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## Tetris – The Game of Life?

Rita Jones

What is most appealing about the poem “Things You Learn From Playing Tetris,” is the fact that the author takes a goofy idea and creates a beautiful piece about accepting the flow of life. The vast majority of poems are serious and intense and although many are beautiful few are light while still being meaningful. This poem achieves that flawlessly. The second reason that this poem is so attractive is the fact that it is concise and to the point. This piece does not contain added fluff and the author did not allow it to be any longer than it absolutely needed to be.

The first stanza of this poem describes Tetris, the computer game which became popular in the 1990’s. The game Tetris is a challenge to create a wall of different shaped units without leaving gaps. The computer spits out the blocks from the top and they drop at a continuously increasing speed. This portion of the poem describes the unique shapes of the different blocks that are used to create the wall. There are no metaphors in this stanza. The first stanza is a well-written introduction. The game is clearly explained and the style of the poem is introduced. The author’s choice of vocabulary in the first stanza is flawless, “the tall twins with bent backs, malcontent unless allowed to lay down and rest or lean against the wall in weariness.” The word choice helps to keep the reader interested in what could be an otherwise boring subject.

The second stanza of the poem dives into what this piece is really about, the challenges of life. The first line of the second stanza, “You learn to build your blocks into a solid façade,” is an obvious metaphor for the idea that throughout life people take all of the parts of their constantly changing history and create a version of themselves that they feel comfortable sharing with the outside world. The author then writes, “As you come to understand that some mistakes may be eliminated with stealth and accuracy.” These two lines represent what is so captivating about this poem; the writer concisely describes the challenges of the game Tetris while also conveying life’s struggles. The last portion of the stanza is possibly the best line in the poem. The author writes, “It is a difficult lesson that these mistakes are hard to tell apart until the end has come.” The writer is explaining the fact that in the game of Tetris some mistakes may be fixed by upcoming units while others will eventually ruin your wall. This line also perfectly expresses the idea that in life you make so many choices and while some of the bad ones may have a minor effect others may be devastating.

The third portion of the poem begins with the line, "You learn that there is less time at the end than there was at the start. / That this intensifies your problems beyond hope..." Isn't this true? It is as though aging only makes this clearer. Each year, day, month truly does seem shorter as each one passes. The pressure of less time makes every problem and challenge seem more difficult while at the same time more immediately important. This stanza ends with, "...your fate depends upon the whim of a machine, ... the work is often beyond your skill." Life is filled with unexpected obstacles, many for which we do not obtain the skills to get past until we are faced with them and successfully work through them.

The last stanza of the poem is short. It states, "You learn that this art involves simple units. / Like the pitches of a musical scale, / whose ultimate nature is mysterious and ephemeral. / They vanish upon completion of their goal." The author seems to be stating that life is made up of elements that you may or may not understand. The meaning of the events in a human life may be unclear but that their purpose is to build a strong history of lessons. At the end of it all, a person may not remember each of these lessons, but that is not necessary, the purpose of their passing is already complete.

This poem is unique in subject matter and is also extremely well written. It says a great deal about the journey of life and is short enough to keep the reader's attention all the way through. The poem has an easy flow that makes it enjoyable to read. Also, as in life, there is a clear beginning, middle and end. I never before would have thought of the game Tetris as anything but a simple game that is a mindless way to pass time. I'll never again be able to play it without contemplating the meaning of life.

## A Slippery Cathedral Roof: The Search For God

Jessica Baker

How should we decide whether or not God exists? Should we use reason or logic to determine religion, or should we leave it all up to faith? Philosophy has long since debated whether or not God exists, and since there is no scientific evidence to prove that there is a God, some people chose to believe that God must not exist. Yet there are many religious people in the world who believe that their faith will one day be rewarded. How do individuals choose their beliefs without sufficient evidence to prove them? Some people give much thought and deliberation before they construct their religious beliefs, some people are born into their religion and form their beliefs from that. However, others never give much thought to whether or not they believe in God. What if your life was suddenly questioned and you were faced with an incredible dilemma? What would you choose? The poem "From the Slippery Copper Roof of a Montreal Cathedral," by Ryan Masters, is a wonderful, comical poem that uses satire to tell the story of an anonymous narrator who climbs a Montreal cathedral, and then unexpectedly decides what his/her religious beliefs are as he/she accidentally takes a life-threatening fall, and then cries out for God to help him/her.

This poem is a satiric comedy that ridicules philosophical fallacies about religion in a humorous way. In philosophy, there are two types of ignorance: an argument that uses a lack of evidence to prove that something is true—there is no evidence to prove that God does not exist, and therefore, God must exist; and an argument that uses a lack of evidence to prove that something is false—there is no evidence to prove that God exists, and therefore, God cannot exist. The speaker climbs up the building and notices the luxurious "24-ounce copper-roof" (12), but neglects to mention the dangers of climbing a roof, as well as overlooks the religious message that the cathedral was built for. However, it is only when the narrator falls to his/her possible death that the character calls and asks for God's help. The narrator states, "between that roof and Rue Sherbrooke below / I cried out for God to help me fucking help me" (68). The plea of desperation and helplessness is what challenges philosophical thought. It is only when the narrator is about to die that he/she questions what the future holds, decides that faith is for those who need no evidence of God at any precise moment, and immediately relies on God to help him. The narrator disregards the fact that there is no scientific evidence that God exists, and automatically hands his/her fate into the hands of God. Therefore, this poem is a satiric comedy because philosophy has debated the existence of God for centuries, but the narrator decides to forget about

logic and immediately chooses to believe in God regardless of the lack of facts.

This piece is written in first-person perspective in order to envelop the reader into what the narrator is simultaneously thinking and experiencing as he/she takes a critical fall off of a cathedral roof. Masters uses first-person narrative in order to introduce the character to the reader on an intimate, personal level. The narrator pays no attention to what could have been a near-death experience, as does the reader. The narrator and the reader both experience the fall off of the roof as the speaker describes the incident from a first-person perspective;

This poem is religious because  
when I slipped  
on the way back down the roof,  
for that flash exposure  
of copper-plated time,  
when I slid  
on palms and soles and ass towards the edge,  
the 100 feet of open air  
between that roof and Rue Sherbrooke below  
I cried out for God to help me fucking help me [lines 59-68].

The use of “I” is used to trigger a personal reaction in the reader by creating an intimate sense of fear for the afterlife—as well as building an understanding for why the narrator chooses to ask for God’s help. Because the narrator had to simultaneously decide his/her beliefs as he/she fell, the reader understands that the narrator ultimately decides that he/she believes in God based on his/her own free will. I say free will because, as Masters once stated in an online interview;

It is not God who is responsible for terrifying the narrator into a cry for salvation. It is the narrator who is responsible for putting himself into a situation where he is forced to confront his mortality. Whether this is done consciously or subconsciously, the fact of the matter is that the narrator has forced a spiritual ultimatum from himself by climbing the cathedral.

The narrator created his/her own ultimatum through his/her own free-will, and ultimately has to answer for his/her actions. By limiting the subject material to the narrator’s personal thoughts only, the reader can follow the character intently, and this will cause for the reader to continue reading and enjoying the poem.

Masters uses literary terms as a way of displaying beautiful language, creating a mood for the poem, and creating a setting. Allit-

eration is used throughout the poem, “[The light] bouncing wicked with a crazy crackle” (18), “a monument to modern man’s ruined faith” (33), “when I stepped from the scaffolding / onto its steep slope of new metal” (46), in order to compose language that is crisp and emotionally interesting to the reader. “Wicked,” bouncing lights, and a modern man’s architectural and spiritual downfall, entail that the cathedral is overlooked and disregarded by citizens and sinners. The author personifies lights that sell “triple X delights” as sinners, stating, “Where the light / originally sinned before plunging up Crescent Street” (17), in order to illustrate the sinful behavior that crowds and corners the pious cathedral daily as well as describe the setting. The author combines alliteration as well as personification in order to describe the setting in more depth. The speaker states, “[...] the copper worker’s scaffolding / which clambered conveniently / up the stone cathedral walls” (36-38). The scaffolding is personified in order to imply that the narrator unwittingly went onto the scaffolding, and also to imply the scaffolding personally “clambered,” or climbed, up towards the roof with the narrator along with it—entailing that the scaffold is far beyond the narrator’s control, and that fate is somehow leading the narrator towards the roof. Masters’ beautiful use of language sculpts this poem into an attractive brochure about a scenic religious building, and an eye-opening tale about a twist of fate.

As I passed around this poem from friends to relatives, I noticed that everyone who read this poem literally laughed out loud after reading the last line in the poem. The fact that the narrator is sexless and anonymous made the story universally touching. This piece is very witty, intimate, well-written, and emotionally appealing; personally, I could relate to the message of this poem because, as a religious person, I had given much contemplation to my life-long religion and could relate to the narrator in the way he / she decides. I know that faith may seem, to some, as a gullible or an absurd choice, however I ultimately believe that I have made a good decision. I personally chose to rely on faith and believe that there is a God, rather than try to find some logical claim that will support my decision because that is what faith is all about—faith needs no evidence! I believe that there has to be a higher power that watches over us and that he, she, whatever God may be, has a certain way of making things work out for the best—almost like some kind of all-knowing teacher. Thank goodness I have already made my religious decision—instead of having to critically make my decision when falling off of a cathedral roof! As for the writing, I was rendered speechless as I peaked over the anonymous narrator’s shoulder as he / she gave the gritty description of the supposed religious setting, described the glorious journey towards the cathedral roof, and whimsically expressed how the he / she carelessly drank wine as he / she en-

joyed life by watching the world that surrounded him/her. Yet I was completely shocked when I spoke with the writer and I came to discover that this was an autobiographical story! I believe that Masters' courage to tell his story in such gritty, lovely details is a breath of fresh air into the world of literature, and I think that this poem was, by far, the best piece out of the entire Porter Gulch Review. Masters' writing is absolutely beautiful and it touched my heart in a way that no other literature could compete.

## Static

Nicole Frager

Yesterday when I was driving, I was thinking about the war. My thoughts were weighing me down, wanting to escape out my pores. I wanted this feeling of uneasiness to go away, but it won't right now. It is because people are dying and I can't stop it. I listen, and I hear excuses... "There's nothing we can do about it anyways", "the Iraqi people want us there", "stop being such a hippie." I want to vomit, just like when 9-11 happened. People were upset. That I understood, but what scared me was the thirst for a violent revenge. I didn't agree with it, already unhappy with our government's position of power regarding foreign policy. I tried to speak out, but I was silenced. Eventually, silence became easier than conflict, and soon the air became very quiet. We were back to our normal lives. My neighborhood went on as usual... get up for work, take the kids to school, go to class, an afternoon in the sun, some drinks with dinner. No worries, no bombs here, no one's starving on my street. People say, "You should be glad you don't live in a third world country. Stop complaining, you're living in the land of the free. Then how come I don't feel free? I feel trapped inside my own body.

My neighbor is so sweet, making dinner for us, always smiling. I love her, yet I cringe to think of when she yelled at me for saying our government helped instigate this. She said, "Better someone else's kids than mine." So, I stopped talking about it. That was last year, and now I feel it so much more... voiceless to avoid conflict, avoiding the realities we need to face. Silence can lead to ignoring something too important to ignore.

"Words carefully measured/ like a neighborhood cup of sugar"(Schwarz, PGR 100). In the poem "Good Neighbors", Schwarz compares our society's neighborly chit-chat to using a measuring cup. We watch what we say to avoid conflict. We talk casually, measuring our words so we don't offend, instead of talking freely. I went to a barbeque last week with some neighbors. They had news covering the war on T.V. the whole time. I tried to ignore it, having fought my battles all week long, careful not to bring up my opposing views. I just wanted to relax and not be accused of being overly emotional. They treated the war as a trivial subject, something simple, like borrowing some sugar from your neighbor with a thank you and a smile. I felt sick in my bed later that night, thinking of the comments made, as if we were watching G.I. Joe. What cool gachets we have. "Did you see that one blow?" And I want to do what the poem says, "unhinge this tenuous relationship". I want to be surrounded by awareness. I'm sick of these surface relationships to avoid the massive need for change. "We who

eschewed politics/ to wear the mantle/of good neighbors/find ourselves voiceless." Schwartz speaks about are dismissal of politics in our conversations to avoid looking outspoken. It's like a habit, staying out of issues that can bring about frustration, sadness, or even a feeling of helplessness. Yet, our silence feeds our ignorance until it grows into what we are now facing.

My best friend from back home told me yesterday, she couldn't take it anymore. She's retiring her "political career". She says think like "all governments are corrupt in some way" and "maybe those people do want us there". I wanted to cry all day long, dreaming about her and I on the opposite sides of a battlefield of the blind status quo versus the sacrifice of change. We are being ripped apart. So maybe I'll just keep saying, "I know what you mean, it's hectic. So how's your boy?" Then in the car I imagine the past. I hear voices of neighbors back then, "The Indians need us, they are uncivilized", "There's nothing we can do about slavery, just be glad you have what you need", "I don't think Vietnam is right, but need to trust my leaders, I have enough to think about". In all of these situations, society stood back and let their leaders unjustly hurt and kill innocent human beings. It hurts so much to feel like we grow and grow, and yet we don't learn. How will we ever change? I want to be a good neighbor, but the "silence that settles across the neighborhood" is no longer a peaceful quiet to me, like when I used to lay in the sun with my best friend down the street, sipping on lemonade on a hot summer day. Now the "silence" is somehow loud and full of static in my brain. I want to talk about it! Yet, it's hard because I want to talk like friends, not enemies. I just don't want to be voiceless anymore.

"We chat/ when time and weather permit". It's sad that we can't all just chat on our porches about baseball and love, but I don't think we can ignore the inevitable any longer. Ignoring has led to ignorance, which has led to these problems we are now facing. The author of the poem brings to light this tension that we as neighbors may be experiencing. This poem inspires change because it brings up feelings that most can relate to. It throws our tendency to hide from society's problems in our face. Her tone of sarcasm makes me want to rise above this ignorance and add to positive change in this world that we as neighbors share.

### Works Cited

1. Schwartz, Elaine G. "Good Neighbors". Porter Gulch Review 2002.



Sara Friedlander

## Between Ideals and Reality

Mellissa Sante

Have you ever imagined having to deal with an unwanted pregnancy? Have you ever thought about what you would do, or how you would feel? Have you ever judged another person in that situation, thinking they should have done “this” or “that” differently? I can say confidently that almost everyone I know would answer “yes” to these questions. It’s easy to assume how we would react, or what decision we would make. It’s easy to judge another’s actions and deem them “right” or “wrong”. Once that scenario becomes a reality how many react differently than they expected they would? An unwanted pregnancy can produce many unexpected thoughts, feelings and reactions. One can not know for sure how they would react until they are facing that situation head on. Alex Taurke clearly details the raw reality of his confrontation with an unexpected pregnancy in his poem “To Michele”.

I had always told my friends,  
Confidently, self-righteously, and yes  
with arrogance:  
If it was my choice  
I would  
do the right thing. (Lines 9-14)

Taurke had assumed he would feel a certain way. He admits being self-righteous, and arrogant. Which leads me to believe he had previously judged another’s actions (in the same situation) and was confident that if it was up to him, he would “do the right thing”, and take care of his child.

I was laying on my bed  
the day you called me  
and told me to sit down.  
But my mattress couldn’t soften  
The oncoming collision of my  
Youthful Idealism  
With that day’s  
Cold Reality. (Lines 1-8)

Taurke’s world changed, and a part of his innocence died, the second he received the phone call that caused the collision of his “youthful idealism” and the “cold reality”. It sounds to me that the life chang-

ing news came as a complete surprise. When a woman takes a pregnancy test it is because she suspects she may be pregnant, therefore the news may not come as such a complete shock. For Taurke who was laying innocently in the comfort of his bed, the shocking news was devastating. Once the situation became real, Taurke's reaction was not what he had expected.

"Oh God.

Oh no.

End this.

Kill it."

"I screamed to myself

The instant you said "I'm pregnant" (lines 15-20)

These lines are brutally honest and full of raw emotion. Taurke's belief that he would want to "do the right thing" drastically changed. His words speak volumes of how dramatic he felt in those devastating seconds, when he learned that his life would never be the same. Line 18 "Kill it" was a very strong statement that showed the immense fear that Taurke felt. The fact that he refers to the pregnancy as "it" gives me the feeling he doesn't want to, or can't accept it as a possibility for anything else. It's obvious Taurke did not feel ready for this immense responsibility, but I am left wondering what happened. In line 19 Taurke says, "I screamed to myself". Did he share his fears with Michele, or did he carry the burden of his disappointment by himself? I am curious to know how this dramatic predicament ended. Did this really happen to Alex Taurke and Michele and if so how were their lives effected? I hope they have found peace and happiness with their decision, whatever they chose to do.

I chose to write about this poem for many reasons. I felt I could really relate to some of Taurke's words. I had always thought I would "do the right thing" if I ever were faced with an unwanted pregnancy. I will never forget the day I took the pregnancy test and it was positive. Although I was already sure I was pregnant and only taking the test to confirm my suspicion, the fear I instantly felt was suffocating. Just like Taurke, I was no longer confident of my previous beliefs. In fact I no longer wanted "doing the right thing", I just wanted it to be over. I had heard a lot about unwanted pregnancies, and I knew the choices I had. What I was not prepared for, was the emotions involved when I realized I now had to make that choice. I had never experienced an anxiety that intense before. My mind was blurred by a collection of mixed emotions, and I could no longer think clearly. I had always expected that I would be happy and excited when it was my turn for motherhood, but I was not at all. I felt somehow I was less of a

woman, because I was not reacting the way I “thought” I should. I realize now there is no set rules of how I should feel. My feelings are important no matter how much they differ from others.

Another reason I chose Taurke’s poem was because I really admired his honesty, and his courage to write how he truly felt. When I first read the poem I was actually taken back by line 18 “Kill it”. It caught my attention and I found myself going back to read it again. At first I was very disturbed, but I realized maybe I was so disturbed because I could relate in some way to his words. I never felt like the words “kill it” could explain the way I felt, but I could understand the feeling of just wanting it to be gone.

I had some friends and family members read the poem (men and women) to see their reactions. The women seemed to have a more expressive reaction. I watched one of my girlfriends closely while she read Taurkes poem. I could tell when she got to line 18. Her face contorted into a deep scowl and gasp slipped from her mouth. My boyfriend’s reaction was not nearly as strong. He felt the words were harsh, but he also felt that it was not an uncommon reaction, and many men probably feel that way and just may not express it.

It was refreshing to see male point of view in that situation. It seems we usually focus on the woman and how she feels, because it is her body, and ultimately her choice. This poem really made me contemplate the different human reactions, and realize they are all equally as important. From Taurkes reaction to his unwanted pregnancy, to my friend’s emotional response to his words. The emotions that created this poem and the impression those emotions left on the readers. Taurkes words produced a strong response in those who read them. Some readers were disgusted and judgmental and some were a little more accepting and understanding. Neither reaction is “right” or “wrong”. What is truly important is we give credit to everyone’s feelings no matter how different they may seem from our own.

## Applied Tetris

Nate Kotila

This poem explains to us readers how to learn from playing a video game from the early nineties. This is pure genius. I used to play Tetris when I was a kid and my brother first bought an original Gameboy. I never thought of learning from it, but this man, Christopher Johnson, has come up with clever ideas of things one would learn from playing Tetris.

First, before giving the lesson that should accompany the game, when it is purchased, for people like me, who don't notice lessons in front of their faces. He starts by describing the pieces that will be in action in the game. All seven of them; Though, if you've never played the game you wouldn't know what the pieces look like anyway. He describes the pieces of the game like people giving them traits, such as broad shouldered, tall with bent backs, and portly. These we would associate with people. He then describes how they would go about acting, in what position they like to be, and how they are to be used.

A lesson to be learned, though not stated by Mr. Johnson is that with the seven characters of different shapes, we learn that it is not one type of individual that is necessary to make things work out, but that we need a multitude of people to make up a whole. It teaches us a form of tolerance for others that are different from us. Whether the people are squatty, tall and scrawny, or crooked and misshapen; they are all necessary to complete life. Life could go on and success is possible, but it just wouldn't be the same without a character.

In the second stanza he explains the lesson of patience and understanding of mistakes. He explains using the metaphor of a wall how we build ourselves up but leave little gaps (chinks in the armor). We learn from this about human flaws, that no one is perfect. This is explained ever so beautifully: "As you come to understand that some mistakes/ May be eliminated, with stealth and accuracy. / But that others remain behind." No matter how carefully we try to make ourselves up we still have flaws that exist below that which we project and will some day force us to come to terms and fix them or lead us to our doom.

The third and fourth stanzas are much shorter than the first two stanzas. The third explains how Tetris teaches a person how to think and make a lot of a rather small amount of time. It teaches how to run on reflexes. How in life you start young with plenty of time, but the older you get the less time is granted to you. It also teaches how in life you're often at the mercy of someone else. In the case of Tetris, you are at the mercy of the game as to what will happen to you. In life

you may believe that God controls what happens to you, or some other outside force, and there is nothing that you can do about it except roll with the punches.

The fourth stanza does not state a specific practical lesson for most people. It states that Tetris is like an art form where once something is completed, it vanishes away from existence like a piece of music written only for the person who is writing it, not sticking around as anything permanent, merely temporary. This is created through the basic units of play that were brought in at the start of the piece. We work hard in our lives to create, to make everything that we touch the way we want it to be, but, in the end, it will in some way or another be destroyed and nothing will be left of what we created. By that time we may be dead, or we may still be living, but nothing lasts forever.

There is a kind of mirror image going on, except the reflection is something less than perfect compared to the original, a kind of odd symmetry. The first and last stanzas reflect each other in an odd way, and the two inner stanzas have reflections of each other. As a whole, the poem starts with the introduction of the seven pieces brought up again at the end by the concept of the pieces being "simple units" to be put together to make a wonderful whole that will disappear. The second and third stanzas are the two lessons that are learned. The lessons of patience and living. How, no matter what we do we will still die at one point because in ourselves there are flaws that get more prominent the farther along in life we are.

## Pennies on the Streets: The Offering of a Few German Estrada

The sun's annoyingly increasing heat began to pester as it clung to his fragile, almost pitifully weak torso, like an obese man dripping in sweat. The few forgettable white clouds hovering unnoticed in the blue sky began to form what appeared to be mythical creatures, which existed primarily in tales told to children. His feet moved quietly on the downtown pavement, their sound lost amid the noise of the crowded street. He walked past an under-aged smoker whose youthful features made it obvious. The boy carelessly puffed his sweet nicotine as the smoke filled the air with the scent of pool halls and empty bars. The smell slowly drifted to a police officer near by and her decision to ignore the situation was shameful. He proceeded as a pedestrian on the sidewalk when suddenly, he saw the beggar. Like all the others in his unfortunate predicament he held out a neglected hand, which gradually deteriorated down the slope of society and into the urine-socked ghettos of America. His vomit stained T-shirt hung loosely on his skinny body, while his calm and silent demeanor masked screams for the indispensables of life.

It is confusing and disturbing that in the richest nation in the world human beings are going hungry. They are without shelter and companionship, yet some of us choose to ignore them. In the poem "Two in the City" the poet reveals our country's shameful decision to neglect the homeless because they serve as a reminder of our society's decadence. It displays our lack of compassion and the rotting decay to which it leads. The struggle of the beggar is subtly presented to the reader throughout the poem by the tone and hidden messages within the writing. For instance, the poet uses a Spanish-French title for the first stanza to conceal its meaning. The title is "Les Miserables" which in Spanish and French means the miserly. This term is an essential one because people's stinginess is emphasized in this poem.

When I first glanced at this poem the title caught my eye because it reminded me of the Charles Dickens' classic "The Tale of Two Cities". After reading the poem I realized that there is a connection between the novel and poem since both deal with the issues of poverty and wealth. The title "Les Miserables" is also the title of a popular play about the French Revolution, which deals with miserly and impoverished. The writer's poetry was without question influenced by both the novel and play.

The poet's writing reads more like a short story than poetry, and I believe this unique style of writing makes the piece stand out from all the rest. This epic begins in front of a theatre where characters

wait to spend their money on fictional images while ignoring the painful reality surrounding them. Selfishness is the theme of the first stanza. The theme is reinforced when a woman chooses to ignore her fellow man in need, and instead purchases a seven-dollar glass of wine.

The financially unfortunate never once beg for loose change, instead they repeatedly recall encounters with their neglectful "mothers". I believe the use of the word "mother" is a symbolic representation of society. We are all children of society; however, at times we turn our backs on our brothers and sisters, especially the homeless. When their stench reaches our nostrils, we pinch our noses in disgust to reject their wicked odor. To keep them from our sight, we place them in the dark and leave them there. Here are the beggar's words.

I saw my mother again the other day  
In the lobby of the Mark. She was walking  
With her escort of United States Marines,  
So many people crowded around her! She wore  
A mink coat and a tiara. When she passed me  
She didn't see me, even though her fur brushed my hand  
(Spencer 307).

The second stanza is ironic in title "Near Union Square". The poet perceives our culture as anything but united and our lack of unity continues in the second stanza. The beggars grow nauseous with superficial beauty and they pose the question, "You know you're gorgeous, don't you?" The question is answered by the beggar as his "Mother" who the question was asked to, expanse her distance from Union Square by walking away and leaving her "child" calling from the curb "Gorgeous!"

The name Mark, which serves as an unusual name in this poem for a hotel, caught my eye. I decided to investigate and from my research I discovered that Mark was the author of the second Gospel in the Bible and is also a saint (509). This newly obtained knowledge forced me to look for other terms within the writing, which have religious symbolism. I observed that the woman purchased a glass of wine for seven dollars. The number seven is a very biblical number. There are seven deadly sins, God built heaven and earth in seven days, and God said that the seventh day should be the holiest of days. At the last supper Jesus Christ converted wine into blood and it was Jesus who once said something along the lines of what you do to the least of my brothers you do to me.

We live in an individualist society where competition, not cooperation is encouraged (Rothwell 11). A belief in individualistic interest is placed above those of the community and the impoverished suffer its wrath. One can see this in the unjust war launched by President

Bush against Iraq. Our commander and chief would rather take a hundred billion dollars and invest it in a war, than invest it back into the communities that desperately need financial aid. Due to the government's hidden agenda, education, health care, and poverty slide farther down the list of our nation's priorities. Charles Derder, a sociologist believes, "Americans converted to the reigning ideology of 'looking out for number one' are proving ready to sacrifice not only outsiders but their kin on the altar of their own needs and pleasures" (p.111). I believe some of us already have. Spencer's poem reminds us that we must be compassionate towards all humanity and steer clear from greed.

## Russian Philosophy

### Vin Rideout

The poem, "Things You Learn From Playing Tetris", by S. Christopher Johnson, is a superb poem, not only because of its contemporary subject matter, but also because of its clever associations and interesting diction. Johnson's poem is very accessible to anyone who has played video games since the late 1980's, at the cost of being quite inaccessible to those who have not played Tetris. The progression of the poem is very systematic, building a story from the ground up, almost a Tetris analogy within itself. It begins in the world of Tetris, but throughout the poem gains a more abstract and philosophical tone.

Tetris was created by the Russians in the late 1980's, and has been ported to almost every platform known to man, as well as being imitated by many other games. Naturally, none of these other games came close to the success of the original. The game is just elegant in its simplicity. Tetris was not only played by children, either. My dad used my Game Boy more than I did during the few years he was addicted to Tetris. By using Tetris as a base for his poem, Johnson instantly establishes a link with his readers. The downside to this foundation for the poem is that it is inaccessible to people who have not played Tetris. However, I believe that this is no different than the inaccessibility of Shakespearian sonnets to someone who has not studied Shakespeare's dialect before. To understand this poem, you must study Tetris.

The poem begins with a description of the functional components of the game: the blocks. These descriptions are humorous, yet interesting. The language the author uses to describe the blocks is very anthropomorphic, giving each block a unique and fitting personality. The two-by-two block is "portly", the t-shape is "broad-shouldered and versatile." My favorite of these descriptions is that of the two-by-twos, offset by one. The author calls them "harbingers of chaos", an accurate depiction. These are the blocks that make Tetris difficult. If you get them early, they create an instant imperfection in the wall, and if they come late, often you curse the machine for giving you the one, when you had a place for the other. After this introduction, the poem progresses into the abstract, using Tetris as its metaphor.

The second paragraph is about building a wall. It is about preventing, accepting, and fixing your mistakes. Though it is spoken in the language of Tetris, it conveys an obvious metaphor for real life. There's nothing like getting advice from your Nintendo. Mistakes happen in life, but some can be corrected. With "stealth and accuracy", as the author puts it, mistakes can be rectified. However, life is not always fair, and some mistakes will stay with you for eternity. Unfortu-

nately, it is difficult to make up for past actions, and impossible to see the future. One must be wise to recognize which mistakes can be fixed, and which must never, ever be made. In the context of Tetris, these mistakes are unavoidable play errors. Some of them may be fixed through careful placement of subsequent blocks, but others will lead to your demise.

Life often seems rushed, and indiscretions and judgment calls seem to stack up after a while. To accomplish some tasks, you must be almost superhuman; never making mistakes, never stopping for rest, and all the while the difficulty increases. Again, this is obviously applicable to Tetris. The difficulty of Tetris increases with every ten lines you complete, the speed increasing to an almost unbearable pace. My dad was always better than I was at playing Tetris, and I wouldn't be surprised if this was a result of his practiced ability to act under pressure. He is always pulling all-nighters and rushing to meet deadlines.

The single most important lesson learned from Tetris, and all video games, is that all you can do is your best. As the author puts it, "you learn that... the work is often beyond your skill." If a person does their best, in life or in Tetris, they should be proud, whether they made it to level 3 or level 20. Working to full potential is much easier said than done, and is truly something to be proud of.

To truly understand this poem, you must first understand Tetris. If you have not played it, I urge you to go out and find an old copy for the NES or Game Boy, and drop blocks until you have mastered it. The lessons and philosophies learned from Tetris are valuable tools, as this poem so eloquently illustrates. Perhaps you too will enjoy Tetris enough to write a poem about it.

## Plague Among our Youth

Martha Victoria Vega

Our society is plagued by unplanned pregnancies because many young adults do not take responsibility for their actions. They become sexually active and do not think about the consequences. They can be quick to judge or reach a decision before really analyzing all their options in a situation. If a young female becomes pregnant out of wedlock, the potential father might feel: content about becoming a young dad, angry that she is pregnant, and/or scared about the situation. He might also be unprepared financially to raise a child. Young people should practice prevention, and or abstinence. There are programs out there for them to use. For example, Planned Parenthood is a large organization that is confidential, economical and local. All young people should take advantage of.

Unplanned pregnancies are a signifier that parents are lacking time to show their love or energy in raising their children. Children do not get enough attention from their parents at home. Since the young adults need attention and love, they seek both elsewhere. I feel the children need to keep busy in healthy activities such as: school, homework, sports, volunteer work, exercise or attend a gym. However, children need to understand that the parents have to work two jobs to make ends meet. In some situations, children are not lucky enough to have both parents living at home like the "American Dream" with the house and the white picket fence. In some cases, for one reason or another, we have marriages or relationships failing apart and the end result being divorce or permanent separation. It is common to see divorce, as a result you see single parents (mothers or fathers) working and trying to raise money to provide for their children. For this reason, one income is not sufficient for a single parent to pay for the following: landlord or mortgage company, Pacific Gas & Electric Company, Pacific Bell, buy food and clothing. Furthermore, don't expect to take extravagant trips and purchase expensive items to satisfy self-pleasures. The parent's main concern is their child, but the child has other concerns and activities to be worried about.

We as a nation will never be able to stop young adults from having sex, but educating them on the importance of prevention is extremely important. These young couples meet, spend time together, communicate by phone or e-mail, fall in love, and have intercourse. They live each moment to the fullest. They make sure to enjoy their youth and make plans for their next outing in the many phone conversations. Alex Taurke, wrote To Michelle and he begins by saying:

I was lying on my bed  
the day you called me  
And told me to sit down.  
But my mattress couldn't soften  
The oncoming collision of my  
Youthful Idealism  
With that day's  
Cold Reality. (1-8)

Taurke's poem reminded me of the importance of communication between couples. A discussion of goals, plans, core values and perspective in life is vital in a relationship. Yet, some young couples don't think about the consequences of having unprotected sex. Taurke's "Youthful Idealism" is an example of a young person's blindness and lack of communication. When a person is young, he or she thinks they have all the answers and adults have much to learn. Although, a couple may share various interests, but have different expectations on what they want after high school. For instance, the female might want to get married, have the house, raise their children and the male might want to go to college, join a fraternity, graduate, get a job and then maybe get married. These views are completely different and can clash. Upon the girl becoming pregnant, she might be happy and the guy can be disappointed. Their life situation changes at that instant.

This particular poem clearly indicates a male perspective of what the right choice to take might be regarding being a possible father. From this point on, the tension in the poem continues to build. There is a tone change and a dramatic irony. For instance, Taurke states:

I had always told my friends,  
Confidently, self-righteously, and yes  
With arrogance:  
If it was my choice  
I would  
Do the right thing. (9-14)

In this particular circumstance, one may ask oneself, what is the right thing? I know I asked myself this question when I read it. The "right thing" can be many different things. You automatically get the sense that there is a conflict and a solution must be reached. Here are a couple of options I came up with. Option one, have the child and have the grandparents help out while both parents are attending college. Option two, have the child and give it up for adoption. Option three, have the child and move in together. Option four, get married, find gainful employment, have the child and go to school at night. Option five, terminating the pregnancy. These are my options, but one can

come up with more solutions.

There are another four lines that completely describe how our society can reach a quick resolution to a problem. Fix the problem by deleting it from existence so it won't affect the current life style or college plans. Taurke goes on to say:

Oh God  
Oh no.  
End this.  
Kill it.  
I screamed to myself  
The instant you said "I'm pregnant." (15-20)

Kill it! That's a beautiful being that she is caring inside of her and he just wants to kill it. Maybe he should have used a condom or another form of contraceptive to prevent this situation in the first place. I find it ironic that he pleads to God for answers and suddenly, the answer to his problem is "Kill it". It is not surprising that the youth find it much easier to kill the baby since that is learned behavior. In fact, when the United States has a tough situation they either solve the problem by using ammunition or declaring war, which in result kills life. This poem is a perfect example of how irresponsible young adults can be. Unplanned pregnancies seem to be an epidemic among youth. We need to educate and put as much focus on this problem that exists today.

Obviously, some young people consider abortion as a form of contraception, as "screamed" in this poem. Personally, I know two acquaintances who have used abortion rather than using other methods of birth control. Although the following statistics are fairly old, according to a Web page sponsored by Heritage House \_76:

The number [of abortions] increases each year as it converts more of its [Planned Parenthood] clinics to killing centers. In 1985 it had 51 chambers which killed 110,000. By 1994 it had 70 which killed 134,000. Every year, it refers to other facilities almost as many abortions as it does itself (Ch. 42).

Young people need to find alternatives to using abortion as a solution to their problems. You would think that the "right thing" would be for him to take responsibility for this new being that he created out of love or lust. The correct thing to do in my point of view would be for him to marry the pregnant girlfriend, hustle to land a job and raise that child that has the right to be brought to this earth. It is morally wrong to kill another. For this reason, your one blood should not be killed and given the opportunity to be born, take his first steps, become educated and

be an asset to his or her community. Killing your future child in the womb can have negative emotional or physical effects on a young couple. One could live with a bad conscience and always wonder what could have been of that child. Some women find it difficult to conceive after getting an abortion. In any case, abortion should not be considered a contraceptive.

Early sex education is important. Parents are responsible to have the “birds and the bees” talk with their children, but some find it hard to provide sex education discussions because they did not have it at home when they themselves were young. For that reason, the school should teach Sex Education in 4<sup>th</sup> grade instead of 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Although, there are supporters who wish to change the standards in Sacramento and in local districts, there is pressure by conservative parents to keep teachers silenced and children in the dark about sex education and the function of their organs. Condoms are essential in preventing pregnancies and must be available to the students in the nurse’s office. Knowledge of Planned Parenthood and social health organization such as this one become indispensable in preventing unplanned pregnancies and the spread of STD’s. Of course, abstinence is a clear way to avoid conception, but obviously that is not happening, so we need to come up with other solutions.

In closing, I feel we must all work together on this problem. Unplanned pregnancies among young adults won’t go away if we are quiet. We must write to our political and school representatives. We must strive to live a utopian society every day of our lives. We only get one life, one world, and one universe so we must strive to preserve it. We must work together to live a better life and not to “kill it,” as the poet Alex Taurke would suggest. Imagine if his mother would have aborted him or the youth of whom Taurke received the inspiration for this poem, maybe then this poem would have never been written.

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## Just a Survivor

Chris Dykmans

Maybe when it comes down to it, there are two kinds of people: victims and survivors. But maybe we can choose between both. In everyone's individual life, there is some sense of fate. Everyone encounters a situation where they are thrust into certain grim conditions. But how one chooses to deal with the situation can determine whether the individual is either a victim or a survivor. A victim will give in to circumstance, letting themselves be overwhelmed and controlled by these situations; they are a victim of fate. On the other hand, a survivor surpasses the grip of fate and lives for their self. The poem "Old Juan", by Joan Safajek touches upon this. It's a glimpse at how one chooses to live around fate; how to be a survivor and take back supremacy.

Old Juan may be a petty farmer, but he is just as unique and strong as anyone else.

Through the poem we learn that inevitable things occur in his life. On his farm, it never rains. There is a drought, yet Juan continues to farm. His farm is on the verge of dying; it seems like a lost cause that he continues to travail. We even learn that Juan outlived cancer, leaving a long red scar in the middle of his stomach. There is a lot going on within this poem, and looking closely at each portion can show us how fate works, and what it's like to live like a survivor.

The following quote is the beginning sentence, touching upon Juan's continuance of his farm work in spite of harsh conditions. "Bare back gleaming in noon sun, / old Juan digs up dry grass / for drought starved cattle, his hoe / handle polished smooth with use" (Safajek). We first find out that the conditions on the farm are grim.

There is a drought, cattle are starving and dying, but Juan continues to work; as pointed out by the description of his hoe. The drought is the form of fate for Juan, and even though he could give up and lumber away, he continues to farm, and even when it's an expiring cause. As fate would have his land slowly break down, Juan would still farm. This must lead to an idea that Juan farms for himself, and that he must have a special faithfulness to it. It's a strong way to introduce us to the poem.

Following the previous segment comes one that gives us some insight on Juan's attitude, and the notion of fate. "No rain for months, he laughs / and shrugs, bemused black eyes / clear as the desert sky" (Safajek). The first part of this where he laughs and shrugs off the fact that there is no rain, shows that he is a survivor. He could easily complain and give up, but instead he doesn't give in and continues to farm. Juan is not letting himself become a victim of fate, but rather he is trying to rise above it, trying to keep on keeping on. The second part of

this segment, letting us know about Juan's "bemused black eyes", raises some questions about fate. Bemused means to be "engrossed in thought", so obviously Juan is speculating the situation he's in. Juan is an old farmer, and yet, he is still bewildered by fate, even when he's had his whole life to think about it. Maybe it means that we are not ready to fully understand life and how it works. Or even, maybe it implies that life can never be understood in the first place; after all, Juan's had his whole life, and he's still "bemused". It implies the notion of fate, that random things are going to occur with no cause, that can leave a man or woman lost in confusion. It's a good setup for the author's way to deal with fate, which follows next.

The following is a possible solution to the issue of fate. In answering how to deal with it, Juan looks into himself and what he is capable of.

What more can he do, he asks./ Unpredictable as rain, women/  
come and go, cattle and children/ die. What more can he do/  
but clear and plant/ chilie pepper fields/ with machete and hoe./  
He smells like sweat and sage,/ hands so tough he holds cut  
pieces/ of cholla cactus without gloves, (Safajek)

In this, Juan realizes that he can't control fate. Instead, he looks into himself for how he can deal with it. He begins to understand that he is only human, and he can do only so much. So that's what he does, he continues to farm and work hard because that is all he can really do. He is surviving, controlling his own actions, even in the midst of a harsh fate. He is trying to live the best he can; thus he is a strong person. He could just as easily be a victim. His fate could easily control him and overwhelm him, forcing him to live depressed and influencing him to not work at all. If Juan was a victim, he would try to live by fixing the problems that fate brings, the problems that he can never control. Instead, he continues to plant and farm, doing what he can. He is living for himself and not as a response to fate; he exists first and fate second. Juan takes back control. He eventually realizes he is a survivor, which is pointed, out next.

Following the solution, we find out the aftermath. We learn of Juan's cancer operation, and the happiness that comes from knowing that he is still alive.

He points with a hint of pride/ to the long red scar/ that divides  
his belly./ A cancer operation, last year./ It doesn't matter that  
this ranch/ where he was born belongs/ to a rich man from  
Tijuana./ He's still alive, still able to hear/ cattle bells ring, rhythmic/  
and reassuring in the cool/ quiet of night, (Safajek)

We learn from this what its like to find value and meaning in the wrath of fate. Juan is proud of his triumph over the cancer and living

through the operation. He can and should, going through that can be life threatening and frightening. Juan comes out on top, and he is grateful to be alive, and he takes pride as a survivor. After this operation he realizes the gift of life, and how trivial fate is. We learn this from the part "It doesn't matter that this ranch/ where he was born belongs/ to a rich man from Tiajuana./ He's still alive...." (Safajek). Another way that could be phrased is "It doesn't matter what happens. He's still alive...". Here Juan throws away the thought of living for fate. He doesn't care what happens, he is simply grateful to be alive; a simple thing which many of us ignore. Juan decides to omit fate, and chooses to take in the good things; an example being the cattle bells ringing in the quiet of the night. Juan is a true survivor, living for himself and taking in whatever he can, even in the midst of a harsh reality.

Maybe Old Juan was meant to be a model for us all. It shows us the way to live, the way to exist for oneself. One may also think this is just a fictional piece of literature, but in truth it's based on a actual story. When I talked to the author, Joan Safajek, she let me know that Juan did actually exist, but passed away. She informed me that his son took over the ranch, and he said, "There will never be another who will work quite as hard." So Juan's journey is not fictional fluff meant to sound good; it was real once. So if Juan can live for himself the way he did, so can the rest of us; who may often disremember the gift of life, and loose command of ourselves in a situation brought by fate. We learn from Juan that we can only control ourselves, but can't prevent the death and sorrow that occurs around us. If we are in superiority, we can be happy.

So at the end of this story, we can create an idea of surviving and being victimized. To exist as a victim is to give up control. The victims live accustomed to situation and trying to prevent unsought occurrences of sorrow; thus they have no real choice for what they do next. A survivor, on the other hand, realizes his place in this world, that he is a mere human and can only manage so much. They live for themselves, doing what they can, not letting fate influence their sense of self worth. In the long run, the survivor has lived doing the possible, not concerning himself with the impractical. He leads a more productive and gladder life, knowing that he gave it his all; which is the only real thing we can give. We can't subdue everything that happens, but rather, conquer ourselves and the way we deal with things.

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## Was it a *Sweet Sixteen*?

Joanne Toth

The poem *Sweet Sixteen*, by Orion Denley, grabbed my attention when I was first reading through the collection of poems because it was different from the rest. It is short, but very powerful. The piece is about dying, and about what happens when you die; particularly, it's about a girl dying on her sixteenth birthday, and the questions that are raised about death, and what we don't know the answers to. Is it true, as the poem suggests, that the last thing you were doing in life will live on forever?

The first question the poem raises appears in the first line: "I know what happens when you die." I wanted to know how does the author know what happens when you die? And what is it that happens? This first line is what pulled me into the poem. Nobody really knows what happens — all we can do is guess, and hope for the best — because none of us can really know without going there. Once you go, you can't come back.

The poem suggests that: "what you were doing when last alive / Will last forever". In some cases that wouldn't be very good; what if you died in your sleep? Would you just sleep forever? What if you were having a bad dream? What if you died in a terrible car accident? Or you were very weak and sick? These are some of the questions I had when I read the poem. I thought about all the things that could happen, and I wanted to know where this idea came from, and what about all the people who didn't die happy? Are they in their own "hell"?

The poem goes on to give one such example: "Some people spend eternity / On an Iron Lung / Dreaming of cigarettes / And beaches". For those people I hope that they don't spend eternity on an iron lung, but instead spend it on the beaches, which they dreamed about. In this idea about the last thing in life living on forever, these people would be tormented by their mistakes. I guess that's where this idea came from. It's not about heaven or hell, but your own heaven or hell.

For all those people who died living life, like Laurel, in the poem:

"I pray  
That what I know of death is true  
And that the last party  
Was the best party,  
Ever".

For Laurel, it was a great party, but because it was her last, it will live forever, and become the best party ever.

The author talks about Laurel, which raises a lot of questions in this poem. Who is she? How did she die? The title *Sweet Sixteen* makes me think that it was her sixteenth birthday, and she died at a party. But from what? Was she doing drugs, or drinking? Or maybe she died in a car accident on the way home? She may have gotten a car for her *sweet sixteen*, and died on the way home.

This possibility of a car accident is very likely and happens a lot. I thought of this because it happened to some guys at my high school. They were at a party and got drunk, then drove their car into a tree at a very high speed and died. I didn't know them personally, but when something like that happens close to home, it leaves a mark. For those guys, I hope that what you were doing when last alive doesn't live forever, because one fatal mistake will haunt them forever. They can't ever be forgiven for the mistake they made. I'm not sure that one mistake that an otherwise good person made should live on forever. The mistake shouldn't be forgotten or forgiven, but should they relive it forever?

For Laurel, this probably isn't the case because the author said that they hope it's true for Laurel, she must have died happy at the last party she went to. I still don't know what happened to Laurel, but I hope she will be happy at her last party, the best party ever.

Although the poem leaves a lot of unanswered questions about Laurel, it is a good poem. IT has a meaning that a lot of us don't like to hear about, but is important for all of us to think about. The author used his view of death to help him grieve for the loss of someone he cared about. We may never know the answers to the questions asked about death, and I hope that we don't have to find out for a while.

Without answering the questions, it leaves us to wonder, and to identify the poem with our own life experiences. I think the poem is very well written, and the writer gets out what he wants to say without using a lot of unnecessary words to clutter or distract from the poem's meaning.