

## 1st Place – Ashi Robson



Michael Dula – The Reach

*I recently donated my eggs to an anonymous, gay male. Despite the life he is leading, this courageous man wants to experience the gift of creating his own offspring. He picked me through an agency based on my photographs, favorite books, movies, music and philosophy on life. My journey ends here as a chosen surrogate grows and nourishes a child that will soon be his.*

*His.*

*I want to tell you how happy I feel every time I think about this man because it is my hope that at the end of today and tomorrow and the rest of his forever, a part of him will feel that much happier too. "The Reach", created by Michael Dula, represents entirely why I did what I did. The painting before me, exploding with colors and shapes that can only begin to describe the complexity of our universe, embodies everything that I hope for our future: compassion, acceptance, love, understanding, and in my case specifically, a selfless gesture that has changed me. I see before me, a featureless figure; a figure that is made up of unique building blocks stacked in such a way that one cannot decipher it's sex, age, ethnicity, or color of skin. I stand behind the person in this painting as if I am standing behind my faceless child; my heart believes that while the blues and greens might make up the color of his eyes, or the browns and reds might suggest the color of her hair, my faceless, skin-color-less child is standing with arms wide open, welcoming a world of differences. The figure is me, it is the anonymous recipient of my eggs, and it is the child that will be raised to understand the message that this painting conveys. "The Reach" is my dream for the future. I would like to share with you a letter that this painting has inspired me to write to the unborn child who I will only know through knowing myself.*

To my son or daughter:

By now, it is likely that you know about me. I am your mother but I am not. The man who makes up half of you is someone I have never met. He is a person that I am forever connected to and I do not even know his name. I believe that he is a sincere man. I know that he is important because I know that humanity is important. I know that he chose me to be the other half of you at a time where I was, at the age of 23, starving-and-looking-in-all-of-the-wrong-places for insight, perspective, and inspiration. By single-handedly picking me to be the other half of you, your father whose-name-I-do-not-know, assisted in helping me find myself.

Right now, in this moment, I am so close to being the best version of myself; I am inspired by how badly your father wanted you to exist. I am honored that he chose me. He saved me by creating you. That is what I know. Everything else, son or daughter, is just a guess—a guess that you have been raised in a home filled with patience and acceptance with an emphasis on having an open mind. It is likely that you have a strong sense of individualism. By now, you are probably developing opinions about important issues that will forever remain in our world: things like Love, Faith, Shame, and Hope. Maybe you have even decided what you'd like to be when you grow up. Can I tell you something? I am considerably fascinated with your take on unimportant things too: things like mayonnaise, socks that don't match, and how often you think you need to make your bed. I wonder about your taste buds. And let me just say, darling, that if you happen to like goat cheese then you did not on any account, get that from me; because I think goat cheese tastes like soap.

I recently caught myself wondering if any of my flaws run through your blood; *I should like to apologize if you happen to talk too much when you are nervous and over analyze everything that has ever happened to you, and if you have managed to escape the tendency to do those things but function with a somewhat 'intolerable' level of impatience then I am sorry about that, and if its any consolation you can totally work on it and it will start to get easier, kind of.* There is a small chance that you have been walking through life with my eyelashes and my unfortunate elbows. Maybe you have even experienced your first love already, and if you haven't that is okay because you will. Okay? And I'd like you to know, and this is just something you should really know, that this person, the person who falls in love with you back? That person will love your unfortunate elbows. And maybe you don't understand this now, as you read this, but my hope for you is that while living and learning—you will begin to see the beauty in every inch. In every inch of yourself, in every inch of what is honest, in every inch of those people who, despite how different, are good people.

In  
every  
inch  
where there is beauty

I can only imagine how beautiful you must be.

I can assume that with each breath you breathe while reading this, you are able to state your favorite time of year, movie, holiday dish and childhood memory to a perfect stranger, if they were to ask; *and while all of your answers are only hypothetical to me—the real ones exist, just as you really exist and I can't decide if I've truly wrapped my head around that yet; and maybe I never will; and I suppose that is a contradiction to this entire letter now, isn't it?* Well anyway, these qualities that make you into you all the while? They will change and flourish and lead you to defeat before something new in you begins to flourish again. You will be perfect in your imperfections and I know this because I am your mother, but I am not.

I guess what I am trying to say, love, is that I could spend an entire fall season's worth of hours thinking about what you think. The narcissist in me hopes that you have inherited my affinity for Frank Sinatra, rainy days, and sunflowers while simultaneously having my eye color; but only because the narcissist in me knows that my eye color is actually kind of cool and well, I'm just trying to be honest.

I suppose I should admit to you that I am terrified of bringing this letter to an end. Its just that when I play and then replay all of the hellos in all of my memories, there is the notion that ours will simply freeze in time—right here in this barely organized serving of alphabet soup—only to be followed by a goodbye that is overflowing with finality. Finality that will set in with the very last letter that makes up this letter, and then—and this is my fear—I will grieve that I no longer have a purpose. I'm really just trying to be honest.

*Hello-and-I-love-you-and-goodbye.*

Like a short story in one of those Reader's Digest magazines that my grandfather kept in the bathroom; but much heavier, and not as dusty, and completely irreplaceable.

I promise.

I will leave you with this:

I believe that you are a miracle. You exemplify something truly wonderful. Did you know that? My heart knows that you know that but I want to remind you just in case, that you are living and breathing proof that humans are able to love who they love and live a life that makes them feel complete. You are your father's son or daughter. You are proof that conforming to tradition is not necessary for one to make a family. You represent the future. Acceptance. True happiness. You represent miracles.

And darling, wherever I am, whoever I've become, whatever I may be doing in the moments that pass as you read this letter: hold close to you the notion that simply helping the father who dreamt you to life has been consistently rewarding to the life that I lead. This journey in itself will remain a part of me with every novel, every picnic, every firefly, and every single dandelion wish. You were my first universal gesture and I must say that the very thought of you makes my heart beat with hope for humanity.

So truly,  
The Me that is part of You

## 2nd Place – Summer Reed



Hank Garcia – The Christian Left

### The Curious Dialogue Between A Citizen and the Christian Left

There was a time where I was politically asleep to the important changes that were happening in government. Though I was at the correct age to protest against unjust laws, stage sit-ins, and join campaign trails, these things didn't interest me. I wasn't even registered to vote. I still cared about my country, of course, but I just couldn't see the relationship between politics and my reality. As long as I got up in the morning, drank my Starbucks coffee, drove to work, picked up groceries, and knocked out on the pillow at night, life was sweet.

Recently however, I was invited to have lunch with an old friend, Hank Garcia. He is a fierce Democrat and always encouraged me to find out about Obama, the Tea Party, and so on. But one part of his lecture struck me the most: "Arguably, the Christian Right does not have a patent on being Christian." Patent as in "the exclusive right granted by government to [...] manufacture, use, or sell an invention." Garcia spoke with such passion on this particular topic that curiosity crept up inside me. He described something behind the D.O.O.R, the District of Organized Religion, that none of the Republicans wanted the public to see. As it began to rain, Garcia left, but my curiosity had peaked and I wanted to see what was behind this forbidden D.O.O.R.

Surprisingly, the entrance to the Republican warehouse was wide open and an old man and his secretary staffed the front. They flashed a brilliant smile as I walked up and beckoned me inside, to which I nodded curtly and skirted through the entrance. The smell of fresh paint and refurbished carpeting greeted me at the door as I took in the scene. The place was beyond orderly. The warehouse had strict signs of someone with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Every box was tightly taped closed, every file and tax bill in numerical and alphabetical order; the décor of the room was well-balanced and hardly suspicious. As I turned to leave, there was a door on the left that was slightly ajar. I began to close it when the room suddenly sucked me in and I slammed face first into the side of a cage. Recovering from the blow, I realized that I was just two inches away from slamming into a piece of sharp glass that protruded threateningly from the cage.

A terrified voice cried "Leave me alone! What more trouble can you plague an old Party with?" The "Party" was a human figure hunched inside of a small cage, radiating an intense orange and red light that shimmered even brighter as it spoke. Scribble lines jumped, darted, and wriggled back and forth across the body in a state of excitement and fear. I croaked, "I haven't come here for anything! Who are you? What is this? "

"Who am I? You mean, what am I? I, it, myself, or whatever tense you prefer, am the Christian Left. Symbolically, I look human, but I represent the few faithful members of the Democratic Party who still reverence the name of God. "

"WHAT? I may not know much about politics, but there is no such thing as the Christian Left. Democrats don't *believe* in God or a higher power,"

"How quickly you speak child! Slow your tongue so that both might speak! The Christian Left is a centuries old organization with faithful members as "numerous as the sands on the seashore", Joshua eleven four, who have fought and died for basic human rights. I suppose you wouldn't know much about us though. The media won't print it, televise it, or even agree to talk about it. Let me tell you honey, we are the Conservatives' best kept secret since the 1970s."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I *mean*? Well," the orange and red light turned into pleasant warmth like sunshine and the scribbles moved in gentle curves as she spoke:

"We once played a significant role in American society. Our belief rested on the fact that Jesus wanted His followers to defend the poor and remove the "stumbling block in front of the blind man", Leviticus nineteen fourteen. So His followers in Congress used Christianity as a platform to achieve social justice, freedom, and equality for middle and lower class Americans. We've achieved this in the past with the Abolitionists who protested slavery and ended that ghastly tradition with old Lincoln in the President's seat. That was in our younger years. Then we took over the saloons and speakeasies, protesting the illegalization of alcohol in the 1920s. We lined the streets, advocating women's rights, marched and sang with Dr. King on the way to Selma, and peacefully opposed sending America's children into Vietnam. When people asked 'What would Jesus do?', believe me honey, we did it!" And she chuckled at her own joke.

But her humor didn't last long. Orange shifted into a scarlet hue and the heat of the room intensified:

"But after the war! After the war, the energy died and people began to grow comfortable within their own lives. No one saw it coming. Unfortunately, the change in society turned unfavorable for us. The government began to take God out of every establishment once built upon His name. The courts no longer prayed before each trial and the pledge of allegiance banned in schools, for some do not like the idea of "one nation under God ". Even the phrase 'In God We Trust' was almost stricken from every dollar and quarter in American the currency. The Christians in the Democratic Party grew few, possibly from the fact that freedom and equality were no longer major issues. The public panicked when Al Qaeda attacked the Twin Towers, men were committing indecent acts with men, and mothers were killing their unborn babies. Seeing the terror, those conniving Right Wing leaders fed off the people's fear by promising peace and a

good moral society, all in the name of God. And for the past eight years, Republicans have shamelessly abused the name of Jesus by turning it into a conservative characteristic.

They have shrink-wrapped, packaged, and processed Christianity in a way that looked good to the public, but bit them back in the butt when their bank account was empty, when the house foreclosed, when the loans were denied, the debt increased, and families were forced to live on the streets. The public has been bitterly disappointed and the church has taken the heat for it. I tell you, I cringe whenever *conservatives* place God into the reasons why they've endorsed a bill.

The Christian Left's light began to pulse with anger and injustice as she called upon the past. It sickened me as I noticed how unbelievably scrawny her body was from lack of political activity.

"Take a close look at the etchings in this cage. Examine the residue. They are results from years of forcing us inside their organized, perfected version of Christianity. This cage. This prison they've locked us away in, as if we were wild animals that would destroy their mock religion. O! Woe unto the Right Wing!! For they have taught God's children to resent His holy name!"

How awful it would be trapped behind bars, I thought, watching self-serving politicians disgrace religion for control over a nation. I, too, became angry then suddenly saw the humanness of the Christian Left. It was never meant to be forbidden, taboo, or reserved for the elitist who can afford it. This was a religious Party, sensitive to the sufferings of her people, locked away as the counter-parties continued to deceive millions.

"Oh, little understanding politician," she wailed "Look at the cross. Our party symbolized something great, something beyond ourselves. We used to rally movements that united people from across the nation. The world even! Once, we were whole, but today "scattered on the hills like sheep" Second Chronicles eighteen nineteen. Mere broken fragments of the mirror, once part of a whole when American beliefs reflected the blessed teachings of Jesus. But now, I have only a sliver of the mirror that's so dirty and marked over that sometimes, I forget who I stand for!"

And the Left burst into passionate sobs. I, standing there, witnessing her great anguish, was filled with overwhelming compassion. I drew near and touched the cage, immediately feeling the deep vibrations of pity and depression. The Christian Left should be free to continue its practices of good will, I thought, if there is to be true freedom of religion in this country.

A sob choked my words as I cried "Don't cry... we can do something about this!" and ran out the room. And then it disappeared. No boxes, no files, no secretary. Just the empty ruins of an old warehouse. I looked behind me, the door swinging back and forth in the rainy wind, and looked ahead at the barren landscape.

### 3rd Place – Evelyn Flores



Arian – Generosity

#### What Once Was

Adam played with his father Franklin in the grassy summer field. Hide and seek Adam played with his father Franklin in the grassy summer field. Hide and seek seemed to always make him giggle, but he always had to seek. Adam searched near the tree, behind the truck, inside the house, but Franklin was nowhere to be found. A quivering noise came from the garage, catching Adam's attention. He ran to the door, with an excited grin on his face. Adam started moving things around. As he reached behind the wrench box, Adam felt something slimy. As he grasped the slimy object, he realized the slime came from a frog. He squished it for a couple of minutes, then he put it down and continued with his search. About a minute later he found his dad hiding under the pool table.

Exhausted from so much running around, Adam wiped his eyes as he yawned. He felt a sharp sting in his eyes. He screamed, yelled, pounded his feet on the ground, and swung his arms for help. Utterly frightened, his vision became vague, and he seemed to lack breath. His father, with a stupefied face, grasped Adam in his arms and ran into the house. As he washed Adam's eyes with cold water, his son's pain became sharper.

Franklin immediately walking rushed to the E.R. He waited for the Doctor's response, impatiently walking from hall to hall. When Doctor White suddenly came out of the E.R., Franklin clung on to the doctor's vest, pleading for an answer. Adam had lost his eye sight. Tapping his right foot, Dr. White said "We have conducted an examination on the dried slime found on Adam's hands. His eye lid twitched uncontrollably. I'm sorry to say, but the slime found is from a poisonous frog. Adam must have come in contact with this frog and rubbed his eyes. The slime intoxicated his sight. Moving his pen around, Nothing can be done, I'm sorry." Franklin collapsed, along with his hopes and aspirations for his son

Adam had no idea what was going on. He couldn't understand why the sun wouldn't rise. Nights took forever, and morning never came. His father and mother couldn't bear the idea that Adam was blind, and this pessimistic attitude was transmitted to their son.

Adam spent his days in his four-walled room, with a window the size of a sheet of paper. His only friend Sylvester came to visit every day. Sylvester would play the piano as Adam sang Two Steps from Hell by Heart of Courage. Sylvester was a young boy with more wrinkles than a crumpled paper, a nose the size of a carrot, ears that seemed to belong to a monkey, and eyes wider than an owl. He was dirty and his hair that looked like a brown pillow of leafs. Adam truly appreciated Sylvester, and he didn't ask for nothing in return other than his friendship.

Together they would walk to the meadow field to admire Mother Nature. Sylvester would describe to Adam how rain dropped in a melancholy manner; how the sun rose sluggishly. He told his friend about the fiery orange red horizon and the different species of animals, deer, bears, and raccoons. Adam didn't care. All he cared for was Sylvester, how he was the only one who cared for him. Adam soon enough ignored the fact of his blindness. He came to realize that he could see through his faith, smell through his knowledge, and touch through his experience.

Adam's companion and cohort, Sylvester, would lie about the world. He would tell Adam how the ocean waves were reflected in the sky. About trees that were all sorts of colors, some red, others orange with a shade of purple. He found no need to let him know how corrupt and ignorant society was. How fathers rape their children. How parents mentally abused their kids. How racism exists and how homeless people slept under the cold night sky. How discrimination leads to suicide and how humans are filled with illiteracy. He wanted Adam to realize that fantasy ruled reality. How it was better to believe fairies and unicorns existed. Reality was uncontrollable while fantasy was controlled by oneself.

The days went by, and everything was well. Every day, was a new day filled with positive energy. Until, Adam's parents decided to take him to Europe and see if he still had remedy. The trip was made.

Sylvester was devastated; if Adam's sight were to be restored, he would see who Sylvester truly was. Someone who wouldn't be loved or appreciated to those with sight, Sylvester couldn't let Adam see him like this. Adam would also feel disgusted; he would point and laugh at his tragedy. A month came, and Adam was back from Europe. His eyesight had been restored. The first thing he wanted to do was see Sylvester, and show him that he could see.

Later that afternoon, Adam went to the spot they always went to every afternoon. Sylvester was sitting on a rock and feeding the bunnies. Adam touched Sylvester's right shoulder. Sylvester quivered and gently turned around. Adam, with a horrified look on his face, pushed Sylvester and sped away. Sylvester wept, he knew this day would come. He knew society would change Adam. His one and true friend turned into everyone else. Everyone who chooses rich over poor. Everyone who prefers material over love. Everyone who discriminates against the less fortunate. Everyone who craves for more, even when they have enough. Everyone who lives in ignorance and illiteracy. Adam no longer held the innocence, and he no longer loved with his heart. Sylvester slept with his sorrow in the field and morning never came.