Seven means completeness. Which is why it's sickeningly perfect that we don't quite make it there. It's sickeningly perfect because when we lose a Level Six, we can no longer be complete. Because when the floor of Level Six is dropped, we lose pieces of ourselves we can't replace.

Level Six is a pain beyond all human comprehension. It's strange how you can go from a sad, empty feeling in your gut to a heart-wrenching nausea that makes you tear at your sheets at night and scream in your sleep. This is Level Six. This is the people who are never coming back.

Though I've never dealt with a Level Six in my life, I've seen it. I've seen my father fall to his knees and sob in a pew of the church as the organ played and the presence of my grandpa faded into the dark stained glass and musty air. I could feel the emotion drain from my mothers eyes as she sobbed and leaned against my door, saying that my cousin -- her little niece she had known closely since he was born -- had passed away. So young... so unexpectedly.

Level Six is agony without the satisfaction of calling it pain. You can say that you're in misery but you can't describe exactly how you feel. It's a sort of pressure, weighing on every surface of your skin. It's a sickness in your stomach; a tingling in your arms and legs. It's a bloodless face, a set of empty eyes. Level Six is where you have to smile. You have to smile or people start to notice that you're dead, too.

With Level Six, you lose a part of yourself that you will never fully replace. Level Six is the only true tragedy of the levels, for it is only Level Six that has the power to kill you. If you've ever heard of elderly couples dying hours apart from one another because of heartbreak,

that is Level Six. The loss of a Level Six is not a loss of “they.” The loss of Level Six is a loss of something wholly and undeniably “I.”

Level Five breaks our hearts, but Level Six shatters the remaining fragments of our souls. It is Level Six at which the six stages of grief all throw themselves upon us with painful and terrifying intensity. We feel as though we’re drowning; dying. In the moments following the tragedy (sometimes as long as decades,) we sometimes no longer wish to live.

This is Six. The terrible Six. The level from which it is hard to recover, the only level which brings earth-shattering pain. We won’t get much deeper into Level Six. We all have depression anyways and besides, Nick’s annoying the crap out of us with dad jokes. If he keeps it going he’ll never *be* a dad. But maybe it’s too early for the death jokes. But then again I mean, you can never be too early for death jokes.

9:12pm: The Statue

It’s strange how quiet it is when I press submit. Half the group is asleep and Britney nods solemnly. “Well, I’m having nightmares for the next three weeks.”

Within twenty minutes we’re walking out of the library. But there’s this quiet call to think about this prompt just one last time. It’s cold outside and Emma nods, walking toward her mom’s car as Nick waves and heads the other way. Amy runs towards an Uber and I exhale, seeing mist. Everyone’s gone, but Britney and I stay behind. It’s getting colder and we look up at the person on the horse statue outside the building, gazing towards the tree-lined horizon.

“Do you know who they are?” Asks Britney.

“No,” I say as a breeze from the North picks up and whips through our jackets and coats.

“But somebody does. Somebody remembers.”

She nods and turns away toward the headlights of an oncoming car. I look over and we exchange sad smiles before she steps inside. I can hear the door slam as she heads home, but I can't take my eyes off the statue's solemn face.

My mom is late to pick me up, but I don't sit down to wait. I can't look away. I just keep looking up at that statue, wanting to remember.

Reflection

My process of writing and revisions was simple: I took a look at the beginning of each sentence and, because I spent so much time writing this piece, remembered what I had written and rewrote each one, adding large chunks that I later revised and combined with the best parts from my original essay. Then, I compared my work with the original paragraph to make sure that I had included every part that my peer had liked during our review, as well as parts I myself found personally valuable. It was quite the process, and I'm very glad with how my piece turned out.

I feel as though I have developed many skills from reading and revising my work so many times over this semester, as well as experimenting with new forms from writers I would have never heard of had I not taken this course. I feel as though I have developed the skill of sight. I feel as though, through this class, I have grown in my ability to truly see the art in what others have written and bring in those emotions and ideas into my own works in very powerful ways. I believe that you cannot write well if you refuse to see the delicate intricacies that the art of writing demands; I believe that unless you willingly open your eyes to the endless forms, styles, and possibilities of fiction and nonfiction, you can never truly create anything with meaning. I have actually *experienced* the pieces I have read in this class this semester, as dramatic as that sounds, and I feel as though I've learned valuable things about perception and the human mind; the experience of human life. I've learned *sonder*. I've learned the importance of seeing the soul behind the pages I read. It's incredible.

I've learned overall that, in my own writing, my grammar is poor and I am oftentimes far too poetic and depressed. Granted, I think most writers are poetic and depressed -- that's why they're writers. But I hope that I can shake that a bit; this piece was much lighter before my

revisions that you see now, and I hope that, over time, I can slip back into that lighthearted state of mind. I think I need a healthy escape from reality.

Overall, I have truly enjoyed this class. I can say with honesty that it's probably the best class I've ever taken, and my favorite by far. I just always got excited in this class to show what I'd created and to collaborate with my classmates. Going to be completely honest, this was the only class this semester that I spoke in. Every other class I was radio silent. There was just something about your course that pulled me in and demanded that I say something. I just *felt* things when I read and wrote them... I can't explain it any other way. Thank you for supporting me and encouraging me. Thank you for understanding the trauma and taking my crap when I sort of lost it for a while. I'm doing much better now, and feel as though I'm finally starting to feel okay again. Thank you for everything. If you ever teach another writing course, please let me know! I'd take this class a million times and still enjoy it. Well, maybe just a few.