

# Lindsay J. Cropper Creative Writing Contest

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## Time Will Tell

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## Time Will Tell

Noah is sitting in his third grade classroom at Lemon Avenue Elementary School in La Mesa, California. His teacher, a stricter educator than he had yet encountered, droned on at the front of his class. Noah is thinking about many things at that moment, but the teacher's lesson isn't one of them. Noah is thinking about music, dancing, and more specifically: Michael Jackson's infamous crotch grab dance move, the one Noah and his little brother had been learning in their effort to master choreography of Jackson's music videos. Noah was always good at everything he tried, but not for lack of practice. So in his 3rd grade classroom, where he was uninterested in the lesson, he practiced what he was interested in: he stood up, spun around, and grabbed his crotch, Michael Jackson style. His teacher, unamused, called my aunt, who couldn't help but laugh.

My mom was on the phone with her sister, as was often the case, while she cooked dinner. I sat at the kitchen island, doing homework. I listened intently to try to hear the story my aunt was telling, the one that had my mom crying with laughter and intensely angry seconds later. These were my favorite types of phone calls to eavesdrop on; my cousins, two boys that are five and nine years younger than me, were wild where I was always reserved. My aunt would call frequently to relay tales of the insane things the boys said or did and we would all laugh as my mom hung up and retold the stories seconds later. I would marvel at their confidence and hilarity, at once jealous and incredulous.

Noah's dancing was funny, until the outburst earned him a new desk in the classroom: facing away from the teacher, the other students, the whiteboard, and pretty much everything he needed to see to learn effectively. She shoved his desk up against the back wall so that even if he

wanted to pay attention to her lesson, he'd have to crane his neck and strain his ears. In complete disregard for his interests--educational and otherwise-- with that single punishment she set a dangerous precedence; not only did the things he actually cared about (music) not matter in an educational setting, it was *because* of his interests that he wasn't fit to study with the rest of the students.

Noah nods in acknowledgement of the journal I've brought to take notes in; it's covered in sparkles, has a tiny metal lock and key, and says "girl power" on the cover. He lounges across the couch adjacent to the one I've set up on-- notebook, an "excessive amount" of pens, a rambling list of questions, phone recording his answers. When I ask if he's okay with me recording our conversation, he shrugs. He "doesn't really care", a common theme in our conversation-- and not in that he doesn't care about what he's saying. It's that he doesn't care what you or I think about what he's saying. He switches between sitting up and sprawling across the cushions, depending on what I'm asking him about. My brother, who lives with Noah and his family, sits next to us, mumbling about his fantasy football team. There's a Cowboys game on, and periodically Noah or I ask Alex why he's pacing in front of the TV. We keep him involved in our conversation, if only vaguely. Noah and I have never been very close; as kids, I had always just grown out of whatever TV or movies he watched, and it seemed for a long time that our interests were opposite. Once, on vacation in Lake Tahoe with our whole family, Noah asked me to go swimming with him. I was reading on the shore and talking to our Poppy about the JFK assassination. Noah infamously (among our very small family) whined to his mom that I wouldn't swim with him because "Grace just wants to talk to Poppy about dead Presidents!"

My favorite picture of Noah and I is from the fall following that summer vacation. Noah and his parents had driven up to Orange County to visit and came to watch my soccer game. In the picture, I'm wearing my green jersey and dirty soccer cleats, smiling excitedly as I lean down, my hand on his shoulder, my chin rested on the top of his head. I'm pale and my dark hair is messily pulled back in a green ribbon. Noah's tiny, but his stomach sticks out in that toddler way. His jet-black hair falls around his deeply tanned, round face in a perfect bowl. He's sipping a Capri-Sun, presumably the one that I had given him from my post-game snack bag; I never liked them. His eyes twinkle at the camera and his mouth is twisted up in a smirk. We couldn't look more different, but it's still the picture in which he and I look most like family.

Noah is sixteen now. As I ask him about his schooling, he's laid back across the couch, petting his cat lazily. His eyes, dark and round, are on the television. He runs his hands through his hair, which is shaggy, still in a bowl cut (but by his stylistic choice now), and tinted orange from bleach of months past. As I begin with my list of questions, Noah's father, Mondo, walks in and asks about the interview. The framed pictures found around the Flores house of Mondo at Noah's age are indistinguishable from the selfies that Noah posts on his instagram. Noah nods to his father and his words come slowly, as if he's focusing on something else, mild disinterest coloring his tone. Still, he tells me about the public schools he has attended in his lifetime: Hollywood Park in Sacramento, and the rest in La Mesa, CA, Lemon Ave Elementary, Parkway Middle (7th), La Mesa Middle (8th), Grossmont High School, and finally, an independent study program through Diego Hills Charter. He's disliked most of them.

When he was "like really young", Noah got really into skateboarding, then baseball and basketball. He was an excellent athlete from a young age, so much so that I actually enjoyed and

looked forward to going to his La Mesa National Little League games. These games would often be a family affair, at which my Grammy would huff and yell at the umpire for snubbing Noah because he's "too talented," and his little brother Nathaniel quickly earned the nickname "SnackBar Nate," because he was so tiny and cute that he would stand in front of the counter, his eyes barely peeking over the top of it, just wide-eyeing the volunteer until they gave him free candy. He'd grab his AirHead and skip back over to his mom's side where she'd sigh and roll her eyes at his candy. Besides his uncanny ability to receive gifts, he only cared about supporting his older brother, yelling "Go brudder!" even when Noah was in the dugout. Nate is twelve now and can both see over the snackbar counter and pitch for his own baseball team; during Nate's LMNLL games, Noah can be found skating around the parking lot behind the outfield, and standing at the fence watching Nate when he's up to bat. Noah's grown bored of playing baseball, but still surfs with his dad and skateboards regularly-- just *try* walking up his family's driveway without tripping on a stray skateboard or one of the ramps he built.

I asked Noah about his activities, and in the same vein as his answers about school, he answered with mild disinterest about his time playing baseball and the like. He sits up, and looks at me for the first time since we started talking, with more interest in his tone, as he gets to the part he's actually passionate about.

"I've made music since eighth grade."

He began by taking a guitar class. It was his first instrument that he learned to play, and ever since, he's been making music. He had an innate ear for music. He could listen to a song, hear the melody, and just *learn it*. His first guitar teacher told him what to learn, but didn't really teach him. Noah learned on his own, and then took another guitar class during his freshman year

of high school; he laughed and told me he was a better guitar player than the teacher, *honestly*. He later modified this sentiment, saying that he wasn't necessarily better, just advanced quicker than the teacher could teach him. Besides, there were so many students of different skill levels in the same class that the single guitar teacher couldn't possibly keep up with each one. Funding and emphasis on music education has dropped so significantly that enrollment has gone down 47% over the last 30 years, even though studies show that art education engages students so much so that their test scores raise and truancy and dropout rates lower.<sup>1</sup> Noah says that he hated the school because of the people, but I can't help but wonder if he would've found a reason to stay in public high school if we focused on balancing the education of our kids so strengths in many subjects could shine.

Noah struggles to put a finger on what exactly it is about the school (Grossmont High) that he hated, which he ultimately left during his junior year. He chuckles and mumbles about narcs, long days, teachers that didn't really care, and campus security that had it out for Noah's group of friends: the skater kids. Ultimately, though, he keeps coming back to one simple explanation: the people. They all care too much about what everyone else thinks. Noah's always had his own style, favoring thrift store jeans inches too wide at the ankles to be in fashion when he was a freshman. He scoffs about it now, irritated because the kids who used to make fun of the way he dressed wear the same style. It's cool now. His surf-punk-skate-kid style is *in style*, which isn't what bothers him. Those kids, the "normal ones" who the campus security and administration don't *watch out* for, didn't make fun of his clothes because they disliked them. They made fun of him because he's fine with being different.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.artsed411.org/factsheets>

I bring up the times that Noah got into trouble at school. Most notably, he was suspended for two days following a fight. He laughs when I mention it. He won the fight, and for more reasons than he beat the shit out of the other kid, who was ultimately expelled. A girl in Noah's grade posted a video of a kid who used to run in the halls at school. The kid was "special and like... just different," and Noah commented on the video telling her it was messed up and requesting that she delete it. She deleted Noah's comment instead. Another boy started bugging Noah at school for standing up for the kid, saying "yo bro, she can roast on whoever she wants." He just kept going on, and finally, they took off their backpacks and fought. My brother interjects here. He has a video saved on his phone of a mob of high school students, "you can't see the fight, you can just see Noah walking away afterwards." Noah laughs and adds, "and he's just lying there." His pride in this isn't stemming from winning the physical fight; Noah is willing to stick up for his peers where others are scared to. This is the first point where Noah says something I heard many times after: he just doesn't really care what anyone thinks about him, "not really at all."

Noah was born on July 23rd, 2001, which he was surprised I already remembered. How could I forget, because I was at the hospital when he was born; granted, I was only five years old and only kind of have a vague memory of my aunt Kelly in the hospital bed holding a tiny thing, but I have seen him grow up since the start. Seven weeks after Noah was born, Kelly was awake early in the morning, nursing him. She was watching the news when the second plane hit the World Trade Center. She describes the terror she felt, holding her brand new baby and not knowing what the world would look like for him, though all a mother could want for her child is happiness and peace. My aunt and uncle have raised their kids with the knowledge that they

would have immeasurable support while they chase the things they're passionate about. I often wonder if the way Noah and Nate are willing to put their whole self into things is a reflection of that.

He's always loved music, even though for a long time it was just listening to it. Once, on the way to our family vacation in Lake Tahoe, Noah rode in the car with my family, and brought his favorite Ramones CD which my dad reluctantly let him play. He was four, but he knew every song and every lyric. Now, almost entirely self-taught and fully self-motivated, Noah plays the guitar most frequently, and does it well. But he can also play drums, bass, harmonica, ukulele, and electric organ (a gift, and a very loud one that you can feel in the carpet of their house when he plays). As Noah and I begin to talk about his music, he leans forward and elaborates on his thoughts without me asking him to. He brings up related topics even, things he thinks would be relevant "to the things [I] want to write about."

Noah was the lead singer and played the guitar for a band called Wet Dream, which broke up earlier this year because one of the kids moved to Montana. When I ask him to explain the name and it's obvious connotation, Noah just mumbles about how his friend picked it. He doesn't seem to like any question that could belittle the importance of his band or music. Alex notes his demeanor and interjects with what I wanted Noah to explain: while the name is a reference to "male adolescence," it's supposed to be about dreaming of surfing. Alex begins to say that the band's genre is surf punk, to which Noah pipes up with a resounding "nah." Noah categorizes their stuff as more indie surf. They even had some jazz chords, wrote some heavy punk songs, and once played a blues song. Noah looks at me as he says this-- "you were at that show, right?" I was. I went to three of Wet Dream's shows, all of which Noah organized. One



was played behind a surf shop for a sales event; it was small, maybe twenty or so kids from Noah's circle of friends, moshing and buying Wet Dream t-shirts. I own one too. Their first public show was at a strange shack on UCSD's campus; the other guitarist in the band didn't show up that night because he was grounded for a bad grade. The show that Noah referenced was the biggest of the shows that I've been to, and the most impressive. It was at an actual concert venue downtown (albeit one that had a serious backyard vibe), and featured seven other bands. Wet Dreams' original songs were by far the best, though another band there was apparently more popular; that band featured a kid whose instrument was a pumpkin that he curled up next to and beat like a drum. There's no accounting for taste. At each show, I was impressed and jealous of Noah's circle of friends. They were all impossibly cool for high school kids; they dressed well, listened to underground bands and socialized at concerts every weekend. Noah smiles a little when I ask if he feels like he fits in better with them than he did at school.

I've never heard Noah talk more in his entire life than when I asked him what artists he's listening to now to get inspired for his own music. He's still writing, even after Wet Dream disbanded. He focuses on making music that feels relevant to him, like his favorite artist, Daniel Johnston. Daniel Johnston "has spent the last 20 or so years exposing his heartrending tales of unrequited love, cosmic mishaps, and existential torment to an ever-growing international cult audience."<sup>2</sup> He famously performs during manic depressive episodes. Noah shows me a video of Johnston performing with tears streaming down his face. There are many emotions flashing plainly across Johnston's face, and his vulnerability is what has drawn Noah to him. Since he started writing and making his own music, the authenticity of the music he listens to matters more to him. Noah now questions how much of himself the artist puts into the music, because

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hihowareyou.com/about>

that's what he strives to do himself. Johnston's music itself is unlike anything else I've heard before, and Noah explains that this is because it's "outsider music." I ask him to elaborate about what that means, and he lowers his head and says quietly, "He just thinks differently about the meaning of every part of the music." Johnston's video is still playing, and Noah looks at me and repeats a line: the artist walks among the flowers.

Noah wrote and sings lead vocals on Wet Dream's only released single, titled Time Will Tell. It's written for his best friend at the time, a girl he was in love with who had a boyfriend. This was not a well-kept secret, and he doesn't seem to care. Everything about the song is purposeful, the volume of his voice at the beginning, every beat and lyric; considering the way Noah feels so passionately about being authentic in your music the way Daniel Johnston has shown him is possible, his vulnerability and honesty in the song is no accident.

"It's like his music has connected to my life in like the *craziest* way. Like, this story happened, and you're not going to believe, but this is, like, actually something that happened and it's like insane." As he said this, Noah's face was open, his eyes wide, his tone serious but passionate and I thought I probably would believe it. A friend of Noah's made a short film about suicide a while back. Noah starred in it, as the best friend of a kid who committed suicide. In the beginning, he stresses this point, it says *irony* and then pans off it. A song plays at the end of the movie while Noah's character contemplates suicide. This song is by a friend of Noah's named Sean. The director had put the song into the ending without telling Sean, and before she could tell him, and before the film was released, Sean committed suicide. Returning to the spot (an abandoned building and parking lot) where they filmed that scene of the movie, this is the place where Noah learned about Daniel Johnston. He got the chills, and he didn't know why. He got

the weirdest feeling that something was going to change in his life, while a song called “Walking the Cow” by Daniel Johnston was playing. A week later, he returned to that same exact spot. There was a homeless guy walking nearby, and he was singing none other than “Walking the Cow” by Daniel Johnston. Noah and his friends approached him, and the man asked them if he had attracted them with the Daniel Johnston song. He told them that the skater kids like them would change the world. Noah took a video of a whole interaction with him. As much as it is just a video of a homeless man ranting about how fucked society is, the entire thing is so serendipitous I got the chills, watching this proof that Noah’s connection to Daniel Johnston was as deep as he felt. He rants directly into the camera, the flash on, and talks about how we punish “youthful exuberance,” and Noah pauses it to tell me that this is exactly what I’m talking about, too. A plane flies over the parking lot in the video, and the man freezes then immediately continues his sentence when the plane is gone. Noah explains that the abandoned building they had used in the movie used to be a playhouse; this man used to be an actor there, and when planes flew over, the actors would freeze and pick up when it was gone. I doubted this story for a second. Noah showed me the guy’s facebook page: it’s true. We continue to watch the video and the guy begins talking about how Daniel Johnston has foregone every societal norm and stigma about mental health to just live in his music. Noah looks up at me and repeats this line: “it’s a willingness to do what you love to do despite opposition.”