

ENG 213 Introduction to Creative Writing Portfolio

Jeremy Palladino

Prof. Drew Perry

12/13/19

Table of Contents

Non-Fiction:

“Letter to a Former Friend” pg 3

“CD's and Why I Buy Them” pg 6

Poems:

“Kid Icarus” pg 9

“The Barista” pg 10

“Quicksand” pg 12

Fiction:

“A Future Present” pg 13

Letter to A Former Friend

My Dear Friend,

You don't remember this, do you? Meeting in kindergarten, realizing we sat on the same bus? I lived right around the corner on Kimball, and you were the first person I'd call on the weekends. We tossed a football in the streets, throwing it over the curb, making diving catches in the neighbor's lawn. We would pretend that supermodels sat at the top of the trees, whoever climbed up the fastest would get to kiss them. We shared myths about what lurked by the power lines behind our neighborhood. Kids with BB guns driving quads on the dirt strip of road. A strange man wielding a fishing pole. Masked teens with switchblades hidden in the tall grass.

When it snowed, we walked the frozen roads shoveling driveways for ten bucks a pop. We split the profits evenly. We were the kids who jammed playing cards in the spokes of our bikes, riding down the hills past endless rows of raised-ranches on makeshift motorcycles. And the whispers during our sleepovers, desperately trying to keep ourselves awake, fooling your parents that we were asleep so we could sneak downstairs and play video games all night. You always would fall asleep before midnight, though, and I would be up all night anxious to be in a bed that wasn't my own. I remember this, at least. But you remember how it ended, right?

To be fair, we were always very different people. You struggled in school a lot, and even though I would offer to help, I knew it was something you had to do on your own. I never liked westling, but I always pretended I did when I watched it on TV with you. You always talked about fighting people. Especially Patrick, even though he was

your friend. Patrick was a smug little prick, I'll give you that, but his parents weren't the nicest people, so I always gave him a pass. I never understood why you wanted to fight anyone in the first place. Maybe it's just a "boy thing" that I never bought into. You were always better than me in baseball, but I kicked your ass on the basketball court. It must've been weird when I quit sports. That's the one thing we really had in common.

Now I started taking dance classes. Hell, I even got cast in the middle school musical. I got lumped with the group of nerds, Eric and Belvin and all, despite the fact that my smarts couldn't keep up with theirs past the seventh grade. And you? I guess you started to run out of ways to impress your friends. I can still hear you sucking your teeth whenever I made a joke on the bus. The chuckling you, Patrick, and the backseat low-lives made as I walked down the aisle. And how you spoke down to me, saying "Bro, shut up faggot," like it was some sort of playful jab. I always wondered when you'd turn your back on me. I guess this was it.

What saddens me most isn't what I remember it, but that my memory could be wrong. There's a small chance those actions actually happened, they just felt real to me. We were drifting apart and my brain filled in the blanks. It wrote a story it has already seen before: a scrawny kid quits sports and steps on stage, does his song and dance, and loses all masculinity. Blame it on the culture of the time if you will, but the lurking fear of being called gay scared me out of a friendship. I'm sorry for that. And to make things worse, it turns out I'm still the same guy you were friends with all those years ago. I still like watching scary clips on the internet, and getting mud-stains on my jeans from playing "Kill the Carrier" in someone's backyard. I spend so much energy proving to the

world that I wasn't gay, that I wasn't one of *them*. Honestly, I don't know if that's worse than just making fun of them like you did.

I'm not sure how the script was written, but I'm sure my mind skewed the truth and blew things out of proportion. Maybe yours did too. So what really happened? We both hit chaotic points in our lives, and the world around us changed the way we saw each other. After all, we are the protagonists in the stories of our own lives. I'm the victim in my version. I wonder what I am in yours.

I still have that message you sent after I stopped talking to you. A little virtual envelope that says "hey, r u still my freind???" on Xbox Live. Really? Nine years of friendship and all you do is send me a message on Xbox? I wish you called me. I wished you walked around the corner on Kimball and talked to me like you used to and you tried a little harder to fix our friendship. But in reality, you did. That's exactly what a 13-year-old kid would do if their best friend hated them. I wish I knew that at the time, because I do now. I wish I gave you a second chance and I sent back a stupid little virtual envelope that read "yes, i think so".

I still have your home phone number memorized from back when we had to dial them. And that scar from when we played football and I dove in the street for an interception like and idiot. Sometimes I glance at your house when I drive by it, imagining where you are in life. I hope it's a good place. Now that I sit here, after seven years of silence, I wonder if I'll put this in your mailbox. And if I do, I hope you reply.

From,
Your Former Friend

CD's and Why I Buy Them

“Who knew they still sold CDs anymore?” he said, sparking up some small talk. He was a man dressed in a Marines uniform, a blue-breasted jacket, polished black shoes, and pearly white gloves. A pair of square glasses sits on his nose.

“I know, I’m surprised they haven’t thrown them out yet,” I replied. It was a strange scenario, being in a Best Buy at one o’clock on a Tuesday towards the end of June. There was nothing else for me to really do, except drift around my small town while everyone else I knew was at work.

“What CD is that?” he asked, notioning to the one in my hand. He was in his early or middle thirties, not old enough to talk to me like a parent, but old enough to not treat me like a peer.

“Audioslave,” I said, “It’s the one with all of their hits.”

“Didn’t they have a singer who died a while back?”

“Yeah, I forgot his name. Chris something—”

“Chris Cornell. Now I remember. Wow,” the Marine said, “Does your generation know any of these bands?”

“I’m not sure” I answered, “I guess some of us do.”

We talk for another fifteen minutes about music and about our lives. Every so often, we are interrupted by strangers coming up to thank the Marine for his service. It’s hard to talk about myself, trying to compare my mild life stories to the experiences he has gone through. But here I am, a directionless teenager home from college, having a heart to heart with a Marines recruitment officer in Best Buy. It didn’t matter that he was dressed in uniform, wearing badges that glistened on his chest, shaved as smooth as a razor can make. For fifteen minutes, he is just a person looking for CDs. And so am I.

I don’t really know *why* I buy CDs. Maybe because I shifted from a song-listener to an album-listener. My music exposure used to be limited to stand alone songs played on car rides and stereos, trusting professionals at radio stations to hand craft my taste. Now my music preference is narrowed down by algorithms, reduced to the same few bands in recommendations. I figured I should start listening to their albums instead of

the same five songs. I always feel flustered when people asked me what music I like, since I'm not one to latch onto groups. I don't have a favorite song, or movie, or political party, or religion, or anything, just a hazy list of things I sort of drift towards. I'm still waiting for the pieces of who I am to all fit together. Maybe finding a band will be a start.

There's something about the seamlessness of a CD that changes the way you hear an album, too. The hum of the spinning disk before it begins, the rare skip of a beat in the middle of a verse, the lack of interruptions from notifications and advertisements in between tracks. There's only one thing a CD is made to do— play music. Shopping for CDs became its own pleasure, too. It's in a forgotten ritual of the modern shopper— the art of browsing. It's not about buying the albums you like. It's about hoping to find the albums you like, walking into a store and never knowing what lies on the shelves. It's about the discovery of art. The disappointment you feel when you find the newest Foo Fighters album, but it's too expensive for your price range. The risk you take on buying a Cake album because it was on sale. The months you wait until you finally stumble upon "Californication" scrambled in a clearance bin in your local Best Buy.

There's a sense of rewardment in buying a CD, holding it in your hands, popping it into the car radio on the drive home, knowing these songs are yours. They don't exist on a server somewhere in Arizona. They exist in my hands. I *own* them. I don't feel this way when I click the order button on Amazon, or when I load Spotify on my phone. The internet is an amazing tool, but it places too much power in convenience. Moving forward into a hyperconnected world hurtling through life at a breakneck pace, I need somewhere to slow it down. There must be some breathing room to waste a little time.

There's something about this generation, about living right now, that just doesn't resonate with me. I have this impulse to go back, to live in the past, the 80s and 90s. It's a sort of flirtationship. I can wear the clothes, listen to the songs, use the technology, but I'll never truly be in the past. The modern day frightens me, and thinking of the future paves a bleak road for my pessimistic mind to travel. It's not like problems didn't exist twenty years ago, there certainly isn't a flawless decade. But everything wrong with the world right now seems so heightened. When I look at my phone, news pops up about

people suffering from halfway across the globe. The climate has gone to shit and there's nothing we can do that's quick enough to change it. The problems of the world have become my own, and I have enough to deal with without that sort of pressure. It feels impossible to tune out, and even with the guilt I feel by turning a blind eye from these problems, I need a space to look away and breathe.

I don't take my life for granted, it's a miracle I'm here in the first place and I don't want to seem selfish, but it would have been more miraculous if I was born just a few decades earlier. Earlier enough to walk without a screen in my pocket, to lay in the grass when I have nothing better to do, to move through life just a tiny bit slower. The closest I can get to an old fashioned life is by listening to music, one disk at a time.

Kid Icarus

They told me I could fly.

My parents, my mentors, my peers,
they tell me not to fret, for one day I stare at
success in the face and grin.

And then they warn you about a kid named Icarus.
How reaching for the stars scorched his dreams,
disintegrating like moths in a flickering flame.

But they still expect Icarus to soar.
He didn't fall because he touched the sun,
he fell because he didn't know how to fly on his own,

because when he crafted wings and glued them
on his arms and flapped for dear life,
he mimicked the birds around him and
wondered why he was falling.

And now they expect me to mimic the birds,
so I step off the ledge from the tower I've nested in,
and look at the jagged stones on the shore below.
I no longer wish to see how far I can fly,
but wish to see how soft I can land.

The Barista

I walk into the coffee shop, full of
hazelnut tables and grown ups in need of naps.
I wonder where the three dollars I spend
would go if I didn't buy coffee everyday.
Maybe I could buy a car. Or a boat.

Today, the air will frost fragile fingers-
the windy city lives up to its name.
A twelve-ounce cup can only warm me so much,
before I make the twelve-block trek to work
just to come back here, every morning.

But then I remember why I came.
The barista behind the counter sends
jitters down my spine,
Waking me up more than a
chai latte ever could.

I notice her hair, long, brown, swirling in
frizzy spirals, eyes hidden behind her glasses,
her freckles that never faded from grade school-
like splashes of coffee grounds on her cheeks.
The hearts over my I's instead of dots.

She memoizes my order, and
hands it to me with a smile-
that signature smile, folding
out of the corner of her mouth.
What else makes a smile like this appear?

Does she have her own barista, draped in
an olive apron, dotting hearts on her name?
Or maybe when she sees me, dragging my
corpse into the double wooden doors,
she wakes up just a little bit more.

Nonsense.

I am just a customer. She is just doing her job.
I swipe my debit card, she hands it back,
and we go on with our lives.
But I'll be back tomorrow.
There's always tomorrow.

Quicksand

There's that feeling again.

That feeling that juts like a spade
digging into dew-dropping grass,
filling that hole, that hole
right under the left of the ribcage,
which never makes itself known
until it starts imploding.

It's toppling like quicksand
Falling into itself,
An infinite loop.

And then the ears get really hot,
and the arms and the legs start to tingle,
and a ball of iron and nickel cools and sinks,
condensing and pressing on the pancreas,
and the brain flattens and oozes out
fuzzy thoughts that put all reason to sleep.
And then you walk away.
But I still feel it without you in the room.

A Future Present

March 26th, 2019

I stayed up all night hatching this plan. I found a stained receipt in the garbage can last week with Aunt Miranda's signature and I stole it. I studied the way she hooped her "M" like a McDonald's arc and swirled together her "E's" in her last name "Wheeler". With a sheet of loose-leaf paper and a ballpoint pen, I wrote a dismissal note about how Aunt Miranda would be staying home for my birthday today. She will not. Usually I go to Sarah Cunningham's after school until Aunt Miranda gets home from work, but not today. I need to get home and get my letter before anyone has a chance to read it. I need to know what it says. I can't wait any longer.

Sarah Cunningham is my best friend. She has been since I moved to Maryland when I was seven. She's in my fifth grade class with Mrs. Jeannotte, but lately she treating me differently. It's not just her though, I think it's everybody at this age. People are starting to notice things. Like my hair, my dusty black hair that sits on my scalp wrapped together like a bundle of hay. They already laugh at Dewey Hendrix because of his lisp and how he slurs his words together like a snake trying to speak. I don't want to be like Dewey Hendrix. I don't think they like it when I wear my My Little Pony shirt anymore, or that I still wear thick-rimmed glasses instead of switching to contacts. When will they notice that I don't live with my parents? I don't know, maybe they already have.

It was Sarah's birthday two weeks ago. I remember her wearing a pretty purple dress with turquoise butterfly earrings and a thin silver necklace. I can see her excitement reflect off of her glossy blonde hair. After all, she is turning ten, the most important birthday before you turn eighteen. That's when you get your letter. I felt obligated to give her a gift, even though I would give her a bigger one during her birthday party. I caught up with her after class, I slipped her a box with a plastic ring I

won from a claw machine in it and a birthday card I made with construction paper. It's a stupid gift. Sarah's a lot richer than me, she probably thinks it's lame. I'm glad she didn't open it in front of me.

I walked off the bus and headed straight to the main office. By the time I made it there, Principle Walters already began reading the announcements over the PA system. I handed the secretary my forged note and held my breath as she examined it. Her eyes pierced through the square frames of her glasses and darted across the note. My stomach got a little fuzzy. I can feel my breathing, concentrating on how slow it filled my lungs. The secretary squinted her eyes as she read it. I couldn't tell if she wasn't buying it, or if she simply couldn't read the note. By this time, Principal Walters finished the announcements and read off the list of birthdays today. It appears I'm the only one today. I stared at the wooden plaque on the desk that read *Mrs. Kowalski*. Hopefully she doesn't read how nervous I am if I just stare at the plaque. I think having eye contact with her would make it worse. "What is your aunt staying home for," Mrs. Kolwaski asked. I froze up a little bit. I didn't think this far ahead.

"It's a...surprise, she said," I replied. Mrs. Kolwaski locked eyes with me for what felt like minutes. Then she grinned. "Well, isn't that sweet. I hope it's something fun, Miss Mika," she said while jotting down words on a pink slip. She tore it off the pad and draped it over the countertop. I snatched it quickly, like my goldfish Bubbles eating her fish flakes when I finally remember to feed her. I dashed out of the office and headed to the opposite side of the school. I don't like it when I'm late to class, too many people look at you when you walk in.

I was with Sarah when she read her letter two weeks ago. I remember seeing her open her mailbox, finding a white envelope tied onto a little brown package. I'm not entirely sure how it works, but this is how my Aunt explained it to me. Sometime in the future, some really smart man made a time machine that sends things back in time, but it's too dangerous to send people to the past. The only thing safe enough to send is objects, like letters and toys and stuff. The government is very strict about what people send back in time to make sure people don't send things like money or lottery tickets.

When you become an adult, it's been a tradition to send yourself a letter and a gift back to when you turn ten-years-old. Some people get very long letters that spell out everything in the future, like when they get married and how much money they make, and some people get very short letters that talk about how they miss being a kid. Knowing Sarah, I'm sure she wrote herself a long one.

I sat next to her as she unfolded the letter inside. Typed on a sheet of paper was the woman she would become. "Mika, look! I'm going to be a fashion designer, and move back to New York where my parents are from." Joy radiated off of her face. Sarah always talked about growing up and making her own clothing line. She sketch out dresses and pocketbooks during recess. "And I'm going to marry a handsome soccer player, and have two children, and a french poodle. And my mommy and daddy are moving back to New York with me when they retire, so I can see them for Christmas!" Sarah folded the letter back up and opened the package. Inside was a metal picture frame decorated with grey roses and a photo of Sarah and her parents, the same one she kept in her room. I wish I had a photo like that.

The bus ride back was very strange. I didn't know who to sit with, especially because I usually sit alone in the morning. I felt everyone's eyes on me as I walked down the aisle, staring at me like my eyebrows were burnt off or something. I slipped into the emergency exit seat because the seat it a little smaller and people leave you alone. Sarah got me a gift too, and she gave it to me after class. She made me open it right away. It was a rectangular box with a silver necklace inside, just like the one she wears. I didn't put it on. I put it in my backpack instead. On the bus, I took it out of the front pouch and started twirling it in my fingers. I noticed the little heart on the front has little diamonds in the shape of little hearts. That's very nice, I thought, but I don't think I'm pretty enough to wear it yet.

The bus dropped me off at Aunt Miranda's quiet little blue home. She moved in here with that that man named Kevin, who turns out is not my uncle. I haven't seen him in a long time, but I never really asked why. It's a little odd not seeing my aunt's red Mini-Cooper in the driveway. I ran to the mailbox, which is made out of thick black

plastic. My heart began thumping faster. I opened the mailbox and stared into it for a few seconds. Nothing. I went on my tippy-toes and stuck my arm into the box, feeling all the way in the back. It was empty. I ran across the front yard and flipped over the white vase with pretty yellow flowers on it. It looks empty but that's where Aunt Miranda keeps her keys in case of an emergency. I unlocked the front door and ran into the kitchen. There were envelopes and papers sprawled out across the kitchen counter, so I climbed a stool and began sorting through them. I'm looking for the letter I wrote myself. Why isn't it here?

I went back outside and put the key back into the vase. I walked back to the mailbox with a panicky feeling and sat on the lip of the road that bumped up to the grass. Maybe the mailman just didn't come yet? I don't know what else to do. I snuck my way back home so I can read it, and now I might get in trouble and not even have the letter. I just want to know what happens when I grow up. I've thought about it for the past two weeks, staring at Bubbles while I lie in bed, and I have no idea what to expect. I felt happy for Sarah, it's nice to know her dreams came true, but I don't have a dream like that. I don't know what I'm going to look like in a decade or two from now. I just want to see Mom and Dad again. I wonder if they read their letters when they were kids. I wonder if they told themselves about me, and if told themselves about the car accident. If I were going to die, I know I would tell myself.

It must've been close to an hour. The mailman should have come by now, unless he took the day off. But it's not a Sunday, it's a Tuesday. Did I just forget the address of Aunt Miranda's house? Do I think it was a stupid thing to do as an adult? Shouldn't I remember how desperately I want it now? I just doesn't make sense. Unless, maybe I never got the chance to write myself a letter. The more I think about it, the more it snaps into clarity. I hugged my knees and buried my face in my lap. Maybe I don't live long enough to write the letter. If my parents only made it to their early thirties, maybe so do I.

I kept my head tucked between my legs when a car pulled up. "Mika? Mika, what are you doing?" I could tell it was Aunt Miranda by the nasiness of her voice. I slowly

lifted my head and saw her head poking out of her Mini-Cooper staring at me with her wide brown eyes. She always looked a little too young to be my mom, especially when she wears her big hoop earrings and tight dress jacket to work. But when she is mad at me, she looks just like my mom. "What are you doing here so early?" she asked.

"Waiting for my letter," I squeaked.

"You letter? What let-," Aunt Miranda froze in her tracks. She rolled her eyes and says some words that I'm not allowed to say. She turned her head and it collapsed onto the steering wheel, letting out a small honk that started the neighbor's dog. She looked back at me, speechless for a moment, trying to chase the sounds pouring out of her mouth. She gave out a little sigh and said told me to go inside. I sat on the couch in the living room and put my legs on the coffee table because they're now just long enough to reach. A few minutes later, Aunt Miranda walked in the front door with her red leather purse at her side. She looked more defeated than normal.

She sat down next to me and plopped her purse on the table next to my feet. Then she told me about the letters and how people don't actually send them back in time. She told me how parents write letters for their children under their name and tell them about how great their future will be. They find a memento, like a photo or a stuffed animal or something, that the kid really likes and make a copy of it to have it seem more realistic. She told me how scientists discovered that showing support is healthy for a child at this age, so people began this tradition to encourage children to follow their dreams and feel good about the future. Then she started to tear up a bit. She told me how hard it was taking me in, and how she wasn't ready to be a parent but there was no other choice for her. I would've had to live with strangers, or in an adoption center alone. She told me I don't understand how hard it is to work so hard to support this house by herself, and a child she did not expect to have. She started sobbing some more. She apologized a lot, too. She said how sorry she was that she forgot, that being a parent doesn't come naturally to her, or at least not yet. She said she was sorry about forgetting to write my letter, and how she could have never written a letter like my parents. I find it hard to believe most of what she told me, but I do believe that.

I started crying too. Not because of my letter. I don't care about it anymore. I'm just mad she lied to me. I think it's stupid that parents can lie to us about how everything in our lives will be okay, even if they won't. I went in my room and wedged a chair under the doorknob to lock it. I sat on my bed and stared at Bubbles, who was a bit blurry from the tears in my eyes. I thought about how little control I have over the future, and it made me feel really, really small.

Roughly twenty minutes later, there was a knock on my door. I heard Aunt Miranda's nasally voice muffled through the door. "I know you're upset, but here's the gift I got you," she said. I didn't answer. "It was your mother's," she added. I saw the shadow of a box block out the light from the hallway underneath the door. I debated on whether to get it or not. A few minutes passed, and I decided to open the door. On the floor lay a diary with a picture of my mother's face on it. Aunt Miranda must've found this while she was moving me out of my home a few years back. I smiled a little bit and shut the door. I can't read this tonight. I think I'll read it tomorrow.

March 26th, 2039

I'm staying in on a Friday night. There's nothing special about turning thirty, other than a gut-busting feeling that somehow you're more of an adult overnight. Thomas left this morning on a flight to Seattle for a conference, so I'm alone in our apartment. He took me to Oshami's for dinner last night, a yuppie sushi bar downtown. It was a nice change of pace for a Thursday. Teaching a bunch of third graders sucks the joy out of the weekdays around this time of year. I popped open my gift, an eighty-five dollar bottle of Pinot Grigio, and took a sip from my glass. It's already eight o'clock. Benji is asleep in his bedroom down the hall. Gosh, I never would have thought that I'd have a son by the time I was thirty. It seems so strange. Then again, I would have never thought about most things that happened.

Turning thirty felt emptier than most birthdays, even worse than that horrendous tenth birthday. I'm surprised I still remember that. Actually, I might still have that gift Aunt Miranda got me. I completely forgot if I brought it with me when I moved here a few

years ago. I slipped in my bedroom door, set my wine on my nightstand, and opened the closet. I scanned the array of shoeboxes and plastic bins looking for it. Perched on my tippy-toes, I reached for a bin before a box of stilettos came crashing down. Crap. Now my attention is split. My ears are fixated on the baby monitor sitting next to my glass of wine and my eyes and hands are shuffling around box after box in my closet and under my bed. There, I found it. A box full of my childhood belongings tucked away in the corner.

I pulled out Mom's diary from the box. Something about it made me think back to when I was a kid. Hearing how her troubles as a teenager paralleled mine soothed me in a strange way, and looking at her, she ended up making it out okay. I guess I did too, but it doesn't feel that way. I love Thomas, but he keeps leaving me alone for business trips. It's not his fault, but I just never imagined being alone so much. I wish I could have told myself back then that you never quite shake that feeling. Then it hit me. I grabbed a few sheets of loose-leaf and a fountain pen from my purse. I set up a station on the dining room table, accompanied by a freshly filled glass of wine. I began to write:

Dear Mika,

Today, you just turned thirty. Congratulations! I know you were looking forward to this letter years ago, wondering exactly who you were going to be in life. I'm afraid to tell you that that never really goes away. I'm sure you want me to tell you that you're going to change the world and become a famous movie star or the President or something. That's what most kids are told, and I'm sorry they were lied to. The truth is you aren't special, and you don't change the world. You become a teacher, and you change the lives of a handful of children every year. You care about a handful of friends and you try to keep your family from imploding on itself. You have to keep telling yourself that it's good enough, because most days it won't feel like it is. To be frank, I'm glad Aunt Miranda never gave you a letter. No one should tell you how to live your life, not even yourself when you're thirty. Who you are changes all of the time. Stop worrying about where you'll end up, because as long as you're alive and breathing, wherever you

land is perfectly fine. You have a son, by the way. I won't tell you his name because I'm afraid you'll change it. He's almost two-years old, and he's the happiest thing that's happened to you in a long time. I don't think I'll write him his letter. He'll have to figure out the world on his own. Anyway, good luck with whatever troubles your ten-year-old life. Enjoy the ride.

P.S. Don't worry about being good enough to be a mother. Just pretend you're being Mom and Dad.

*With much love,
Mika*

I folded the note several times to form a little square. I tucked the note in between my favorite page of the diary, a short entry that read, "Today was a bad day, but tomorrow can always be better.". Maybe one day I'll be able to send it to my ten-year-old self. But who knows?