

ENGL 2903A:
Fiction Workshop Portfolio

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A Brief Biographical Statement of Jennifer Greenberg

From a young age, my ongoing passion for the language arts has proven to be quite dominant in my life, especially in the creative writing milieu. I attended a liberal arts intensive elementary school that fed wonderfully into the English program at its respective high school. Hence, through essay writing, literary analyses, and copious written assignments, *St. George's School of Montreal* allowed me time to build an excellent foundation in regards to writing techniques and structural development.

Secondly, though I have always characterized myself as an avid reader, my true aptitude for writing blossomed in the ninth grade. A “short story” unit was introduced into the curriculum, in which each student had the opportunity to write their own piece of short fiction, share their piece in a roundtable setting, and receive constructive feedback. Not only did this project encourage me to embrace my love of writing, it also taught me to appreciate the importance of editing and the value of receiving feedback with grace; particularly useful concepts to grasp when applying to the *B.A. Honours in English with Concentration in Creative Writing* program at Carleton University.

In addition, my addiction to writing was rekindled this year upon the completion of the *Creative Writing I and II* courses offered by *Concordia University*. These courses helped me further develop my personal writing style, while simultaneously discovering and strengthening my voice as a writer. Plus, I made substantial progress on my ongoing novel: Never Again, of which I have attached an excerpt to my portfolio. I wish to enrich and hopefully complete this novel with your guidance. I look forward to the productive environment that your Fiction Workshop has to offer, encouraging me to write regularly, while expanding my literary diet. Thank you for your consideration.

Never Again
(Novel Excerpt)

[Synopsis: This piece tells the story of an innocent Ugandan boy who was born into a life of suffering, pain, sorrow, loss, and countless other unfortunate events in his short—but poignant—childhood. We follow *Kaikara* as he depicts his intriguing journey; Upon fleeing his war-torn town of Gulu in search of something more, little does the young boy know that 'something more' includes a pad-locked mouth and a premature recruitment into the menacing arms of the enemies themselves, the *Lord's Resistance Army*.]

I lie awake on the ground as the uneven floorboards splinter my bruised back. Tears flood my eyes, dripping down my dark face. I am hidden by *Baakir*: my elder brother. He protects my frail schoolboy's body at the rear of the bamboo shanty as *Mamangu*, my momma, stands guard. Like a groundhog; she pokes her head through the window, inspecting the passersby. Family members, accomplices, companions, and strangers scurry past the bamboo shoots that define our hut. Fate remains in the hands of this emotionless militia.

They are coming. Thump...thump...thump. Waiting anxiously, *Mamangu* ignores the series of knocks on the old, creaky door. The door shrieks with pain as the soldiers smash it down. *Mamangu* is a statue; frozen solid, unable to move. With modest dignity, she stares the armed forces right in the eyes. I witness *Mamangu's* fierce abduction. From a distance, I stare blankly at the gruesome scene as my momma is viciously caned, two hundred and fifty times. She coughs as she drowns in a sea of red. She is pried from her

home, her family, her existence. A toddler's first memory: A crimson stream trailing behind his *Mama* as her lifeless corpse is dragged across the uneven floorboards.

Once again, dusk is near in the main town of *Gulu*. The sun begins to set; the heavens descend as the blazing ball of fire disappears into the night. Hopefully the radiance of the moonlight will guide us to safety as the stars illuminate our canopy of darkness. The town is flooded with frightened Ugandans. Panting, hurrying, scampering, murmuring; night after night, we leave the safety of our huts, praying to return the next morning. We live, we walk, we pray...

My praying is interrupted by the piercing sound of a gunshot nearby.

“What was that?” I blurt out in a trembling tone.

“Oh quit being such a little *kitoto*. It was probably just a hyena or child-eating lion. Nothing to worry about,” mocked *Eshe* with a sneer of snide sarcasm, a strangely attractive attribute that draws me to her like a magnet, particularly in times of danger.

I take a moment to ignore the angry swarm of African hornets thrashing about inside my stomach to admire *Eshe*'s true beauty, each of her features more delicate than the last: her shaved skull glistens in the night sky, emitting a halo of youth; the translucent whites of her eyes capture me in a spellbound trance; her adorable nostrils twitch ever-so-slightly as she contemplates the whereabouts of the fallen sun; her sweet lips: a barrier, concealing the untold stories of a damaged Past. However, what amazes me most about this beautiful creature of the night is that despite all the unfair suffering residing deep within her *shule*-girl body—merely twelve rainy seasons young—she

brilliantly distracts her peers from such frets, alluring them instead with her contagious optimism; her strongest of traits for which I love her so dearly.

I, on the other hand, am the complete opposite: If she is a beautiful creature of the night, then I am no more than a creepy night crawler. Pessimist by daylight, skeptic by nightfall; I allow my cynicism to rule my lonely kingdom. Furthermore, I lack the pure, unadulterated beauty of my partner-in-crime. Unlike *Eshe*, my jaundiced eyes get lost behind the faint flicker of the slivered moon; and my wide nostrils expand far beyond the blanketed fog that teases us up ahead.

However, as Professor *Maalouf* once taught us in chemistry class: “believe it or not, opposites do indeed attract.” Hence, as *Eshe*’s *cool* disposition fuses with my *heated* nature, our opposing temperaments balance one another in a real-life experiment...

I bring my wandering mind back to reality, shifting my attention towards *Eshe*, who impatiently awaits my rebuttal: “Wow *Eshe Kicongo*, after all these years, you really have learnt how to calm my nerves,” I respond to fill the uncomfortable void of silence.

I barely finish my failed attempt to match her sarcastic commentary when her next dig cuts me off: “What can I say? It comes naturally, especially when you are friends with a little crybaby like yourself.”

Kicking me while I am down, classic *Eshe*.

Nonetheless, I accept her abuse graciously, finding place to squeeze in a little wit of my own: “Shut up! At least I don’t cry when I get hit with a *futbali*.”

“Hey! That was only one time!”

“Whatever you say, crybaby.”

As we walk in a single file line, we force ourselves to carry on, ordering our zombie feet to continue along the path of the walking dead. Our drained bodies march one behind the other as if we are trained militia. Step after step, I beg my weary feet to carry on, yet they begin to surrender. Left...right.....left.....right..... left..... Though camp is only a few meters away, each meter seems endless.

Finally, we arrive at the now familiar abandoned *hospitali* whose veranda has sadly become our only means of protection. A stampede of panicked refugees crowds the area. Hundreds of confused souls scurry about, desperately searching for even a square meter of space to lay down their *mikeka*, their sleeping mats .

After what seems like hours of searching, I stumble upon the sliver of splintered wood that lies below me, just wide enough for two *invisible children*. The butterflies trapped inside my stomach finally escape. My anxiety subsides, only to be replaced by hunger. I gently place my tattered *mikeka* on the edge of the crowded veranda, guarding my newfound territory with dear life until ‘*Eshe The Brave*’ returns to the scene. I refuse to cede this *Promised Land*, though the tide of vicious hunters is rising much-too-quickly. I play dead; allowing my primal instincts to take charge. I promised *Baakir*, my proud older brother, that I would never allow another to treat me as their prey, a promise that I intend to take with me to the grave as I would never ever ever break a promise with family, unless it was a matter of life-or-death of course.

“Pssttt! *Eshe*! I found a space for the both of us!” I whisper, just loudly enough for her sensitive ears to catch, wherever she may be.

Silence

“*Eshe?* You there?”

Once again, no response

I carefully comb through the sea of exhausted tribesmen. I cannot seem to spot her anywhere amongst the bobbing heads. I suddenly notice that I, too, am slowly drowning beneath the ocean’s surface. Caught in the unbearably undertow, I sink into the water’s cold embrace. All I can do now is hope that my love has already found a place of her own, her independent nature: a better sidekick than I could ever offer her. We are black dominoes, collapsing one-by-one, onto the flat terrace. Too tired to care, I ignore the splintering wood stabbing my bruised black back. Instantly, I begin to doze off...

I awake in a state of relief for I am still breathing. Yet, my relief is stolen away when I realize that I am drenched. Heavy rain forcefully pounds down on my tribe. The silver lining of the gloomy clouds crowds the sky, hiding the pleasant rays of sunlight. If it were not for the noisy shuffling of the waking commuters, scurrying to complete their morning rituals and prepare for their dawn departure, it would be impossible to tell the time.

I jolt up from my *mikeka* with a little too much enthusiasm. The result: a terrible head rush. I wait for the faintness to pass. While seated, I remove my sopping t-shirt and squeeze the muddy water into my parched mouth. My tongue absorbs the water like a sponge, greedily yearning for more.

As I exit the deserted *hospitali*, scurrying to catch up with *Eshe* and my fellow peers, I stumble and nearly slice my foot on a shard of glass. In addition to catching my

balance, I catch my reflection in the glass, though I instantly regret it. I am withering away: My brittle bones are eggshells, waiting to crack at any given moment. Like those of a striped kingfisher, my ribs poke through my worn-out flesh. My tiny *shule-boi*'s body weeps for rations. I stare at my blistered feet; the sharp pain reminds me of walking across burning coal. Yet another eight kilometers ahead of me until I arrive back home. Hopefully, *Baakir* awaits my arrival. Is he still living?

The Lunch Rush
(Short Story)

Elderly woman, on the cusp of ninety-five, long-since retired from a life of struggle. The wrinkles in her skin mark years of hard work as a thriving young feminist, fighting for her rights during times of unrest. The neat bun wrapped tightly atop her head hides her untamed locks, once a symbolic image of the wild and unpredictable sexual revolution. Her harsh facial features paired with a permanently furled brow come together to emanate an aura of independence and self-reliance; admirable attributes that once helped Rita strive intellectually in a purely patriarchal society. As an aspiring physician, she seized the honorable title of “sole female member of the *guinea pigs*,” the first graduating class of what was then Sir George Williams University and is known today as Concordia University. Furthermore, upon receiving her diploma, as she witnessed her fellow classmates march straight overseas, she conjured up the courage to march straight into the Dean’s office at the McGill School of Medicine and demand an interview. Though he snidely responded: “While you exceed all of our academic qualifications for admission into our graduates program, we fear that your ‘physical presence’ may be too distracting for your [male] classmates,” Rita did not take this refusal kindly. Instead, it rekindled the spark that burned from within her, fueling her fiery passion and determination.

Though barely tall enough to peer over the glass display case at the array of sandwiches that lay before her tired eyes, what Rita lacks in height, she makes up for in personality. For the first time in her long existence, an expression of utter defeat overtakes her face as she ponders her lunchtime sandwich selection with the utmost of difficulty.

It is the lunch rush at Café Double and the line-up trails on endlessly into the distance. Rita is aware of the crowd of impatient customers waiting behind her: short-tempered lawyers reeling in potential clients with a free panini, energetic hairstylists running across the way to grab a quick grilled cheese in between appointments, mobs of CEGEP students first discovering the bliss that exists outside the confines of mystery meat and brown paper bags, hungry waves of construction workers in dire need of a “*Philly cheese steak avec des frites pour emporter*,” and cranky senior residents of the building like herself, who strongly believe that with each year of wisdom, they gain a greater right to unarguable rudeness.

Rita tries to tune out the bratty Dawson student standing behind her, loudly whistling the *Jeopardy* theme song in her ear. She points to a tray clearly comprised of tuna-fish sandwiches and readdresses the busy server as if he were *Alex Trebek* himself: “What is...in this one?...Or that one?...And that one over there in the pita?...What about over here on the baguette?...Did I already ask about the toppings on these ones?” Unable to lock in her final answer—a seemingly trivial decision—, Rita is suddenly struck with a rising wave of emotions: she becomes bothered, irritated, disturbed, troubled, distraught, upset, angry, fuming, furious, **LIVID!**

Why can she not simply make up her mind? Anxiety builds up inside of her to unbearable levels, like a hot air balloon, ready to pop at any given moment. Now on the verge of breaking down in tears, Rita questions once more how such a seemingly mundane decision, made 34, 689 times before, could place such crushing emotional weight upon her brittle, bony shoulders? Especially when just this morning, upon receiving that terrifying telephone call—the unimaginable news in the form of a

pathology report—she instantaneously agreed to an invasive hysterectomy and partial mastectomy without as much as a flinch. In that life-shattering moment, the decision to hand over the deeds to her femininity, a precious feat that she fights relentlessly to preserve on a daily basis, seemed so effortless; yet the truly demanding decision, yanking fiercely at her heartstrings: two sad slices of bread smeared with drab pastes and pungent deli meats.

Rita feels a void in the pit of her stomach, one that not even a club sandwich can fill. The risky reconstructive surgery that follows these radical procedures as well as the tedious months of physiological and emotionally-straining recovery does not even cross her mind, for she cannot seem to get past the irony that the same close-minded McGill medical ward that had rudely rejected a promising young woman's demand for admission so many years ago, was now opening its doors to her with such ease, accepting her admission so readily, nearly half a century later.

Should she not welcome the idea of embodying more masculine features with open arms? Can she not rest on the fact that her lifelong wishes to escape unfair judgment based solely on her appearance—or 'physical presence' as the Dean once put it—may come true after all? Is this not the end-goal that she always dreamt to attain? To be treated on the same grounds as the egocentric businessman, standing in front of her at the cash, as she waits anxiously for her time to checkout?

Mi·ner·va
(Short Descriptive Narrative)

Mi·ner·va:

Her elegant name derives from Ancient Roman Mythology. Equated with the Greek Goddess *Athena*, she was the virgin goddess of poetry, medicine, commerce, crafts, magic, and above all, wisdom; all were important traits that drew my Grandmother towards her when adopting a name for her most-prized possession: her double bass.

One could not peel their eyes away from her pure, unadulterated beauty, for her natural glow was absolutely breathtaking. The silky strands of her long horse's mane wove tightly along the rich Brazilwood of her bow, forming a perfectly balanced ratio of salt-to-pepper proportions. As the lips of her bow gently graze the steel wire strings of her curvy, pear-shaped body, *Minerva* graces the room with sweet serenades. Her deep, low voice provides an indestructible foundation for the orchestra members to build their many layers upon. A long time ago, she was the driving force behind the impressive thirty-piece string section of the *L.A. Doctor's Symphony Orchestra*; it was a simpler time spent mesmerizing her listeners, capturing them in an inescapable, yet enchanting trance.

On the day of *Minerva's* departure, her owner bathes each string in one last coating of rosin, in order to enhance her contagiously attractive aura; a last-minute attempt to immediately spark the young girl's curiosity upon the instrument's unexpected arrival on that brisk autumn afternoon...

As the young girl stumbles home from a boring day of grade school—feeling unchallenged by useless basic facts and repetitive times-tables—she scurries past the six-

foot-tall cardboard box, tripping over the massive obstacle that sits unopened in the front hall. Her jaw drops in utter disbelief as she rereads the white label of her newfound treasure. *There must be a mistake. The unwrapped gift could not possibly be addressed me. Could it?* Never before in her ten-and-three-quarter years of existence has she ever received a package of such Grand stature. She suddenly feels incredibly important: *Is this what it feels like to be grown-up?*

Without a single ounce of hesitation, she tears open the stubborn duck-tape with all of her schoolyard might, unraveling the mystery of its concealed contents at an impressive pace. The young girl admires the gargantuan instrument that stands before her with such charm and poise. She instantly draws an emotional parallel between this powerful, feminine creature of nature and her powerful, cancer-battling warrior of a Grandmother. Both are Goddesses of immeasurable powers.

Minerva's ebony skin, as young and unaffected by age as her owner's, masks years of ware-and-tare, snapped strings and blistering fingers. Jenny could not overlook the shocking resemblance between *Minerva's* long neck and that of her *Mamma Minnie's*, a perfect statement of their shared elegance. The splintering wood of her scroll not only tells tales of a long life of late-night orchestra practices—to perfect the recurring theme of *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony*, 'fate constantly knocking at one's door'—and extended dress rehearsals—to capture the eeriness of *Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique*—, but each crease also tells the story of an independent, strong-willed, single mother, who fled a world of abuse and misery to protect the innocence of her other most prized possession: her only son, no more than an oblivious toddler at the time. He would later

reciprocate with the gift of a loving granddaughter: a talented young girl, her biggest fan, her piano protégée, her apprentice, her musical raison-d'etre, the *Mozart* to her *Haydn*, a next of kin to receive her double bass with open arms, eager to unravel *Minerva's* deepest, darkest secrets: her tricks, her treats, the intricacies of each of her carefully crafted grooves.

Furthermore, she would not only carry on *Minerva's* profound legacy, but was equally prepared to create new memories in her balmy wood. Her grandmother knew to ignore the surges of doubt that began in her feet and shot up through her entire being. Though she could not predict how her granddaughter would handle this epic twenty-five pound Roman Goddess, she could be sure that *Minerva's* journey was far from over as the young girl's artistic passion was controlled by a power much greater than both of them combined: the power of 'music'.