ERIK MORAN

Erik Moran is a graduate of Hampshire High School. He is a biology major with a passion for the culinary arts, biking, and music. Erik may pursue a career in oncology. This essay is important to Erik because it represents his personality and thought processes during a transitional time in his life.

Erik wrote this essay in John Bradley's English 105 course during the spring of 2010.
Overburdened by a heap of nutritious fast food, I struggled to keep my eyes wide-open in the nauseatingly cool air, fouled with the taste of a mildew-ridden air conditioner. It is my turn to drive and the scenery I am so lucky to take in is beyond captivating. Covering the sparse and endless plain that is North Dakota are fuzzy gray clouds hopeful of summer rain. Everyone else is asleep in the car, and their snoring and sleepy murmurings are like thick smog of anesthesia. Fargo was left only several miles behind in the treads of my tires when this endless loop of field and firmament seemed to get all about the car and trap me.

I noticed that my phone’s service seemed to be fading away. It would not be long before my communication device deserted me entirely. Like speaking last words to a dying uncle, I tried desperately to send some of my own last words to the girl back home in Illinois whom I would miss so dearly on my time away. I knew that she would be on my mind most of the time. It would just be irritating to think I hadn’t said the last thing to her correctly.

What I remember most from the journey northwest was passing the air force base in Minot. Seeing how oddly the base was constructed made me feel like I had left my normal place of reality. The complex was enormous, covering miles of land. While driving past, I had been unable to find any signs of life meandering about. Not a car or pedestrian. The oddest part was that this large structure was built in this very desolate part of the United States. It was as if it had grown up from the ground, like the many fields of sunflowers that would only be animated by the breeze floating across the flat emptiness. The horizon was exactly even with the immense and sturdy wooden snow fences that surrounded the base where my trip began. From then on, it was only me, my dad, and my uncle because my phone was now roaming.
To say that my graduation ceremony was an odd experience would be an understatement. That last bell was like the ripping open of a torrent that sucked me away to a world I had no understanding of and where the air was unbreathable. I was a “free man,” but in no way did I feel able to use the potential I had developed.

The last day of school was the beginning of a month-long celebration that my comrades of four years or more were just uncorking. Aside from this paramount occasion, there was that summer air that creeps up everybody’s shorts and makes them giddy. The static electricity jumped through the floors and into the cloud of papers floating down from the stairwell. The final burst of energy before the machine turned over and spit out a collection of freshly educated youth to pull at the world’s threads.

Amidst this furious jubilation, I felt no desire at all to give a farewell to any of my favorite teachers or take in a particular hallway or classroom for one last time before I left the building for good. There were no hugs goodbye, and there were no promises made to have a wonderful summer. I just wanted to get into my car and drive. Drive hard and fast until the speed burned off the outer layer that I had been wearing all day and I could just scream. Scream until I was empty.

The safety prey finds in wide-open land is the predictability of it all. Wherever you are, you can see for miles, and wherever you go will always be flat. It really doesn’t matter where you stand. Each spot in the field is no higher than the next. The hawk does not really care where exactly he must swoop down to seize the mouse. Death is inevitable.

The waves had gotten smaller, and the boat was now gently rocking to and fro. It was about a thirty-minute ride to this far end of the lake, but as we would soon find out, it was worth the journey. The vast sky that stretched out to the horizon was layered with storm clouds. We had been taking rain gear off and on for the past twenty minutes, every time a new sky took the space overhead
and either burned us with its hot rays of light or wet us with its icy droplets.

I was the motor-man for the week we were to spend fishing, so I was in charge of mastering the lake and running a small, forty-horsepower Mercury outboard across the big puddle that held our desired fish: walleye. The area was recommended to us that morning by the lodge owner, and after several trials of drifting across about one hundred yards of clear blue water, we found a spot that produced. These spots were nothing more than a buoy floating in the same water that stretched for miles. Beneath might have been a rock ledge, a sand bar, or maybe even a tree, but the only eyes to ever see that were on the round, quarter-ounce chartreuse jig that danced a leech just above the bottom in hopes of finding a partner to ascend with. All that mattered was the animation of the rod as the angler cranked in another fish to be cleaned and eaten.

As productive as our rods had been at catching fish as well as obscure things like barbed-wire fencing, I couldn’t be satisfied. No matter how many fish I reeled aboard, not one would be a satisfying catch. I had caught many fish in my life, and I knew that with the right amount of patience there was no fish I couldn’t catch. Not one hookset or successful landing would bring all that mattered any closer to me. I would just have to have patience.

I think I can truly appreciate the wonder of photographs when I remember my graduation. The pictures themselves even have a glow of the wonderful weather that day. The long summer day had ended with a perfectly ripe, orange sun drifting past the final bars of a flawless blue sky dotted with the puffy clouds of good weather. I was, however, unable to appreciate any of this as I drove to school, frantically hoping that I wouldn’t be late to the ceremony.

I walked through the front doors to the school to find most of my classmates forming lines and acting unfamiliar to each other, after only having been apart for a few weeks. After this, there was nothing more than a long procession to some lawn chairs, up past the podium to get a piece of paper thrust into my hand, and down the steps past my girlfriend, Chelsey, who was
handing out the medals and crying when I walked past. I think now that she somehow stole the tears from me. I desperately wanted to leave with her and go away somewhere to escape the pomp and circumstance, but there were more open hands waiting for my embrace to impress some sort of closure on their concept of me as a child. Every hand I shook I knew I would never shake again, or at least never in the same way.

Back at my home following the ceremony was a small gathering of cake and themed plates in my honor. “Congratulations” was apparently the word of the evening. These people had such blind pride for someone whom they seldom saw. The most striking of all was my dad, who knew I was in a funk. At the school, he had very passively given me a hug and tried so hard to express very little of the emotion that had overwhelmed him upon seeing his son receive his high school diploma. At the house, he gave me a card that said, “Good for one fishing trip to Devil’s Lake.” This gift was to be that hug he had stifled. The trip was destined to be a profound touchstone, whether I wanted it to be or not.

One evening after a long day of fishing, my two companions were once again snoring away in their beds. I figured this would be a good time to meditate on Chelsey and perhaps find that revelation I was looking for.

I walked down to the shore from camp in search of keepsakes to give her to signify that she was the subject of my week’s ongoing fixation. I eventually gathered a little stock of driftwood and a twine-like plant that floated to shore. As with most sentimental gestures, a heart of some kind would be my end product.

As I started my stroll back to the cabin, I began to consider why I had really bothered coming here on vacation without leaving my burdens behind. Was Chelsey really the girl standing on the other side of that graduation podium to guide me forward in a new direction, or was she just another remnant of high school that I wanted to be rid of? It all seemed to come together that night, as I strung together the sticks with the twine, that she was nothing and neither was anything else that happened to me
unless I made it so. Two fragmented hearts came together that night. Ever since that trip my spirit has been as unyielding as concrete. I even felt strong the day after I returned when she dumped me.