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Dying Fish Have Poor Grammar

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These starred papers submitted by Ryan A. Hanson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at St. Cloud State University are hereby approved by the final evaluation committee.

DYING FISH HAVE FISH GRAMMAR

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DYING FISH HAVE POOR GRAMMAR

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by

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Mother is a hurricane with flippers
 Rubbing them against my face
 She twists me into pictures

Dad floats out of his gray suit, which
 Brought out the "I'd rather be howling" in his
 Eyes, days of carving of pine fishing
 And endless packets of rice.

Laughing high-wheels over and over
 Manufacturing robot-like faces
 Sister struggles to hold back a smile that
 Must weigh a hundred pounds.

Not my childish brain cannot
 Play by these simple terms
 That they have scorned
 I must stage my rebellion.

So while they adreily play
 The game, I blink every flash
 Dad grabs my shoulder, his belt
 I press in my mind.

Mother clutches her tissues and
 Nags through all the flashes
 Smiling me into pictures.

THE STATE OF MEXICO

Growing up in Minnesota

A Saturday night hockey

Was like a trip to Disneyland

FAMILY PHOTO SESSION 1986

I am blanketed in saliva.
Mother is a harridan with tissues
Rubbing them against my face
She thinks *one nice picture*.

Dad floats out of his gray suit, which
Brought out the "I'd rather be bowling" in his
Eyes, daydreaming of pins falling
and endless pitchers of beer.

Brother half-smiles over and over
Manufacturing robot-like faces.
Sister struggles to hold back a smile that
Must weigh a hundred pounds.

But my childish brain cannot
Play by these simple terms
That they have accepted
I must stage my rebellion.

So while they adeptly play
The game, I blink every flash
Dad grabs my shoulder, his belt
Cracks in my mind.

Mother clutches her tissues and
Nags through all the flashes
Thinking *one nice picture*.

THE STATE OF HOCKEY

Growing up In Minnesota
A Saturday night hockey game
Was like a trip to Disneyland.

When the goal horn blared
I stomped on my red plastic seat
Cheered and hollered—
A shot of electricity.

My Father barely chiseled
A smile. His massive hands
Met only an instant as
If they were strangers to themselves.

Between periods I devoured
Concessions and begged
For memorabilia while he sipped
Vending machine coffee
Recalling past due credit card bills.

At night I dreamt
Of slap shots so hard
They ripped through twine like
Burning rubber bullets.

A room away he dreamed of
Defensemen blocking shots
And goalies that never
Gave up goals.

PLAYING THE DRIVEWAY

On cool autumn nights
My Father and I watched
The stars from earthbound
Aluminum lawn chairs.

He pointed out the constellations
While I kicked at anthills
The whole time we listened
To old rock n' roll.

He left his universe momentarily
To hum few bars
While Buddy Holly buzzed
On about Peggy Sue.

I tried to sit still as a concrete
Garden statue as his finger
Traced each cluster of stars—
He laughed silently
So not to belittle my act.

My world was as small
As a marble under his
Constellations that filled the
Sky like lighthouses
Flashing in the ether.

PLAYING CARDS WITH MY SISTER

Clear I.V. fluid drips from the sky
Mixing with my sister's
Thick Norwegian blood.

Humor thins heavy drugs
Only temporarily,
After the laugh the needle
Is still rubbing her bones
Like it has been for days.

Another round ends
Magic juices are still dripping
I mark the score, shuffle, and deal
Without words a glance
Tells me we have time
For another game
Loser buys lunch from
The hospital vending machine.

Daytime talk shows begin and
End in-between the drips
Her arm swells, doctors swoon, cards
Are dealt and re-dealt
And the bag drips again.

A LATE NIGHT CONVERSATION

Her face collapsed
As if I had just broken a family heirloom
That beat in her chest.

Words are razors
She said
Not toys

Creative license
I said

I couldn't sleep that night—
Words may be razors,
But they are also
Bones that hold a body up.

After years of silence
The marrow starts to dry up
Bones become brittle
Family becomes a curse word.

TIME TRAVELING GRANDPA

No one knew where grandpa was
Though he was lying right in front of us.

He was watching the summer
Stars, drinking with dead
Buddies at the Cosmic
Bar, reliving all the pearls
That made the necklace of his life.

Years later he was discovered
In black and white
Photos hidden in an old suitcase.

On an English hill of daisies
His smile sailed through
Time, landing in a grandson's
Mind Like poetry sixty
Years in the making.

THE MAN WITH A PINK CAR

To the people of
Bird Island, Minnesota
the man with the cotton candy pink
car seemed like a cowboy
that rode a zebra.

In the cruelest winter storms
he would dart from drift to drift
like a steel bearing in a pinball machine,
pink car swallowed by the snow
except for the orange 76 ball
clinging to the antenna
jutting out just slightly above the
white horizon.

I last saw him parked
at the empty Alco lot
laying on the pale rose hood
with a faded guitar
singing Johnny Cash's
"A Boy Named Sue."

His hoarse voice echoed
through the humid August
prairie and transported me
a thousand miles west of
Bird Island.

THE BULL A PACIFIC MEMORY AT A ZOO

I stand on the pacific beach,
it's early, but dead whales have no concept of time.

Several workers attach explosives to the rotting mammal.
A crowd has gathered for the fireworks display.
50 tons of dead blubber strapped with several pounds of explosives.

I am sitting on the hood of my car.
Watching the slowly developing story.
Waiting for the climax and resolution.

A worker backs the crowd up to a safe distance.
A short and calm silence lingers...

BOOM!

The gentle beast explodes into a million
metaphors all reaching momentarily for heaven.

But they fall short—
It begins to rain blood,
Guts cover the crowd,
Several people begin to choke on vomit.

I laugh like a mad man,
Covered with sinew and muscle
and glorious dead whale.

A 50-ton joke on humanity.
A benevolent beast's final prank on civilization.
A rainy day on the Pacific coast.

THE BULL AT THE MINNESOTA ZOO

A Kindergartener from
Minneapolis scales a wooden fence
Scanning the animal inside
"A boy cow" he determines.

"Bull" I say,
But his definition fits
This simulation better
A castrated nubbed caricature
Forced to eat cud for
An audience that sees no veil.

Watching boy cow is like
Finding a live mouse in a glue
Trap, and suddenly I want to be
Anything but human. I suggest
Baby goats as a remedy.

The kid lets out a shrill
Scream. An excitement that
Cannot be contained. Boy
Cow watches him scamper
Away from inside
The wooded fence.

LITERARY FOREFATHER

A stabbing sensation still lingers in my
Gut. The knife still lodged.
"It's not so bad" I recite reading
Old notes and suggestions, the stale
Moldy leftovers beg like a fish
Gasping for air.

What did it feel like?

You touch the wound, validate
Its existence, the venom creeps
Up your esophagus into the throat—
The doctor called it acid reflux.

Stabbed with metaphors.
Was this too obvious?
Did this arrangement of cryptic
Words too easily betray itself?

I wonder what it feels
Like to stab oneself. Twisting
the knife in your own stomach
Over and over.

GIRL THROWS DART

I was always the dartboard waiting
In a cloudy corner, beyond the
Drinks that kept you sated
During happy hour.

You were the dart with those piercing
Eyes, moving from hand to
Hand until you decided
To fill me with holes.

We were one for a clumsy
Moment, holding each other in a dirty
Tavern until I choked
On your pointed words that tunneled
To the depths of me.

That was your aim, you took
Stock and threw yourself
At anyone until you hit
A bleeding red bull's-eye.

Like a metal that could
Not be scratched.

Even if this ring vanished
It would still weigh me down
Like a million pound
Lie in my gut.

CHEWING ON TUNGSTEN

If I swallowed this ring
Made it disappear
Like a street magician
Would everything
It symbolized be undone?

No, sins would still
Count, maybe only half
As much, but they would
Still pile up as high as
Skyscrapers.

Oh, I remember the first sin
Seeing my reflection
In your contacts
And you staring back at me

And chipping my
Tooth on a ring of tungsten
And a vow that seemed
Like a metal that could
Not be scratched.

Even if this ring vanished
It would still weigh me down
Like a million pound
Lie in my gut.

JUST ANOTHER OLD MOVIE

In a dark and crowded college classroom
I sat and watched the silent silver screen
not yet aware I was watching magic
like an innocent boy
I too fell for Louise Brooks.

She was the definition of the flappers:
a long slender stick,
with slick black hair framing her face,
just like the camera framed her body.

Her ultra-white skin was like pure silk sheets
that slide effortlessly through the night
chasing away nightmares.

I swore her giant raven eyes
were staring at me and no one else
just like everyone else in the room swore.

When the film was over
I walked spiritlessly across campus
humming some jazzy tune
mending my freshly broken heart.

into his lined coat pocket
Where it was safe from
Rainy days and other savages.

THE NOVEMBER SUN THE MAP MAKER'S DREAM IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Lines flowed from his fingers
In every direction
Making boundaries and
Creating new names
For places that had
Already been named.

Everything belonged to him
Now, the Rocky Mountains
Became his chair, the Great
Lakes were his bathtub. The old
Names were as meaningless
As the people who still
Spoke them.

He erased millennia of
History and started anew. Just like
Vesuvius erased everything
From before it erupted. He made
Everything fit into his mold.

The cartographer's world
Folded up nicely and fit
Into his faded coat pocket
Where it was safe from
Rainy days and other savages.

THE NOVEMBER SUN SETS AT FIVE PM IN EASTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

to my right—
two ancient brown horses
grazing on a lazy hill
as I pass at 78 miles per hour.

I crane my neck to watch them,
to the point my neck cracks in protest.

settling back into the seat
I catch a glimpse
Of my receding hairline in the
rear view mirror.

I feel earthquakes as twigs snap
under my feet, whistling wind loud
as tornado sirens, my heart hurls around
in my chest like a loose ball bearing.

The beast utters one final sound: a human-like
coff and disappears into the woods.
I return to my apartment and lock the door, but
Dark eyes still burrow through me.

RUNNING IN SPRINGBROOK NATURE CENTER

Deer drinking from a stream
in unison slurps, like synchronized
swimmers scatter as my feet pound
on a rickety walking bridge—

explosion of brown
and white, hide ricocheting
in every direction, except for
one defiant buck

who barks like a 1970's American
muscle car, spittle oozing from his
maw, breath billowing in chilled
November air like bonfire smoke.

I feel earthquakes as twigs snap
under my feet; whistling wind loud
as tornado sirens, my heart bangs around
in my chest like a loose ball bearing.

The beast utters one final sound: a human-like
scoff and disappears into the woods.
I return to my apartment and lock the door, but
Dark eyes still burrow through me.

SUGAR MAPLE BY AN UNNAMED BUILDING

I made it a priority
To learn your name because
It seemed worthwhile to know
Something simple in a place
Filled with Foucaults and
Baudrillards.

Few others bothered to
Learn something so simple
To them it lacked value until
That week in late September.

But by then it's too late—
An ordinary orange explosion
Distracts everyone from their
Derrida for a moment or two.

Then, the burning subsides
On your arms and our retinas
We all sleep through the year
Waiting for another explosion
To wake us up.

A POET'S MANIFESTO

If I attend a poetry
reading I promise not to wear
a scarf or a beret and I won't sip
wine or smoke cigarettes
or read some other poet's
words because my poetry wasn't
good enough to describe myself.

I will read my own inadequate words!
I will drink beer like it's water
and laugh at crude jokes and swear
and I might drink too much and get sick.
To me that is poetry.

These are promises to me
to be a poet and myself at the same time
instead of some transparent cliché
poet oozing mystery like it's a brand name
killing Ginsberg one line at a time

Somehow you slept through this!
This horrifying world of amusements
Where Star Wars is just
A fantasy barely heard through
The noise of simulation.

AMERICAN CYBORG

You are no longer Science Fiction.
It happened before your eyes
You watched never blinking
The revolution was televised.

Cybernetically enhanced chickens
Genetically engineered milk cows
Everything is optimized.

Credit card upgrades
Zero percent introductory rebirth
Body foreclosure imminent.

Even sex is obsolete
We replicate exponentially
Consumerist inertia decided
Long ago that vaccines and
Inoculations were more effective.

Somehow you slept through this?
This horrifying world of amusement
Where Star Wars is just
A fantasy barely heard through
The noise of simulation.

DYING FISH HAVE POOR GRAMMAR

I am a fish—I were.
Caught now,
Tricked with steely spike.

Chunks of my body fill the water
I breathe me in and out
gasp for clean water
there is none.

My tender white belly is hard like rocks now
my soft life floats downstream.
I can see it, I can see me
I try to choke on chunks of me, but it is of no use.
All the fishes say, "Choke if you can."
"It's easier that way, choke!"
I see my red chunks
And I can't choke.

All the others is fish.
Soon I will not be,
Soon I was a fish—soon I were a fish.