

THE VISUAL ESSAY

by

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REFLECTION STATEMENT

Human beings are ritualistic. Most likely, each one of us abides by self-enforced laws, which govern the outcome of our day. My morning routine, for instance, consists of waking up, pressing the snooze button at least three times in the ensuing thirty minutes, then opening my laptop to check the holy cyber trinity: Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook. Usually I feel rushed as I skim through these sites, as if I missed out on groundbreaking social, political, and creative knowledge and inspiration within my seven hour fast from technology. After rapidly reading Tweets from the *New York Times* and Texas Humor, I can breathe a little bit easier, and reluctantly get out of bed.

The Internet has transformed our communication methods, including ways in which we share art and writing. From online art galleries to creative writing blogs, the arts abound, not limited to the walls of a museum or the binding of a book. The rise of the Internet has contributed to new art forms such as GIFS and new media art, like the visual essay.

The visual essay combines creative writing with film. From non-fiction to fictional pieces, visual essays use film and lyrical language to electrify the senses. While questioning the subject of my Honors Thesis last year, I knew I wanted to combine features from my two majors, English and Art History. For this project, I fused creative aspects from both majors in a stimulating and challenging way by tackling this new media art form, the visual essay.

I began my project by researching examples of visual essays and film artists. My supervising professor, Dr. Curt Rode, shared with me an amazing online journal

called *Blackbird*. From there, I found John Bresland's *Mangoes* especially inspiring. His filming technique consisted of smooth film shots, mimicking the steady, lullaby of his voice.

Another inspiring artist for my project was the world acclaimed filmmaker Pipilotti Rist, specifically her piece *Pour Your Body Out*. Exhibited in The Museum of Modern Art in 2009, Rist's *Pour Your Body Out* featured giant, magnified images of flowers juxtaposing awkward camera angles of people, thus creating a surreal world moving in slow motion among a backdrop of colorful explosion. Rist's *Pour Your Body Out* led me to the short film, *Solipsist*, from the artist Andrew Thomas Huang. His piece includes several time lapsing techniques and green screening in order to show color and texture acting as a mysterious force, which transforms people into mystical creatures.

Douglas Gordon's *Making Eyes*, created to Rufus Wainwright's music, inspired me in a different way. Unlike Rist and Huang, Gordon's piece features a lack of color except for the deep, mesmerizing quality of pale, green irises dramatized against drooping, painted black eyelashes and lids. From these inspirational pieces, I learned the necessity of timing and the use of metaphor to explain a scene, an emotion, and a character within a film.

While I had plenty of inspiration about filming techniques and overall style, I still needed an actual story, the almighty essay portion of the visual essay. I began re-reading short non-fiction pieces I wrote last year in my creative non-fiction class. One of the major challenges that I faced with these pieces was that they depicted moments from my childhood, such as me as a child plotting revenge

against my kid brother in Chicago, Illinois. Although I had material to build off of for my visual essay project, there were certain scenes that I knew would be difficult to replicate.

From there, I looked at journal pages of creative writing I wrote over the past year or so, and decided to write a new story based upon them, one more suited to “the visual essay.” I began to realize how bizarre it was that a relatively new, open-ended art form had its limitations, or at least to say complications. With the visual essay, I felt immediately bound to the text. There was a sense of pressure, not only with time, but how to portray characters and emotions literally and metaphorically that would be understandable to the viewer. The text and the visual component of this art form needed to compliment each other in a thought provoking way while also making sense to the viewer.

I re-examined the artists who first inspired me while also paying attention to Hollywood movies and their style of editing. While watching Bennett Miller’s *Capote* with Philip Seymour Hoffman, I was struck by the opening scene depicting Holcomb, Kansas. The image of the farm was quiet, still and even beautiful, but it was in the silence that the viewer knew something quite horrendous had taken place. I examined the short films, *Forecast* by Tim Sessler and *Fog* by Caleb & Shawn. Both were absolutely amazing in the sense that through music and shots of nature, wild and calm, forceful and gentle, that they created a series of dichotomies quickly evaporating and formulating with each passing scene.

From these film inspirations I wrote, *21*, a story based upon experiences with a good friend of mine last year. While the characters and the story are

fictional, I drew off of this emotion of being friends with someone who was dealing with significant health issues at such a young age. I created a character who was dependent on her friend, and while it is her friend who is facing life altering news, it is the protagonist who is mentally unraveling, drowning in anxiety about her own life regarding love, friendship, and future dreams. These emotions the protagonist faces are borderline narcissistic, thinking of herself while it is her friend who remains positive despite the possibility of her own physical illness. Juxtaposing bodily sickness is mental anguish. The nameless protagonist is living in memories of the past, both with her friend and family, and is unable to move forward because she is frozen in fear due to the tension of actual loss and potential loss: her fragmented family, her feelings towards Paul (her friend's boyfriend), and the idea of losing her best friend to disease.

After the final edits of my story, I commenced filming everything I saw that was even the slightest bit intriguing. I became a new media hoarder, collecting countless files of possible footage from "house in morning light" to "house in evening light." I heavily relied on the skills I learned in my Intro to Photography and New Media Art courses. What I learned in my studio and art history courses on photography greatly altered my perception about photography and its uses from art, social and political documentary, to even scientific research purposes. As my photography professor, Dick Lane, said to our class the first day, a camera is a box with a lens, which controls how much light enters and escapes. I learned early on, however, that photography is far from simple after switching the setting on my Nikon SLR from automatic to manual. Adjusting the aperture and f-stop even the

slightest bit greatly transformed my images. I then began to pay close attention to light and color.

Nick Bontrager's New Media Art course resumed where photography let off. From my background in Photoshop, I easily adjusted to Adobe Premier. The technology and film editing options that I learned the first day in Adobe Premier trumped all my editing knowledge in Apple's iMovie. By creating films in my New Media course, I practiced making continuous looping GIFs, film editing and special effects in both Adobe Premier and After Effects, and lastly how to adjust audio in Adobe Audition. Through this class, I was given the opportunity to rent incredible, expensive cameras and audio recorders that previously I did not have access to. The essential rule of film that Nick taught me was that one must remember that each shot of film is like taking a single photograph, both of which depend on light, planning, detail, and a little bit of luck.

I kept this in mind while filming my friend Jen, who played the role of the protagonist's friend. While it is easy to be a photography sponge and shoot film of everything around you from dust to falling leaves, prepping for actors and actresses takes a great deal of time and planning. For each scene, I made an outline of the props needed, the location, and how I wanted Jen to behave and look. As in the story, they travel to the park near dusk. Based upon the text, I filmed Jen with dim sun flickering through her hair, illuminating her youth, delicacy, and bright blue eyes. The same degree of planning went into filming my friend Benton, who played the role of Paul, a character who embodied the young protagonist's loss of love, as he later became her friend's boyfriend. Luckily, his house was the perfect

backdrop of a flashback the protagonist experienced. In this flashback, she is consumed with the memory of her childhood home in the snow.

The snow scene in general created several conflicts. My family owns hundreds of 8mm films of my brother and me as children, one of these being us as kids frolicking through the snow. During the planning of my story and film, I decided I would convert the 8mm of us in the snow to a DVD, burn it to my computer, and edit it in Adobe Premier. However, due to the original video camera breaking, I was unable to play them back, thus leaving me with hundreds of tapes without any sort of identification. Still I had hope and went to Fort Worth Camera. The little hope I had quickly diminished after the camera expert gave me the sad diagnosis that each 8mm tape would cost \$20 to convert along with additional shipping fees. Rather than spending a lifetime of savings on 8mm tapes, I used Benton's house as the location and filmed it in a way that instead of seeing the actual memory, the viewer would see a present day glimpse of the home, not warm and cozy like the text implies, but cold and distant. While filming Benton, I concentrated on the use of light-his being dim and almost red against his face, compared to Jen's pale skin illuminated with light. I wanted to cast darkness over the protagonist herself and Paul, so they acted as a foil to Jen (the friend) since she is idolized and glorified by these characters.

In the preliminary stages of filming, I had no intention of showing the protagonist's face, let alone me acting out the part of the protagonist. I always envisioned her faceless, mirroring her fluctuating identity. After collecting clips of different angles of my face, body, hands, I found other great, unused clips from

previous projects, which ended up complimenting Jen's physical space in the kitchen and in the garden.

Contrasting scenes of people were scenes involving bright colors, and fluctuating forms. I experimented with different food dyes, powders, paints, glass, and light bulbs to create a style reminiscent of Pipolitti Rist and her large, surreal, colorful images. These abstractions provided the metaphor needed to convey the protagonist's inner confusion about her situation and life. The swelling of the colors also represent the physical form of the body such as cells growing, dividing, and replicating. The scenes with color, water, and powder are meant to slow the pace of the video, and allow the viewer to sink into his own mind without focusing on the actors and actresses within the scene.

After gathering hundreds of films shots, the most difficult part of my journey came to a peak as I attempted to piece them together in a smooth, cohesive way. I began by dividing film clips up by scenes in the text, and different moods and abstractions. Starting off chronologically, the editing became trickier as the first two pages of my story equaled to four and half minutes of video; thus if I continued at that rate, my video would have equaled out to be longer than thirty minutes. Given my presentation time was fifteen minutes, and that probably no one would sit for that length without some prior warning or food bribes, it was necessary to significantly shorten the clips. This resulted in deleting most of my story and reworking it to sound coherent and intriguing in the shortest way possible.

Because of the amount of memory each clip took up, much of the editing had to be done on the library Mac desktops. While the computers ran faster towards the beginning of the project, editing became slower and more complicated as files rendered because of the complex layering of different colored masks and visual effects. Thanks to external hard drives, no files were lost during the rendering process.

Once the film editing was done, I added voice recording and background music to the film. The text, of course, is the root of the visual essay. It is the backbone, which guides the images cohesively, while the images offer abstract takes on the words themselves. Much consideration went behind the music choice for this piece. I wanted the music to be distorted, unsettling, and restless, mimicking the protagonist's mental anguish. The piece I finally chose was Frederic Chopin's *Nocturne Opus 9 No 1*. Due to copyright laws, I needed to pick a piece that was accessible through the Public Domain. For other various film projects I frequented Freemusic.com in order to get great music to download onto iTunes without the worry of copyright infringement. I slowed down Chopin's piece by twenty percent then reversed it, creating a lethargic, ethereal sound.

After uploading my video to the Internet, I was discouraged by the quality of the audio when it was said and done. I ended up spending hours editing the audio in order to eliminate background noise such as the buzzing refrigerator to the cars driving by outside. Each time I embedded the files, I would then notice something amiss like a forgotten scene transition or the timing of the audio and the visual component being slightly off. Since I worked on the project, my chef

d'oeuvre, for nearly a year, I felt timid to release it into the wild, to the Internet for everyone to see. Mentally I found excuses to keep editing such as "I should re-edit the colors in this scene," or "I should make the spoken part of this clip a bit softer." Finally towards the end of my visual essay journey, I came to terms that my project was officially ready to be viewed and I embedded it onto Vimeo.com-a website devoted to film.

My Honor's Thesis, "The Visual Essay," was a rewarding experience. This project would not have been possible if it had not been for the amazing professors who helped me along the way such as my Supervising Professor, Dr. Curt Rode, and the members of my Honor's committee, Alex Lemon and Dr. Mark Thislethwaite. I would also like to thank Dick Lane and Nick Bontrager for teaching me about photography and opening my mind to the digital art realm. Finally, I also would like to acknowledge the friends who helped me along the way including Jen Miller, Benton Baldwin, Allie Balling, Lauren Cunningham and Lauren Brown.

During this process I gained skills in editing film and audio as well as practiced a new, unique way of story telling. While story telling has been the ongoing fiber connecting mankind from the past to the present, the visual essay is an evolving way of connecting us to the future as the Internet and technology continue to be a part of our lives. Although frustrating at times, the hours spent were well worth creating a piece of art that I am proud of. This journey also made me realize the work, time and creativity that contribute to motion picture films. I hope to take my project beyond my time at Texas Christian University by entering it into new media art competitions, and creating new visual essays and films.

It's June and we are twenty-one. I sit on a black, wooden stool beside you in our lavender kitchen. The window unit blows hot air directly onto our sweating faces. Faux tanner trickles down our necks staining white and sky blue t-shirt collars. I remain distracted by a red lump on my ankle, the itching driving me mad. Still you wait for a doctor's call. You wait, I itch. I am the useless window unit; you are the broken flesh, me incapable of breathing cool air and you aching to feel something beyond the cracked wound. I scratch off thin, clear skin flakes until the ankle wound splits open, oozing a blood trail on the white, tile floor. The phone awakens the silence. You answer while I crawl on my knees to wipe up the blood. We laugh because it is not the doctor at all, but rather we won a free cruise, again.

You are six; I am six and a half. We are primal, egotistical beasts paying homage to black licorice and red berry mud pies. Despite the white fence dividing lives, a muddy creek adjoins two worlds. We fight over swampy paradise. Dirty nails sink into milky skin and grubby hands yank pigtailed. *You stole my canoe! You destroyed my fort!* My brother laughs silently behind a giant oak tree, watching the scene unfold. I kidnap your collector's edition "Britney Spears Barbie," lighting her hair on fire with a magnifying glass. You elbow me during our roller-skating competition resulting in eight stitches across my left eyebrow after I splat like a bug into an air conditioning unit. Eyebrow less for three months. No dessert after dinner for at least a year. It is a miracle we both survive the fermenting years of forced friendship.

Beyond the creek mud caking our perception with juvenile jealousy, the windows know everything about you and me. The windows witness the fights, the hugs, your disco night-light battling the dark with faint shades of red, green, blue, and yellow as weapons. The colors swim through my window, protecting me from the demons unearthed during the night. They know we each share awkward haircuts and ugly Christmas sweaters that our parents entertain themselves with; honestly who thinks a six-year-old girl with a bowl cut wearing a light-up Christmas sweater is cute? Me wanting to be like you, you wanting to be like me, when really we were just the same.

It's June and I'm I thinking about being twenty-one while you dream of Disney cruises. By this time in life, Steve Jobs co-founded Apple and Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. In twenty-one years I learned how to make mushroom risotto, managed to avoid jail time, and stood up on water skis for a hot six minutes before tumbling on my ass. Maybe I should get around to writing that novel. Or travel to Paris, just you and me on the Seine. Running away from the grand familiarity of the unfamiliar. There are times I want to say goodbye rather than hello, dessert first dinner last, kisses before vomiting words. I'm Venus de Milo, butterfly stroking through salty blue seas. No arms, all legs. People want to capture me and put me back where I belong. But I'm swimming so fast they can't catch me and will never find me, because my legs are growing tired and the fabric twisting around my body is pulling me down, drowning me.

But here you are in the lavender kitchen, calm, thinking about floating in a massive boat with strangers dressed as Jasmine and Mickey Mouse, while I think

about itching, and Paris, and being twenty-one. You flip through pictures on your laptop, discovering hidden treasures or hideous disasters of cheesy smiles and fake laughs with people we haven't talked to in years. We are fifteen in this one, attending our first Southland Heights football game of the season. You laugh at my thick set of bangs drooping across my hormonal forehead, like left over spaghetti noodles on a plate. There you are, not much better than me, with outrageous blond highlights zigzagging like zebra stripes, capturing sunrays off the metal bleachers. My parents stand a few rows back, looking out onto the field. The gossip and giggles fade as we sink deeper into memories, those of life before divorce and waiting for phone calls.

It's February and I'm eight, he's six. Our childhood home is covered with snow and ice, a father's pain in the back and his children's paradise. We scream and dance in the soft, white powder, revealing tufts of brown grass swirling with mud like vanilla fudge ice cream. Shadows coat the glistening snow. Mom yells at us to come inside because it is getting dark. Naturally, we revolt, tossing snow into the night sky, screaming like children possessed by ice demons. Dad threatens to throw snowballs at us. We're not afraid because we are young; we are immortal, knowing nothing of death, nothing of pain. He comes out with brown, leather gloves, a grey Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt, and light brown shoes with red shoelaces. He takes a handful of snow and covers it with both hands, gently forming the perfect weapon. Our frigid bodies waddle through invisible concrete. I shove my brother out from his hiding place behind the tree. Screams and laughter

break out as snow soars through the air, caking our blue snowsuits. Dad swoops up our exhausted, little bodies, chuckling to us about being easy targets.

The house is warm. Two tall brass lamps and a television in the corner create light in the small, pine walled living room that once seemed massive. My brother and I tear our snowsuits off revealing layers of itchy sweaters. Our wool socks slip and slide into the adjacent kitchen. Mom grabs the snowsuits, complaining of the water puddle on the floor. We hardly listen to her when our eyes capture the stack of buttermilk pancakes resting on the plastic table. That night we gorged our stomachs with pancakes for dinner, coating them with gooey Aunt Jemima syrup and globs of margarine.

What do you dream of? Cruises in Barbados? Eating tiramisu first? Not saying the C word that divides you and me, my twenty-one from your twenty-one? That divides the itching from the waiting? My window from your window?

My name is Margaret. I'm 5 foot 2. Left-handed. A lover of steak and ketchup. I worship the Red Sox, coffee, and Picasso. I've never been on a roller coaster because I'm deathly afraid of heights. I hate socks because they suffocate my feet. When I eat superfluous amounts of wheat products, hives pop out of my skin like popcorn. Like that one time, I went on a date with Steve Hays my senior year in high school. He ordered two types of cheese pizza-one with barbeque chicken, the other pepperoni. The salad croutons. The pizza. The breadsticks. Steve jumped back from the table, almost falling over in his chair. I looked at my reflection in the cheesy, metal pizza pan. Bright red welts creepy crawled across my chest and on my cheekbones. Steve placed \$20 on the table and ran out of that

pizza parlor so fast like he just witnessed a human transform into a zombie right before his eyes. I called you to pick me up because you had a car, even though it was a blue tin can on wheels. Your words calming, cooling, perfect, unlike my current gagging words right now, sticking to my throat while we sit in the lavender kitchen.

Doctors say cancer is a malignant neoplasm. It's when the cells divide and grow uncontrollably. It eats, reproduces, and kills- not waiting until after dessert or after twenty-one. Tonight, we decided to make breakfast for dinner. I crack an egg, and slowly the yellow yolk lands in the center of the black skillet. I push the clear liquid trailing behind the yolk towards the center of the pan. "Eggs are so good for you," I say. Like this single egg will suddenly make the unspoken "C" disappear. The egg sizzles and spits vegetable oil on me, as if teasing me that I would even think this egg could heal, that this eating breakfast for dinner thing could take it all away.

The unspoken "C" hangs above us now. She dangles from the chandelier, peering down upon the wooden table that is the Nile between you and me. She is in the eggs I shove down my throat; she slithers between your pink painted toes, dancing pirouettes around blackened bacon. We ramble on about my homework, your family, our addictions. People stretching people, because aren't we all dancing along the edge? Chipped, pink nail polish grabs cold blond hair, tossing it into a ponytail. Green veins swell, pressing against the flesh like roots about to break free. Unlikely life grows inside; what a strange womb this is.

We get in my white Accord and drive, leaving phones and dirty dishes stained with crusty, yellow yolk behind. Windows down, music blaring because we both know there is nothing to say. Your blond hair falls out of the ponytail and it trails free out the window. Eyes closed, pale lips mouthing the words to *Some Nights* by Fun. The car pulls into a gravel parking lot, the tires squishing little grey pebbles with their weight.

Before us is an infinite area of brilliant, simple grass, inhaling and exhaling the warm sunset. Trees form a wall on either side of the field. You take your tennis shoes off without saying a word; intense blue eyes focus on the field in front of you. You run. I struggle removing my buckled brown sandals; then finally I sprint to catch up with you. We spin in circles, screaming like the sun gods possessed us, acting like immortal children. We fall to the ground, throwing grass at each other while we drink red wine, because we are both twenty-one and that's probably what Steve Jobs and Mary Shelley did too. Maybe, I thought, I could make it better.

Picking each other up, we return to our lives, not denying what is. Sweat seeps out of our skin, creating an opaque glaze sticking to cool flesh-I am a walking Krispy Kreme doughnut in a yellow dress. We sit in the car giggling, while like a monkey, you pull grass from my tangled mane. We laugh because both of us fear the lavender kitchen and the dried yolk plastered pan. That's when you tell me you want to see Paul.

Paul sits in his American flag boxers while watching re-runs of *Sons of Anarchy*. Dim sunlight peaks through the cream metal blinds, illuminating dust floating through the air. Steam swirls up from a styrofoam cup of Ramen noodles.

Green peas and corn bob up and down in the pee colored broth. This was Paul yesterday, today, and tomorrow: boxers, microwavable noodles, and tobacco rolled into thin, brown paper.

Paul and I attended the same astronomy class during my freshman year in college. 9:00. Monday morning. It was my first official college course. I arrived to class fifteen minutes early with a purple binder, a black and white notebook, and a pencil bag stuffed with sharpies, highlighters, and blue and black ink pens. Professor Losch handed the first row a mountain high stack of papers to pass back to the others. Our professor wore his long, gray hair in a low ponytail. Prickly silver hairs protruded from his face, convincing his audience that he had not showered since stargazing with Sasquatch from his weekend in the Texan hill country.

“Your first quiz,” he laughed jokingly. “Before you walk out, it’s not for a grade, folks. This is just for me to get a grasp on what you already know.” *I might as well write on the quiz I don’t know anything about astronomy, except stars are cool, and this was a way better option than taking chemistry or physics. So I thought.*

“Since these are math problems, I want you to use a pencil. No pens in science classes.” *Math? I thought we were just going to look at shiny things in the sky? And of course I only brought pens. Typical freshman move.*

I contorted my body to face a hundred eyes, some petrified, others half asleep. Odds are someone else had an extra pencil. Out of a hundred students, Paul sat directly behind me. He wore a black Led Zeppelin t-shirt and thin-rimmed wire glasses. His dark, brown hair stuck out from multiple directions, softening the sharp angles of his face. Crystal blue eyes stood out like intricate marbles against

olive skin. I'm surprised I managed to speak in normal human language without sounding like Chewbacca or my face turning ruby red. Paul smiled, handing me a yellow mechanical pencil.

Paul began sitting next to me during class, as if this one act of pencil sharing formed a bond between us. He smelled like pine trees and tobacco, the scent clouding my mind from anything Professor Losch was teaching us. Together we went on stargazing fieldtrips for class, standing next to each other so one another's body heat shielded us from the chilly night air. He grabbed my hand while I leaned my body against his.

It was in that moment I realized my deep feelings for Paul. I felt so timid to be with him. Like if I were to look into his eyes too long he would disappear and realize that I wasn't perfect. That I drink too much or cuss too much. That I was nineteen and he was twenty-one. And then the dream would be over. The bridge swinging wildly between us would tumble down in an instant by just my eyes looking into his a bit too long. But for a second it was real. For a brief suspended moment in time, Paul was all I needed, not you. My hands gently caressed his face, and like a painter, they designed swirls from his bottom lip to his temple. Then suddenly the vibrant colors turned a stale black and white, disappearing like they were never there. The bridge cables snapped, plummeting to the ground, but strangely there you were to gather the pieces when the pencils, the stargazing, the handholding stopped before it ever truly began.

You and Paul talked when he visited me in the dorm. The three of us ordered pizza and drank cheap wine from a cardboard box while watching Disney

movies on Wednesday nights. Paul knows nothing of the “C” and the multiple doctors visits. He makes us laugh, you especially, and we forget about reality for a brief period of time by escaping to McNellies Bar to hear you sing again.

The three of us live in a smoke-filled world, not only laughing at jokes but tragedies. Decaying wooden walls bear the weight of sepia tinted photographs of people many years dead. The light in the room radiates from tall flames springing forth from tealight candles. The citizens of our world suffer from the same affliction, but occasionally we gain tourists ordering pink cocktails framed in sugary specks, the girls gossiping over the flame. The light reveals lips puckered with sugar droplets kissing the bottom lip, forming hollows as words drip into the sound waves of our siren’s contralto, your voice, uniting us with the pink sugary girls, us with Paul who sat staring at your beauty one night, the night the bridge crumbled. It wasn’t my eyes but your voice that cut the cables.

Curly blond hair hung loosely below your chin while your voice seduced the night, sending chills down our spines, and like wine, we became drunk off it. Your already thin body swayed to the soft guitar fading into the sleepiness of the mind and for once we were free from it all. Except this bar, this place, where memories stick like glue. The same wooden barstool, with one of the legs slightly lower than the rest. My fingers skating along the mahogany countertops, tracing around little chunks carved out as if they were there since the beginning of time. A haunting chain of memories linking you, me, Paul, and the people I used to know.

It’s August, I’m 18, he is 51. The first time I went to McNellies was with my dad before I left for college. I remember placing a pink sugar packet under the

barstool so it wouldn't wobble while my dad ordered us two Shiners. This was the first beer we ever shared together. It was usually me as a kid, sneaking out to the park near our house with a couple of friends, drinking from six packs of PBR and Red Bull until our bellies bloated against belts and bodies trembled under the fluorescent street lamps.

It's nearly 3:00 a.m. when my blood stitched eyes focused on my dad in his green, leather chair, the alcohol immediately killing itself and awoke a thousand different nerve endings in my body. He folded back *The New York Times* and placed it neatly on a glass table. His muscular 6'3" frame towered over my gawky, meat'n'bone alcoholic cage. A sickening feeling crawled over me as he remained silent, turning off the light, walking away. I rushed towards the powder bath to vomit yellow phlegm on the pink floral wallpaper.

Two years later at McNellies Bar, Dad told me he was marrying Cathy. Mom and Dad divorced when I was twelve. Working as a stockbroker meant long hours, especially when he received a promotion from his boss, Mr. Philips. Mom hated Mr. Philips and the pressure he put on my dad. Meetings overlapping with my dance recitals combined with skipped dinners and soccer practices made Mom a single parent during most of my childhood.

Eventually the line between business and family blurred, and my dad took out his stress on everyone in the family, especially on my mom. Frequent late night arguments involving money and how my dad changed awoke my brother and me; I bet even you could hear them from across the white picket fence. I remember the

times playing in the snow, the laughs, innocent joy now replaced with swear words over blown out tires and fuses needing to be fixed.

I escaped by spending nights at your house where we stuffed our faces with Oreos and peanut butter from a secret stash you kept under your bed and watched a sickly amount of *Lizzie Maguire* on the computer- taboo escapades for a family who didn't watch television or eat processed foods.

Your family later became my family. Staying up late drinking wine to celebrate the summer solstice...we looked ridiculous, dressed as elves from *The Lord of the Rings*. My conservative, schoolteacher mother almost had a stroke when she saw us dancing around the maypole in your backyard. She told me your family was bat shit crazy and I couldn't go over there anymore, mumbling something about you worshiping the devil. I looked at my mother in her light cream turtleneck and her long, blond hair strung up in a bun, and replied that this family was the messed up one.

I packed my purple North Face backpack with a toothbrush, some t-shirts, a pair of jeans, and a hairbrush and crossed the white, picket fence. I cried to you about my family falling apart, fearing that someday I would be a brunette version of the lady in the cream turtleneck and the man in the navy suit. I want to do great things, but what great things? How can I be different? How can we own the world and dance on top of the moon and float with the stars? How can I be like you?

What I am is a vampire, sucking life from a cheap bottle in this dreary bar, dreading the sunlight rattling tin cans in my skull. Like a parasite I rely on you to tell me everything is going to be okay, that this world was made for us. But really

the day just echoes the monotony of an illusion coated existence, molding me into the actress playing the role as the friend, the daughter. I wake up mummified, wrapped in white and blue striped sheets. I put on a large, gray t-shirt over my stiff, heavy body, swallow two Advil, and try to be the person that doesn't care that you've been everything for me, and took everything from me at the same time, all beginning with two windows clashing worlds.

I'm 16, he is 49. My father walks into our new brick, two-story house. It smells like freshly painted walls and potpourri. Brown freckled granite counter tops remain cold and bare. A framed Remington print hangs above a grey, stone fireplace. The painting depicts two cowboys pulling their horses through a blizzard. Photographs of my brother and I when we were kids sit on top of the mantel.

My dad's face is flushed; sweat bleeds through his thin, white collared shirt. Red tie loose, cuffs folded back. He grumbles under his breath as he peers through plastic blinds to see the neighbor tediously working in the yard. His grass is like a perfectly trimmed tropical oasis compared to the brittle straw-like hair creeping around our house. How someone kept anything alive in 90-degree heat was a mystery to my dad. Grabbing a Shiner, his favorite, my father walks into the bedroom closet to change. A grey, Dallas Cowboys t-shirt and khaki shorts. Can't forget the belt; it's messy without the belt.

His girlfriend, Cathy, is an actress. She is nothing like the woman in the cream colored turtleneck. She sits on a pink, velvet ottoman in front of a grandiose, square mirror. In front of her rests plastic, gold lipstick tubes, a jar of

lavender scented lotion, and pink and cream powders. The actress sips on her second vodka cranberry while she pins her long, blond hair up into a bun for a role she is going to play later tonight. At 16, I thought the actress was beautiful. She walked slowly to the kitchen, putting on blue oven mitts with little baby chicks on them, and took out Stouffers lasagna. She kissed my father on the forehead, and left for the night like she usually did to act in a play my brother wasn't allowed to see.

You were there in the living room, knowing me before and after, telling me you liked Cathy, hoping that she could introduce you to important schmucks at the theater. You would sing about everything. Frankly I grew annoyed by your constant serenading, dedicating song after song to your grocery store list or how mitosis works. You sang so much that eventually Cathy did recognize you, the cranberry vodka scent flowing out from her bright, pink lips. The moment you got the understudy for *Les Miserable's* Cosette, I thought your eyes were going to pop out of your head.

You started befriending people who also sung about grocery lists and predicted Oscar nominations down to a science. A sea of boys swarmed around you as you flounced from one stage to the next from Cosette to Ado Annie to yourself singing at McNellies. And then the white fence became a brick wall as you blossomed into beauty while I remained stagnant, wrapped into a play staring the actress, the navy suit, the cream turtleneck woman and lastly, you.

Tonight, you go on the stage, your familiar playground, and sing to the pink cocktail girls, to me, and to Paul, who loves you and laughs to himself when you smile back at him. It all started with a window I wish I never looked through, a

pencil I wished I never borrowed, this bar I wish I never entered, leading us to where we are today. Little moments bleeding into a tidal wave of events defining us.

The bar is dark except for the faint candles. My mind flutters with thoughts like how I put too much creamer in my coffee to cover the taste of stale grinds. I can't breathe out of my right nostril today. Don't you hate when you have a hundred million things to do, but really all you want to do is to stay in bed? Waiting for the body to snap like a twig. The cracks in my face might reveal what I'm actually thinking.

I've been on this planet for twenty-one years, four months, 12 days. This is me and my twenty-one. I'm nothing beyond a series of actions unable to be still. And this is me; I'm nothing more than a collection of thoughts, the nameless word that consumes you, your transcendental voice in the grimy bar, Paul and the twisting of the stomach and the blushing of cheeks, heat of a face against his, crumbling like a memory. Thinking what you are going to say to Paul, to your parents as we dance around your yard welcoming the summer solstice with wine and pale pink flowers falling around our bodies.

So I waste my time thinking of mundane things like coffee grinds and toenail polish. Trying to find words to make sense of your 21 and my 21. Knowing we had nothing. We were nothing. Paul, you. I want to feel alive, and free like running through fountains dancing in the rain, knowing your friendship will be here when I'm weird or sad or confused, even about you. Maybe we should travel the world together and see things we didn't know existed except in books and

movies. Let's eat food that awakens our tongues and sip drinks that blind our minds, laughing and singing with people we don't know as we sink deeper into the night air, waking up thinking the gods confused us with them. Maybe then, I can help.

It's June and I am twenty-two. The clock tells me it is 3:19 in the morning, and the room is a mess. The yellow painted walls the Home Depot woman recommended as "warm and cozy" feel more like I'm drowning in a bottle of Dijon mustard. My closet sized apartment gags up the pale, pine furniture I bought from a friend studying abroad in China. I know nothing about China except I like Asia Garden's moo goo gai pan from across the street. I know even less about the color yellow and what's considered "warm and cozy."

I pull back the blue and white striped sheets and place my feet on the cool floor. Yesterday I got a postcard from you and Paul floating in a boat along the Seine. He is still with you, perhaps feeling guilty for the calls, a small scar reminding you of the "C," the unborn ghosts and the living friends. You love this place; you wish to sing here forever. Sometime soon you plan on calling me, but the time difference is so difficult, so complicated.

Now I no longer wait for phone calls. Tomorrow I will return to the creek, where you and I were born, to see a tragedy that has nothing and everything to do with the man in the navy suit, the woman in the cream colored turtleneck, the actress, Paul, and you.

ABSTRACT

The focus of my Honors Thesis was to create an art form that encompassed both creative writing and film production. This led me to pursue a project in a genre known as “the visual essay,” a new media art form that combines fiction or non-fiction writing to visual images. My visual essay was based on a short, fictional story I wrote called *21*. By studying “the visual essay,” I learned about different film techniques and ways of representing characters and scenes. I examined multiple film artists, and editing styles, which greatly impacted the production of “the visual essay.” This paper includes my reflection statement recalling the journey of making my short film, *21*, and the text of the story itself.