

2024 HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST – 2ND PLACE

Mortality and a Rainbow School Bus

By Sofia Guyer

There comes a point in your life where mortality extends its shadowy hand to claw something beloved away from you. This shadowed figure manifests itself in different ways—maybe the death of a childhood pet, or the passing of a grandparent. This devastating event permanently alters how you perceive existence. Although it robs you of a certain innocence, of a belief in a world free of suffering and mortality, it can mark a certain awareness in your life.

Although there are infinite literal ways to react to death, philosophical reactions typically fall under two camps. The first is the common reaction—the submission to nihilism, the insurmountable, crippling depression, and the loss of faith in the world. The second reaction is a choice to believe in the better parts of existence and look at loss as an opportunity to explore parts of the world they hadn't appreciated before. I've witnessed my relatives experience both types, and the difference in how they've been able to continue their lives has been astronomical.

My Nai-Nai¹ passed away in 2016. I watched as my Ye-Ye's² spirit seemingly died with her. The man I once knew as a hard-working, passionate, and considerate first-gen immigrant capable of making a life for himself in a whole new continent became a ghost of his former self. Even at the young age of 8, I could tell something was horribly wrong with my beloved Ye-Ye. The bags under his eyes became heavier, he lost weight from not eating, he rarely left the house, and most noticeably the light in his eyes was gone. He spent the next few years haunted by the death of my Nai-Nai. He hoarded old portraits, pictures, and books, and closeted himself away in his room. He fell under the more common category.

My grandpappy lost his wife to cancer in the summer of 2018 and he defined his life according to his conscious decision to live bigger and brighter than ever. He sold his house. He bought an old school bus and painted it rainbow. He took that rainbow school bus and drove it all over the country. He drove down the Pacific Coast Highway, across the Midwest, and after weeks, he arrived in Maryland, to the quaint pink house my family was nestled in.

I could see the age and traces of grief in my grandpappy's face, but most prominent was his endless love for life. You could see it in his smile lines, his wind-ruffled salt and pepper hair, his effervescent blue eyes. Although he had lost the love of his life he had found more to live for. He found the quiet, holy moments on the road where it was just him, the wheel, and whatever was playing on the radio. He came to savor those moments of just existing.

1- Grandmother in Mandarin

2- Grandfather in Mandarin

My grandpappy fell under the category of embracing life—and he was much better off as a result.

- 1- Grandmother in Mandarin
- 2- Grandfather in Mandarin