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A Certain Age

robert ferrier

If I forget spring,
bruise my face with grass
to meld with soil
in prescience of later ritual.

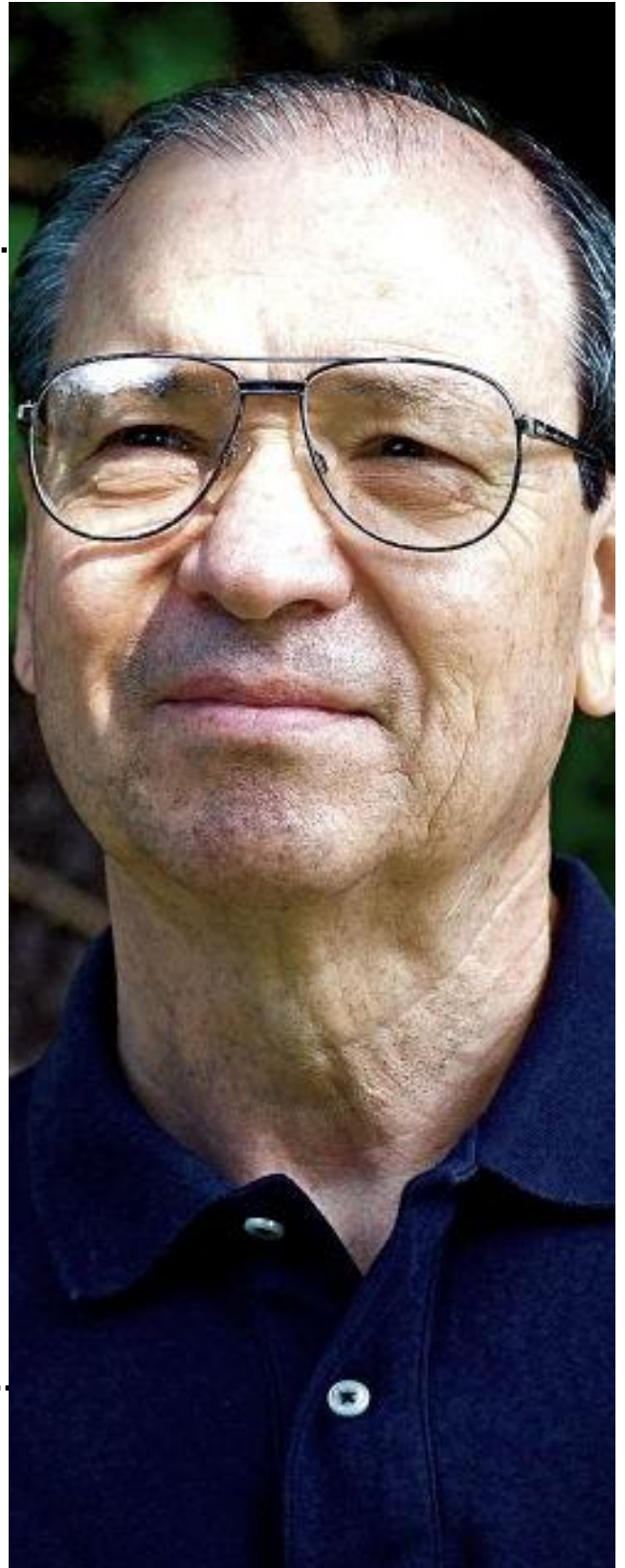
If I forget summer,
drip on my tongue
the blood of fresh berries,
and the insolent taste of mint.

If I forget autumn,
immerse me in mums,
lift me to the highest stadium row
so I may feel the braille of wild geese.

If I forget winter,
let me drink the giggles
of snow angel children
and untangle the Christmas light cords.

If I forget to live,
burn me
and cast my ashes
to the winds of four seasons.





Robert Ferrier's poetry has appeared in *Oklahoma Today*, *Möbius*, *The Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Broomweed Journal*, *Crosstimbers*, *Westview* and *Metro Library Magazine*. His books, *Rhythms* and *Ambient Light*, each won the Oklahoma Writer's Federation Inc. award for Best Published Book of Poetry. He was a 2007 nominee for Poet Laureate of Oklahoma in the US.

India: From North to South

manoj bhagavatula



Waterfalls, Munnar



Sunrise, The Swargarohini





The Backwaters, Kerala

Manoj Bhagavatula is an electronics hardware design engineer based in Pune, Maharashtra, in India. Outside of work, he loves running, playing table tennis, and catching up on his reading. He is part of a local non-profit running group that promotes running as an enjoyable form of exercise. Manoj likes to write and also enjoys travelling and photography.



Welcome to Paradise

alison syring

Danny steers his white Dodge Spirit onto the gravel drive, shifting to a lower gear as he dips and dives through the ruts to the back of the house. He parks next to Tammy's car like always. He hesitates for a moment. Jess's Accord sits on the far side of the driveway, under the dusty rusted carport.

He's been ignoring her all day, the calls before and after school, and even the one she'd snuck during her lunch period, the one he'd passed on to help a customer. Only now does he see his error. If only he'd answered, told her he wasn't up for hanging out after a ten-hour day, he could have avoided this. But there's no way now that he can get out of it.

He pauses for a moment and watches the setting sun's rays glint off his hood, whitening out the detached garage in front of him, the cornfields to his right. As his rumbling engine settles, he notices the flutter of the wind in the drying cornstalks. The crackle of the daytime heat falls over the house and the yard and the surrounding land, and the hum of crickets rises in the distance. He visualizes the beer waiting for him in the fridge, the easy chair with his imprint idling at the television.

But not tonight, no, not tonight, he thinks, his brows wrinkling where they meet at his nose.

He swings open his car door and lunges himself up and out. As he approaches the kitchen at the back of the house, he hears them through a cracked window before he can see them: Tammy and Jess. Their giggles waft out, and their easy

conversation routes a chill down Danny's spine. He jerks open the screen door harder than he planned.

Danny met Jess at a drag race outside of town. Developers had been paving roads west and farther west for years. Paving roads, standing up subdivisions, moving on to the next. They threw down roads faster than the houses came, and when the market went south, the houses stopped coming altogether. Five miles west of town, there were paved roads—with curbs and everything—that went nowhere.

Danny and his friends were out there most Friday nights. First one friend and then another tagged along, then friends' girlfriends and their friends. It became the thing to do, mostly because there weren't any other things.

Danny was getting ready to race one night not long after he'd finished the rebuild on the Spirit's engine. He wanted to test how fast she could go. "Who's going shotgun with Danny?" Mike said. Mike's girlfriend elbowed Jess, and before Danny knew it Jess was hopping in next to him. He'd seen her around without really seeing her, a blindness that was a product of so many failed relationships he'd watched throughout his life. And this night his vision was no different other than he was alone with Jess.

"Are we gonna go really fast?" Jess said, her eyes like pools, he noticed, instead of puddles.

Danny shrugged and focused out the windshield. "We'll see."

When Mike flashed the black-and-white checked kerchief, Danny floored it and popped from one gear to the next. He sat stiff and expectant in his seat but he

could feel Jess next to him, crushed to the back of hers, hands like clamps to her door and the center console. She gasped deep and heavy, breathless, like she was running.

From that night on, she was always around.

"Oh, shoot," Tammy said. "Shoot shoot shoot."

Danny, three years and seven months, looked up at her from the floor, but the smell hit him first, and he scooted from the linoleum—perfect city-block squares down which his Matchbox cars could speed and chase—to the carpet of the living room, a more arduous terrain.

Tammy stood at the stove, cooking. What, Danny didn't know. He usually didn't. He just wrinkled his nose, sometimes pinched it, sometimes even made a choking noise so that she got him out a frozen dinner, nuked it, and sent him on his way.

"I'm making a big old mess, pumpkin," Tammy said.

Behind him he heard a crash, but it wasn't from the kitchen. It came again and he climbed with his cars behind the sectional, into the slit between the couch and the wall. Down the hall someone snatched open a door and it banged against a wall, a moment later the sound of a body crashing into a closed door.

"Goddamn sonuva bitch," a loud tumbling voice said. It echoed down the corridor and escaped into the kitchen. Tammy's dinner noise stopped.

Danny peeked out from his hideaway to see the voice's owner, with his same brown eyes and messy hair, slumped in the kitchen doorway.

"What's to eat?" he said.

"Chicken," Tammy said, though she sounded like she wasn't sure. "And vegetables."

Danny's father half fell, half walked to the table. "Where's the kid?" he said.

"There he is," Tammy says. She lounges at the table, her Roxanne red toenails in the air, smacking her gum and paging through one of Jess's magazines, the one with headlines like "30 Sex Secrets He Wants You to Know!" Jess stands at the stove, barefoot on the peeling linoleum, her black hair twisting to curls in the humid kitchen air. The apples of her cheeks blush red, and she wears a threadbare apron tied around her waist. A look passes between the two, Jess and Tammy, a knowing, a familiarity, like they share something other than him.

"I'm cooking you dinner," Jess says, as she mashes potatoes in a pot.

Tammy looks at Danny and smiles with wide eyes, pops her gum. "Regular little housewife you got yourself here."

Danny keeps her stare for a long moment, then moves to doff his work button-up and drops it over a chair.

"I thought you were working tonight," Danny says. "Shouldn't you be outta here by now?"

"I called in. Jerry's taking me for pizza." She lays a nail file in the magazine to mark her place as she squints at the clock. "As a matter of fact, I better get my shower."

The first time Danny introduced Jess to Tammy was by accident.

After Jess took to watching the guys race on Friday nights, she started dropping by the house. It wasn't that Danny did or didn't want a relationship; he just didn't want to expend too much energy in the direction of something unlikely to bring him anything positive in return. And he'd witnessed enough relationships—Mike and whatever girl he was with that week, Tammy and the new men she rolled in like Mother Nature did the seasons—to know that a relationship probably would not end positively. But Jess was unique, first, because she didn't seem to require anything other than him being there. That level of effort sat well with him, and over time he became comfortable with her visits and even looked forward to them sometimes.

That day, an Indian summer day, no clouds in the sky, Danny was installing a new radio in the Spirit. Tammy'd called in sick to Cookie's and lounged on a foldout patio chair in a striped string bikini painting her toenails. Jess rolled up and parked behind Danny's garaged car without even knowing Tammy was there.

"Now just who are you?" Tammy said as she padded up the drive, her toenails bent up and away from the gravel to protect their polish.

Danny looked up from his project. He'd known this day was coming, and he proceeded as best he could. "Tammy," he said, pointing his wrench. "This is Jess. Jess, this is Tammy. My mother."

Jess morphed her lips into a smile and trained her gaze onto Tammy. "Mrs. Armstrong, it's so good to meet you! I've heard—"

"Nothing, I'm sure." Jess's smile faltered, but Tammy laughed. "I'm teasing you, honey. And it's just Tammy, no missus." She paused for a minute but did not take her eyes off Jess. "I didn't know Danny had a girl."

Jess looked at Danny but he was already back working.

"Why don't we go back to the house? I just made a jug of tea to celebrate this beautiful weather," Tammy said to Jess.

Danny didn't know what to do: was it better to let them leave together, or argue for Jess to stay? He scratched his neck with the wrench, considering how long it would take him to finish up. What harm could Tammy do in five minutes? His body knew the answer, but by the time he looked up they were already gone.

Danny saw, from his hiding place, the understanding swell on his father's face as he took his first bites of dinner. From his mouth up to his temples he seemed to register the dry, tasteless chicken, the wet, mushy vegetables, that they didn't add up to what he—maybe what anyone—would consider an ideal dinner.

"Rick, I know, I'm sorry—"

"Tammy, I swear to God!" he said. He swept his plate to the floor in one fluid motion. "I told you last night, I told you the night before: give me something I can fucking eat!"

Tammy stood in the middle of the kitchen wringing a towel in her hands. "Rick, I'm just not good at this—"

"You better get good, woman!" Rick snatched at her. Danny scrambled, found the little-boy-sized dent in the back of the couch, and pressed himself into it, closing his eyes and imagining he had actually become part of it. He'd tried other hiding places—under the table, beneath his bed—but he found that this spot was just about the safest place he could find where he could still hear and maybe even see what happened, which usually involved, like this evening, Rick yelling and then Rick hitting and Tammy holding bags of frozen peas on her face.

Rick grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her around. At the same time he lost his footing and brought Tammy's head down hard on the butcher-block countertop. She yelped, attracting Danny's attention. He shimmed out of his hidey-hole and peeped his little head out far enough to see his father leaning over his mother, her crying, him holding her hair.

"Rick, let go, will ya, please. You're hurting me," Tammy said.

"You're hurting me," Rick mocked. Danny's eyes grew wider. Usually when Tammy started crying, Rick would yell some more, throw a few things around, and stomp out to the truck. But now he seemed to be getting madder. He slammed Tammy's head against the butcher block again, this time on purpose. "You're hurting me."

Tammy cried out again, warbly with uncertainty.

Slam. "You're hurting me." Crack. "You're hurting me. I'll show you what hurt is, woman."

"Why don't you sit down?" Jess says once they're alone. She keeps cooking and swiveling her head to flash bright grins at Danny.

Danny pulls out his chair, between the window and the table. He sits, running his hands through his sweaty hair, and rests the back of his head against the cool glass.

"How was work today?"

Danny smells a heating pan, hears the hiss of frying meat.

"Hmm?"

"Oh," he says. "Fine."

"Yeah, school was fine too. And then at work I got off early. The store was slow. They were having a special on these steaks so I thought, why not pick two up? And I could cook for Danny? I haven't done that before."

He makes a kind of grunt so she'll know he heard, but that somehow communicates he doesn't have anything to say. Maybe she'll stop talking now, he thinks. In fact, maybe she'll leave altogether, turn off the burners—or not—and just walk out to her car and drive home.

From the top cupboard to the right of the sink—she knows without searching—Jess grabs two large plates. She doles out mashed potatoes, tops them with dark beef gravy, and adds a slab of steak. “I’ll probably never eat all mine,” she says. “So you’ll have one and a half.”

She walks over his plate and sets it before him. “You like it medium rare?” she says. “That’s what the recipe said I should cook it to.”

He shrugs and looks down at the brown meat, doubtful.

“Let me check it,” she says. Before he can argue, she takes up his silverware and cuts into it, into the blood red center, and pries the meat apart.

“Is this alright?”

Danny turns grey at the sight of the bloody internal and pushes the plate away. “Jess, I can’t.” He lays his slick, sweaty forehead on the table.

Danny watched as Rick grabbed at what he could, what was around him. He rejected, in turn, a spoon, a fork, and a dirty plastic spatula. Finally he grabbed the dull paring knife Tammy had used to trim fat from the chicken. “You gotta learn how to be a proper housewife, dontcha.”

He held up the knife and brought Tammy around, so that the back of her neck butted against the counter and he leaned over her. Then he brought the knife down, cold and slick with chicken slime, against the base of her neck above her collarbone. She was shrieking now, a high keening in the back of her throat. Danny had never heard this sound come out of his mother, had never heard it come out

of any human being. It sounded like the rabbits his cousins shot with BB guns in their backyard.

Rick got quiet, breathing loud and deep in Tammy's face as she wept. Danny felt the room fill with a new dark promise, and although he was scared, although everything inside him said look away, look away, look away, he stayed just where he was, perched between that wall and that couch, ready to see whatever new thing his mother would feel.

"You know what the problem here is?" Rick said, spitting on the floor. "I been just talking at you, trying to get you to understand. Maybe it's time I learn you. Maybe it's time I learn you what a good woman gives her man."

Danny watched as Rick unhooked his pants and let them fall to the floor, watched as he hiked up Tammy's skirt and crushed her to him, all while he held the knife to her neck.

Rick must've thought he had her, thought he was winning, but he got caught in the victory too early, while Tammy was hyper aware. He wasn't so large that he could control her absolutely, and she wasn't so helpless that she couldn't take advantage of an opportunity. He let his guard down, lost his grip just a little, and Tammy pushed.

Rick slipped and the blade went sharp side down into Tammy's neck, slicing a fat gash. Skin opened muscle opened veins, and Danny saw the inside of his mother, the dark red meat of her, and he screamed an animal scream. Rick turned too fast at Danny's cry and went down hard on the floor as Tammy flailed in the blood.

"How's your dinner?" Tammy says as she bounces into the room.

Danny lifts his head from the table. Jess leans against the sink, her arms folded, protective, against her. "Fine," she says, smiling.

Danny hears the crunch of gravel outside and sees, out of the corner of his eye, the shiny red flash of a truck he assumes is Jerry's.

"I'll be back later, pumpkin, okay? Don't wait up." She winks at Danny with a penciled eye and leans in for a cheek kiss. He lifts his head to hers and with one outstretched finger makes to trace her scar, still puckered, these years later, and bright red just out of the shower. When Tammy lifts her head her eyes lock on the finger, frozen there in the space between them. She straightens and arranges her hair, which she keeps long enough to wrap around her head and lay at her neck. She smiles, strained, automatic.

She turns on a heel and clinks open the door without a backward glance. It bounces once, twice, before slamming closed in the wind.



Alison Syring recently received her MA in writing from Johns Hopkins University in the United States. Her work has been published in *Outside In Literary and Travel Magazine* and on *The Open Bar*, the Tin House blog. She currently lives in Southern Maryland.

Assignment

lance hawvermale

Who—

and this means anyone
from Barabas to Brando—
would you share dinner with
if time were ice to be melted
and reshaped fluidly at will.

Write (30 minutes) read aloud.

Half an hour later there is Joan of Arc,
part fact and part apocrypha,
feminist thunderbolt
in the hand of God.

The next reader says Sam Clemens
because he would no doubt
have something quotable
to say about the rice,
followed by Da Vinci
to get the dirt on *Mona Lisa*,
the obligatory Shakespeare
interspersed with a surprise
lunch with Irving Berlin
and the expected Marilyn Monroe
who if there is a God
would mainly be dessert.

When they look at me,
guessing by my hair
I'll say Joplin
or by my books Dumas,
I mystify them
when I say your name.

Who—
 if I could ice-carve time
into the shape of anyone
and sit with them
for an evening over soup—
then I would leave
my ice knife untouched,
the time machine uncarved
and pedal down your street.



Lance published his first two novels under the pseudonym of Erin O'Rourke. He released his third novel, a murder mystery titled *The Tongue Merchant*, under his own name - and he hasn't looked back since. His writing has won over 20 awards. His novel *Fugitive Shoes* was named to the University of Oklahoma's "Books That Inspire" exhibit. Currently an Assistant Professor of English at Ranger College in Texas, USA, Lance teaches film, poetry, and creative writing courses.



Patience and Grace

crystal davis

In today's world, family history seems to be a lost interest and fading knowledge. Many of today's youth do not know anything beyond the last generation. Realizing that I had succumbed to this trend myself when one of my children asked me about our family's history. It took me by surprise that I didn't know my great grandparent's names despite my close relationship with my family.

"Patience and Grace" is a series that has taken me on a passionate journey to learn through my grandfather's memories and my great grandmother Grace's journal. Utilizing my own daughter, Patience, I was able to relive many of Grace's memories and pieces of her life, which has helped me understand and grow closer to the woman who had raised my grandfather.

Furthermore, through a thorough research of my family's history, I had found many enlightening and revealing family issues; self-esteem and legal situations that repeat today. I feel like this project will help stop and prevent this cycle within my family and help all of us to grow.

Lastly, my hope is to encourage modern day families to research their family's history to distill the importance of genealogy and pass this knowledge on to our future generations.



The Hen House



The Apple of Her Eye



The Silence



The Redundance



The Daydreamer



The Breakfast



The Reflection



The Beginning of the End

Crystal Davis is an artist from Fort Worth, Texas, in the United States who works primarily in photography and also has an interest and has worked in other traditional art mediums such as painting, drawing and graphic design. She has exhibited locally in the NOISE! Art Exhibition at the Frisco Art Gallery where she placed 3rd for Best in Show. Other exhibits include the White Space Gallery of Dallas, Texas, and a solo exhibit at the Fort Worth Community Arts Center. She is also an honor student working toward a Master's degree in Photography through the Academy of Art University. She is a member of the Student Photographers Society, National Technical Honor's Society, Kappa Pi and the TAC (Texas Artists Coalition).



age vitam
justin hill

Note from the poet: age vitam is Latin for "live life." I have the title of this poem tattooed on the inside of my arm as a reminder to myself to live every day to the fullest.

When a young lad, I was,
I learnt of God, and
I talked to God, and
I spoke about God, but
As I grew older,
I grew up.

I became a man in my own right.
I learnt for myself,
Sometimes talked to myself, but
Rarely spoke about myself.
However, I did learn to live, and
I put the old and dead behind me.

I viewed ahead for what was to come,
Beginning my life, as myself, with
My own opinions, and
My own feelings, and
My own breath;
My own soul.

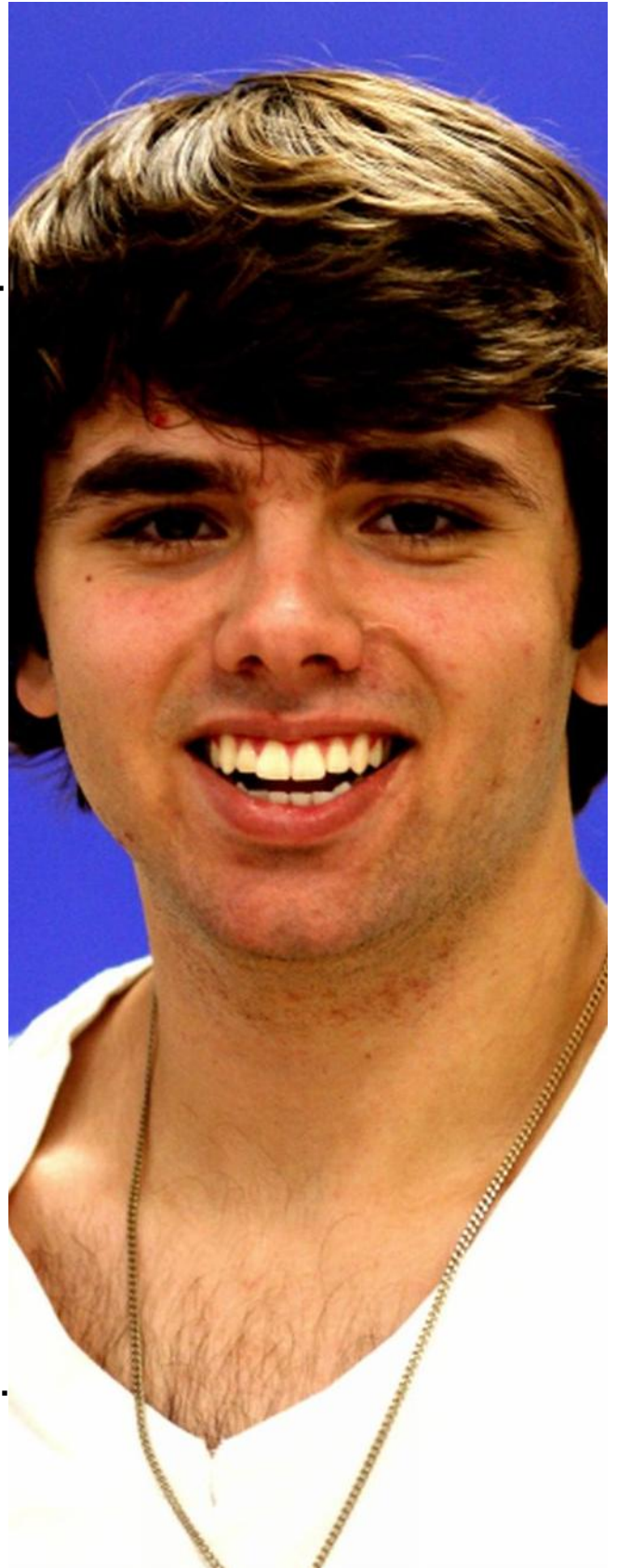
I inhaled,



I exhaled;
I inquired,
I examined;
I yearned,
I lived;
I lived life.
Age Vitam



Currently in his senior year of high school, Justin Hill attends the Huckabay Independent School District, which is just outside of Stephenville, Texas, in the United States of America. After graduating as valedictorian, Justin aims to earn a Bachelor of Arts, double-majoring in Sociology and Theatre Arts, at the University of North Texas. He wishes to become a foremost expert on adolescent sociology. In his spare time, he likes to write poetry, paint, and play the guitar; his favorite books are *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Atlas Shrugged*, both of which he... is very passionate about. Justin was also named a 2014 National Merit Commended Student.



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