



FIGURE 1. Chris Crowe delivering the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecture in the Marriott Center on May 25, 2021. All screen captures from the forum assembly courtesy BYUtv.



FIGURE 2. Dan Flavin, *untitled (corner piece)*, 2011, Tate Museum, Liverpool, England. Photograph by Chris Crowe.

A Novel Idea

Chris Crowe

The following is a transcript of a forum address presented by Chris Crowe, recipient of the 2020 Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award. Crowe is a professor of English at Brigham Young University and an author who writes books for the young-adult market. This forum assembly took place on May 25, 2021.

I hope you'll forgive my blatant display of ignorance, but I'm going to begin today by discussing something I know very little about, then I'll move on to a topic I'm relatively familiar with, and I'll conclude my part of the forum by showing how these experiences, ideas, and movements have influenced—and continue to influence—my own writing.

I've learned most of what I know about art, especially contemporary art, from the time I've spent with my wife, Elizabeth (an accomplished artist herself, with BFA and MFA degrees), walking through museums in the United States and Europe. Over the years, she's been patient with my lowbrow, traditional view of "art," and she's helped me see—and appreciate—the beauty and complexity of most contemporary art. But I have to admit that despite her guidance, I still have a lot to learn.

Here are three brief examples:

In 2011, we spent a day in Liverpool, England, where we toured several museums. One piece I saw in the Tate Museum that day remains especially memorable. It was an untitled work by Dan Flavin, an artist who was, not surprisingly, unfamiliar to me. Elizabeth recognized it immediately (fig. 2), but I was baffled.

How is *this* a work of art?



FIGURE 3. Félix González-Torres, “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), candies in variously colored wrappers, endless supply, ©Félix González-Torres. Photograph by Chris Crowe at the Art Institute of Chicago, 2017.

A few years later, as we strolled through the Art Institute of Chicago, we came upon this art installation (fig. 3). The free candy immediately appealed to me, but, despite my wife’s artistic contextualization and explanation, I couldn’t accept a pile of candy as a work of art.

And not long ago, we visited the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and entered a room where a contraption in the ceiling dropped a piece of white paper every few seconds (fig. 4). This was, I knew, some kind of art—we were in an art museum, after all—but I didn’t have the background knowledge to appreciate it for what it was.



FIGURE 4. Ann Hamilton, *at hand*, 2001, reinstalled at the Hirshhorn Museum of Art, Baltimore, 2017–20. Photograph by Chris Crowe in Washington, D.C., 2011.

Clearly, to me, anyway, art ain't what it used to be.

When it comes to art, I acknowledge my ignorance, and I understand, sort of, why contemporary, conceptual art often leaves me flat-footed: most of it lacks the defining characteristics, the traditional traits I must have learned somewhere along the way, of what makes art art.

But here's the thing: when I think about my various encounters with what I call nontraditional contemporary art, I have to admit that the three works I just shared with you have generated more thought, discussion, and interest than all the paintings and sculptures I speed-walked past in the world-famous Louvre Museum combined.

My art-appreciation quandary can be explained in a number of ways, but I'd like to explore how my understanding of *genre* might influence my ability to broaden my understanding of contemporary visual and other forms of art.

Genre for a particular thing can be explained as the commonly accepted essential characteristics of that thing. For example, if I ask you to imagine a pencil, you'll very likely envision an image that's similar to what I have in mind: a yellow wooden instrument that's around seven inches long, with a pink eraser on one end and a graphite tip on the other.

Consider now a box of facial tissue. But how do you *know* it's a tissue box? What are its defining characteristics?

It has tissue, you say, and it's a box, and it has a label or brand on its side.

If I remove the last tissue, is it still a tissue box?

Well, it may not hold a tissue, but it has the characteristics of a box of tissue. It has a label on the front, a slot for dispensing tissues, it's made out of thin cardboard, and so on.

But what if I break the box apart? What is it now? How do you know?

What if I flatten it? Is it still a tissue box? At what point does it cease to be a tissue box?

Like a box of facial tissues, most things have defining characteristics, qualities that, especially in writing and literature, help us define or classify things according to a genre. We recognize most works by their defining, generally accepted traits. And while it's nice to know something about genre and what it defines, as a writer I've learned that an understanding of genre can also help artists create or make or perform things: a painting, a poem, a polka, or a prelude, for example.

Important as they are to our understanding of what makes something something, these traits are not usually static. In large or small ways, they often change and evolve over time, and in some cases (like those

three works of art I shared with you), they may have almost none of the defining qualities that would have been expected a century—or even a decade—earlier.

Even something as traditional as a Brigham Young University devotional has changed over time. For decades, the speakers stood behind a pulpit and read from notes; sometime later, they read from teleprompters. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, the format began to include visuals, usually photographs, but then more elaborate graphics and even video. More recently, the speakers have moved off the rostrum to stand on a round stage with images projected directly behind them. We still recognize the gathering as a devotional, and we could quickly, if we wanted to, make a list of essential qualities that define this kind of BYU assembly despite the recent changes it's undergone.

In the last couple of decades, my area of study, young adult literature, has undergone significant, interesting, and exciting genre changes. The traditional work of fiction, what we've always called "novels," has been the centerpiece of YA literature for more than a century. Novels were clearly defined as extended prose narratives, works of fiction that told stories using settings, characters, and dialogue to create a plot for readers to enjoy. Novels had a reliable set of rules, genre traits that readers, writers, and publishers accepted and expected.

But as the twentieth century drew to a close, the YA novel began to change. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail here, but let me give some examples to give you a quick rundown: *Bull Run* had not one or two but sixteen narrators. *Maus*, a long comic book/memoir, was called a graphic novel. *Make Lemonade* was written in articulated lines, not prose paragraphs, and then *Out of the Dust* was composed as a long series of free-verse poems. *Whirligig* blended time, setting, and characters, seemingly at random. Likewise, instead of a singular, unified plot, *Holes* had three distinct story strands, each from a different point in time. *Monster* blended genre—prose, screenplay, and illustration—to tell a single story. In the days before texting, *TTYL* was a novel composed entirely in chat-room instant messages. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* was a hybrid novel: half traditional prose and half wordless illustration. And then *The Arrival* was a novel composed entirely of illustrations—and no words!

And these are only the tip of the literary iceberg.

Nowadays, it appears that traditional genre rules no longer apply, and trying to contain the creative evolution of YA literature is like trying to draw boundaries on water. The traits are fluid and ever-evolving, and sometimes it seems that as soon as someone redefines what a YA novel

is or must be, some author takes that as a challenge to write a book that blurs or obliterates those boundaries.

As a teacher and as a writer, I've followed this evolution of the novel form with great interest, and as a writer who most of the time has no idea of what he's doing, I'm always on the lookout for an approach or a method that will make novel writing easier. And I have to admit that the student in me often wonders, "Exactly how long does a novel *have* to be?" or, in other words, "What's the shortest acceptable form that will still count as a novel?"

Let me illustrate how genre evolution has influenced my writing by telling you about my most recently published novel (I've written several since this one, but they remain—probably with good reason—unpublished).

I like writing historical fiction because it allows me to blend the creative pleasure of writing fiction with the intellectual pleasure of exploring history. A few years ago, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in the 1960s, a complex, turbulent decade in American history, and after researching the '60s, I decided to settle on 1968, a year packed with civil unrest, political turmoil, and heartbreakingly assassinations, all taking place while the steady static of the Vietnam War thrummed in the background. I learned that '68 was a turning point in the war for several reasons, not the least of which was the staggering death count. More American soldiers died in Vietnam that year than in all the previous years combined.

In a manner similar to the daily COVID case counts we currently receive, in 1968, newspapers reported the war casualties every Thursday. That year, 16,592 U.S. soldiers died in Vietnam.

When I had finished my research, I started writing the story of a seventeen-year-old boy dealing with conflict at home complicated by the specter of Vietnam. I wanted this young man, a kid who would soon be draft bait, to be forced to confront all kinds of crises and ultimately have to sacrifice for someone he loved more than he loved himself.

With all this in my head, I pounded out a first page, then a chapter, then another chapter, but as the novel grew, so did my sense of despair. My story was boring!

That's a terrifying revelation for a writer, and it's also a sign that the book has some undiagnosed fatal flaw.

Knowing that first drafts are usually flush with fatal flaws, I pushed ahead, but as the pages piled up, so did the boredom, and I knew that if I couldn't fix whatever was wrong, I'd have to dump the entire project.

I woke up early one morning, stewing about this stupid book and what I could do to save it. One of the few things I liked about it was the odd appearance of the number 17. My main character was a seventeen-year-old born on May 17. His father had played college football and had worn the number 17. I liked how that prime number had worked its way into my story, and I wondered if seventeen might somehow be the key to fixing my novel.

But how?

Well, maybe I could divide the book into seventeen sections. Or maybe the story could be told from seventeen different perspectives.

What else? Haiku have seventeen syllables: five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. Could I use that? Maybe a haiku epigraph could head each chapter, or maybe the main character could write haiku messages to his girlfriend, or maybe . . . this was going nowhere. Thinking about numbers usually isn't a way to solve a novel problem.

But then, in my desperation, I wondered, was 1968 divisible by 17? Turns out it wasn't, but even if it had been, what could I have done with that?

What else?

The death count: 16,592. Was *that* divisible by 17?

Turns out it was: 16,592 divided by 17 was 976!

Nice coincidence, but how does that help me revive a dying manuscript?

After a bit more stewing, I decided to start over and to write a novel contained by a syllable count of 16,592, one syllable for every American soldier who died in 1968.

I had no confidence that it would work: with fewer than seventeen thousand syllables to work with, I'd have to leave out so much novel-ish detail that my book might fail simply because its many gaps would make it impossible for it to feel or read like a novel.

Let me read you the first page so you can see what I came up with:

There's something tidy
in seventeen syllables,
a haiku neatness

that leaves craters of
meaning between the lines but
still communicates

what matters most. I
don't have the time or the space
to write more, so I'll

write what needs to be
remembered and leave it to
you to fill in the
gaps if you feel like
it. In 1968,
sixteen thousand five
hundred ninety-two
American soldiers died
in Vietnam, and
I'm dedicating
one syllable to each soul
as I record my
own losses suffered
in 1968, a
year like no other.

The challenge of writing and revising an entire novel in 976 haiku stanzas breathed life into my dead manuscript, and eventually it turned out that at least one publisher considered it a “novel.”

So how did all the strange modern art, the thinking about what makes a tissue box a tissue box, and those unusual YA novels influence me? Well, if I hadn’t already been familiar with all the genre-bending, boundary-blurring artistic work that came before, I couldn’t possibly have conceived of something like this weird little haiku novel.

My current book project is a cousin to my haiku novel. After learning so much about the Vietnam War era, I wanted to write another novel, one that explores how the tragedy of a young man declared MIA, missing in action, affects not just his family but his entire community. And I wanted to figure out a way to have the Vietnam draft lottery play a role in the story.

I also wanted to write this novel in a nontraditional format; I wondered how many genre traits I could leave out of a novel and still have it be a novel.

Could I write a story that approximated an impressionist painting? Could I use broad, vague brush strokes that omit essential, traditional elements of a novel? Could I trust my readers to fill in the gaps? Could I ignore chronology? Could I write a story where the main character, the young man who would eventually be declared MIA, never appears, is never even named?

While I was poking around for a method to this project’s madness, I read a novelly kind of book published in 1915, Edgar Lee Masters’s

Spoon River Anthology. That book got me thinking that maybe I could write my novel in the form of free-verse poems written/spoken by family members and friends left behind by this MIA soldier.

And because I was already appropriating one American classic, I decided that I might as well make it two, so I also used the title and character names from Shirley Jackson's 1948 short story, "The Lottery," in my story.

This project is far from complete. My current draft has about 115 poems from 30 different characters, and despite its current lack of polish, I like how it's shaping up.

I'll conclude my lecture by sharing with you a brief excerpt from this novel experiment, but rather than read it myself, I've enlisted the support of nine kindhearted former students (fig. 5), who will read the roles of nine characters from *Lottery*. As you watch and listen, I invite you to think about genre and your expectations of what a novel must be and how boundaries can be bent, and most of all, I ask you to consider Dan Flavin's lightbulb in a corner to see if it sheds any light on the potential of my work-in-progress to one day be some sort of novel.

Thank you for being such a kind audience.

Now, on to *Lottery*.



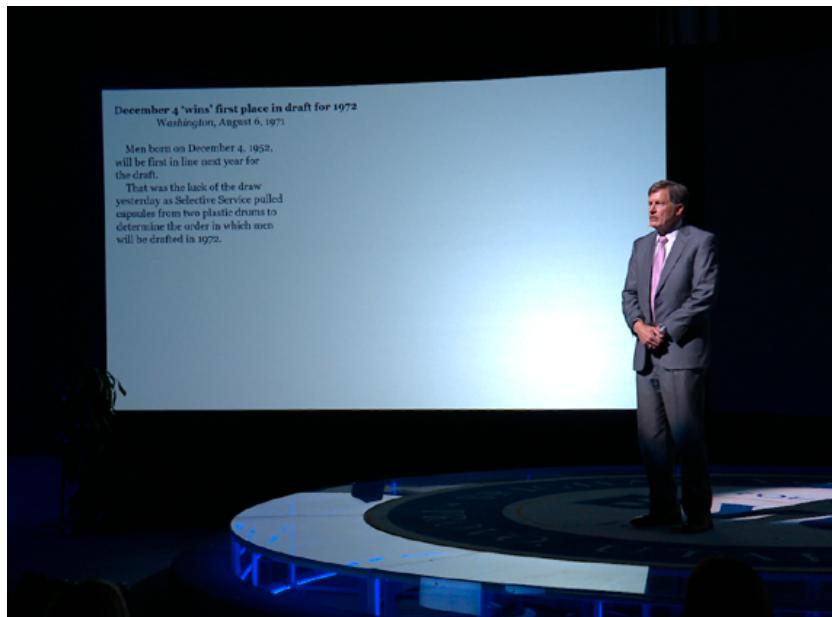
FIGURE 5. Chris Crowe and former students who read the roles from his novel *The Lottery* during the forum. Photograph by Laura Holt.

December 4 "wins" first place in draft for 1972

Washington, August 6, 1971

Men born on December 4, 1952,
will be first in line next year for
the draft.

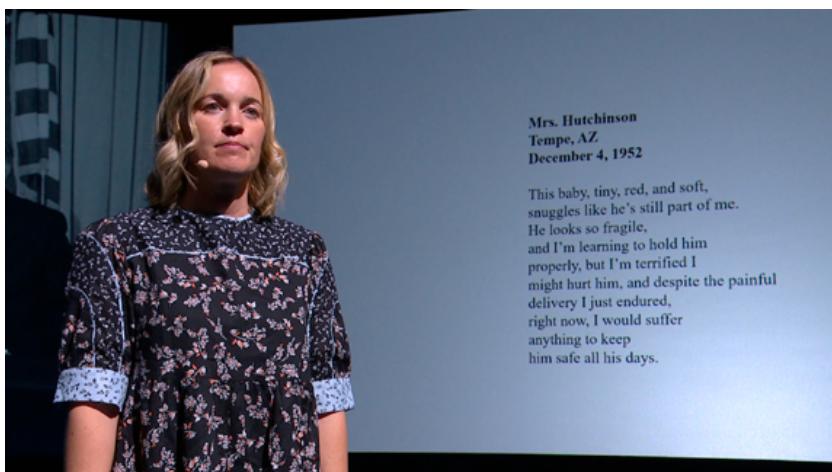
That was the luck of the draw
yesterday as Selective Service pulled
capsules from two plastic drums to
determine the order in which men
will be drafted in 1972.



Chris Crowe

Mrs. Hutchinson
Tempe, AZ
December 4, 1952

This baby, tiny, red, and soft,
snuggles like he's still part of me.
He looks so fragile,
and I'm learning to hold him
properly, but I'm terrified I
might hurt him, and despite the painful
delivery I just endured,
right now, I would suffer
anything to keep
him safe all his days.



Katie Irion

Brad Downing

We were born on the same day,
he and I, and
I'm older by a few hours.
We joked that I'm his big brother
even though he's almost a foot taller than
I am. He was the new kid,
and we rode the same
bus to McKemy Jr. High every morning.
He was tall and skinny back then—
and awkward.

“I’m Brad,” I told him when
we shared the sidewalk waiting for the
bus that hot August morning.
He said he was from California.
His dad worked in Phoenix.
He had a younger brother and a sister.
He’d never been in Arizona before.
What he didn’t say, but what I
could tell, was this:
he was scared to death.



Washington Pearce

Twyla

that boy he didn't
tease me like the others did
he was kind to me

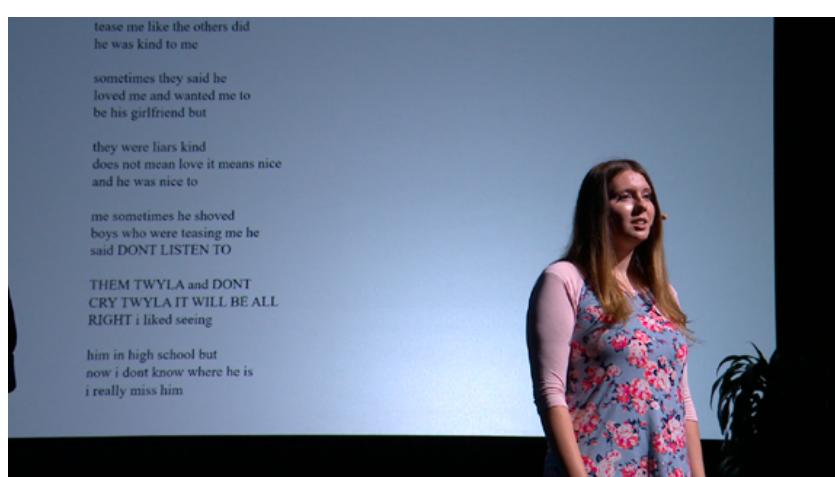
sometimes they said he
loved me and wanted me to
be his girlfriend but

they were liars kind
does not mean love it means nice
and he was nice to

me sometimes he shoved
boys who were teasing me he
said DONT LISTEN TO

THEM TWYLA and DONT
CRY TWYLA IT WILL BE ALL
RIGHT i liked seeing

him in high school but
now i dont know where he is
i really miss him



Madelynn Jones

Davy Hutchinson

Every time my brother touches the ball,
the crowd's roar surges into a wave that
crashes through the stadium.
He breaks through tacklers like they're
wooden puppets.

Watching from the bleachers,
I bask in his reflected glory,
proud to be the freshman brother
to the guy everyone knows, loves, and
cheers for.



Jeremy Holbrook

Heather Bentham

My heart pounded when I snuck
into school in the early-morning dark.
I felt like a thief, petrified that someone
would catch me in the act,
but all was quiet in the dim light
of the hallways.

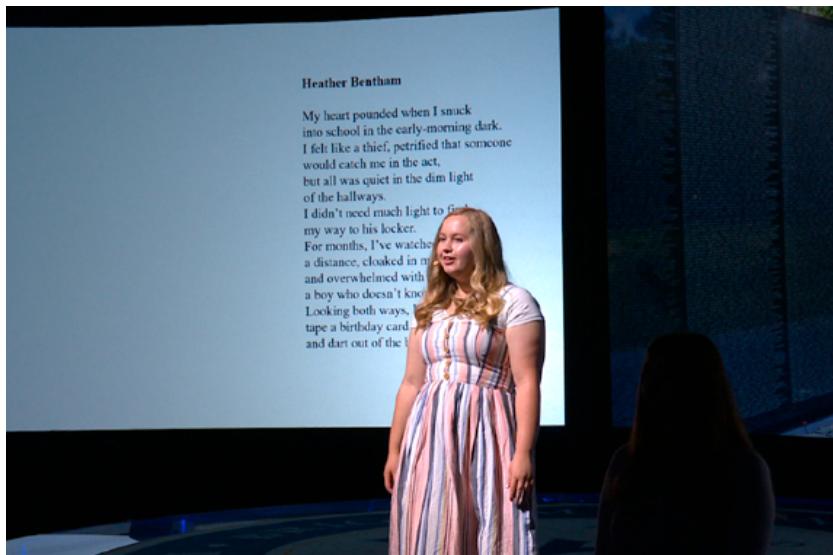
I didn't need much light to find
my way to his locker.

For months, I've watched him from
a distance, cloaked in my shyness
and overwhelmed with love for
a boy who doesn't know I exist.

Looking both ways, I quickly
taped a birthday card to his locker
and darted out of the building.

Heather Bentham

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Ellie Smith

Brad Downing

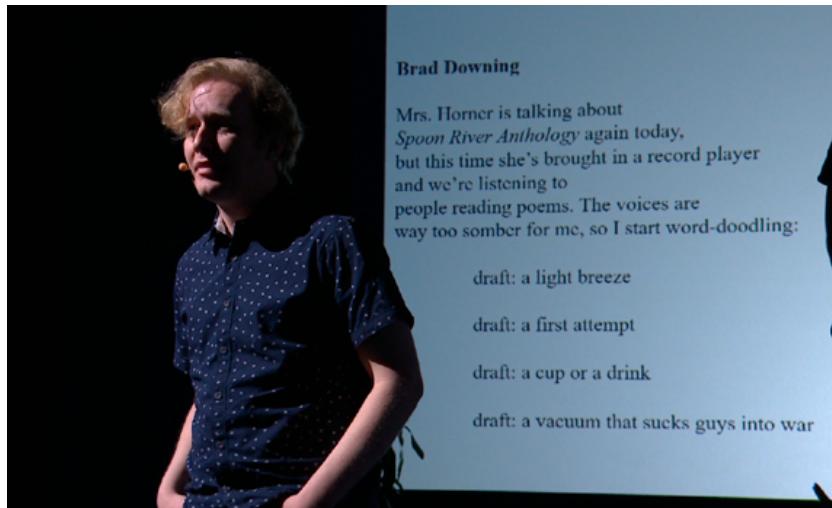
Mrs. Horner is talking about
Spoon River Anthology again today,
but this time she's brought in a record player
and we're listening to
people reading poems. The voices are
way too somber for me, so I start word-doodling:

draft: a light breeze

draft: a first attempt

draft: a cup or a drink

draft: a vacuum that sucks guys into war



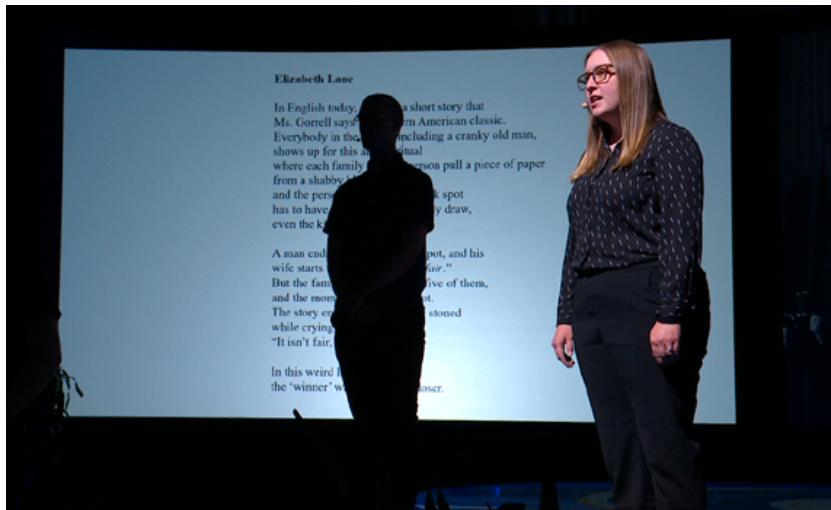
Washington Pearce

Elizabeth Lane

In English today, we read a short story that Ms. Gorrell says is a modern American classic. Everybody in the village, including a cranky old man, shows up for this annual ritual where each family has one person pull a piece of paper from a shabby black box, and the person who gets the black spot has to have everyone in his family draw, even the kids.

A man ends up with the black spot, and his wife starts whining: "It wasn't *fair*." But the family has to draw, all five of them, and the mom gets the black spot. The story ends with her getting stoned while crying out "It isn't fair, it isn't right."

In this weird lottery, the "winner" was actually the loser.

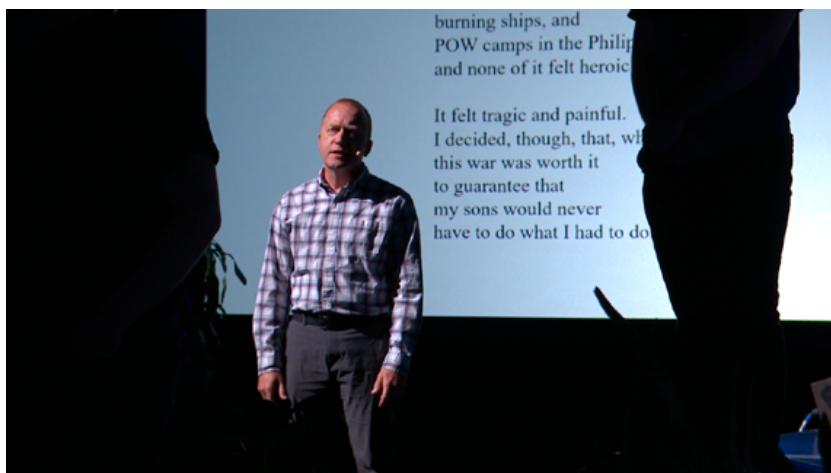


Amy Banks

Mr. Hutchinson

After Pearl Harbor, we didn't think,
we just enlisted, swept up in the
call to serve our country, and
before I knew it,
I was on a Navy ship in the
middle of the South Pacific.
I saw tropical storms,
burning ships, and
POW camps in the Philippines,
and none of it felt heroic.

It felt tragic and painful.
I decided, though, that, whatever it cost,
this war was worth it
to guarantee that
my sons would never
have to do what I had to do.



Jon Ostenson

Elizabeth Lane

Guess what?
That cute boy
from my sophomore English class,
the one who used to torment me
until I cried?
I asked him to the
Sadie Hawkins dance—
and he said yes.
I feel like I won the lottery!



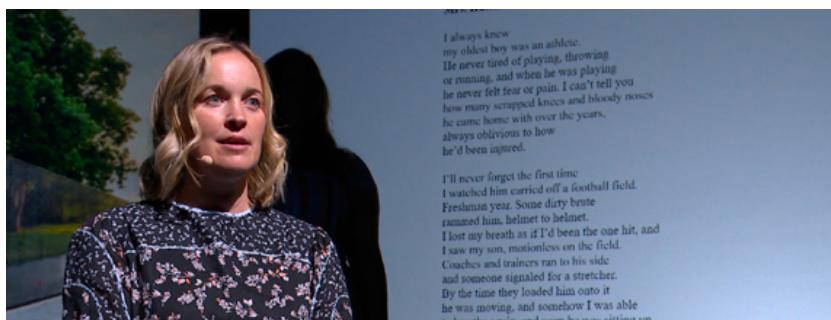
Amy Banks

Mrs. Hutchinson

I always knew
 my oldest boy was an athlete.
 He never tired of playing, throwing
 or running, and when he was playing
 he never felt fear or pain. I can't tell you
 how many scraped knees and bloody noses
 he came home with over the years,
 always oblivious to how
 he'd been injured.

I'll never forget the first time
 I watched him carried off a football field.
 Freshman year. Some dirty brute
 rammed him, helmet to helmet.
 I lost my breath as if I'd been the one hit, and
 I saw my son, motionless on the field.
 Coaches and trainers ran to his side
 and someone signaled for a stretcher.
 By the time they loaded him onto it
 he was moving, and somehow I was able
 to breathe again, and soon he was sitting up
 and talking to the trainer and then standing up
 and telling the coach to let him back in the game.
 Thank God the coach sent him back to the bench
 where he sat and pouted until the game was over.

But the images of my poor boy flat on the field and being
 carried off on a stretcher, they haunt me still.



Katie Irion

Elizabeth Lane

I used to hate him, you know.
He teased and tormented me endlessly
in our sophomore English class.
Some days my tears spilled over before
I could escape into the hallway,
but a year later, he changed, grew into his body,
I guess, but in the right way. Less foolish, more kind.
And I saw in him a sensitivity that had been hidden
beneath his stupid sophomore veneer.

He had always been easy to look at, but
somehow he also became easy to love.

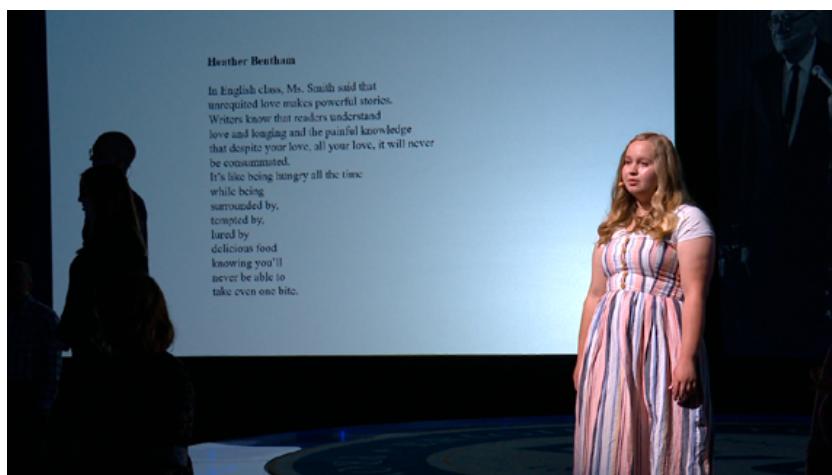


Amy Banks

Heather Bentham

In English class, Ms. Smith said that
unrequited love makes powerful stories.
Writers know that readers understand
love and longing and the painful knowledge
that despite your love, all your love, it will never
be consummated.

It's like being hungry all the time
while being
surrounded by,
tempted by,
lured by
delicious food,
knowing you'll
never be able to
take even one bite.

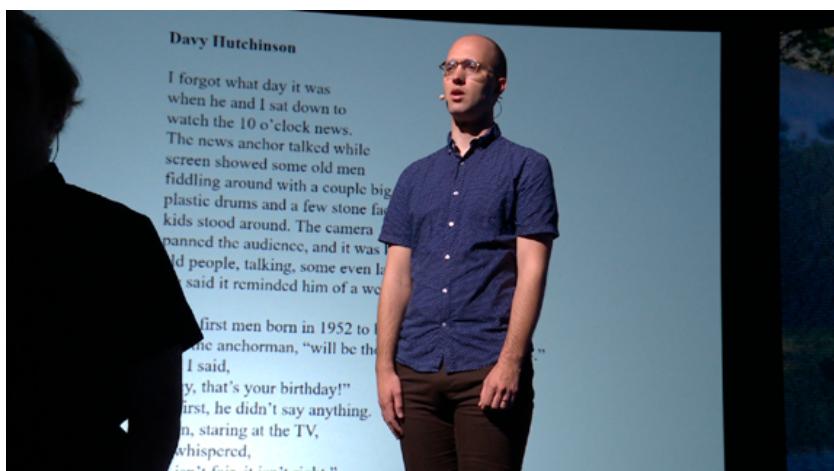


Ellie Smith

Davy Hutchinson

I forgot what day it was
 when he and I sat down to
 watch the 10 o'clock news.
 The news anchor talked while the
 screen showed some old men
 fiddling around with a couple big
 plastic drums and a few stone-faced
 kids stood around. The camera
 panned the audience, and it was kids and
 old people, talking, some even laughing.
 He said it reminded him of a weird short story.

“The first men born in 1952 to be drafted,”
 said the anchorman, “will be those born on December 4.”
 and I said,
 “Hey, that’s your birthday!”
 At first, he didn’t say anything.
 Then, staring at the TV,
 he whispered,
 “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right.”



Jeremy Holbrook

Mr. Hutchinson

When he left, I wept.
Not that he saw, I made sure of that, but
watching him get on that bus tore
my heart.

Now I understand why my mother cried
when I went away to war, and
why my father seemed so distant.

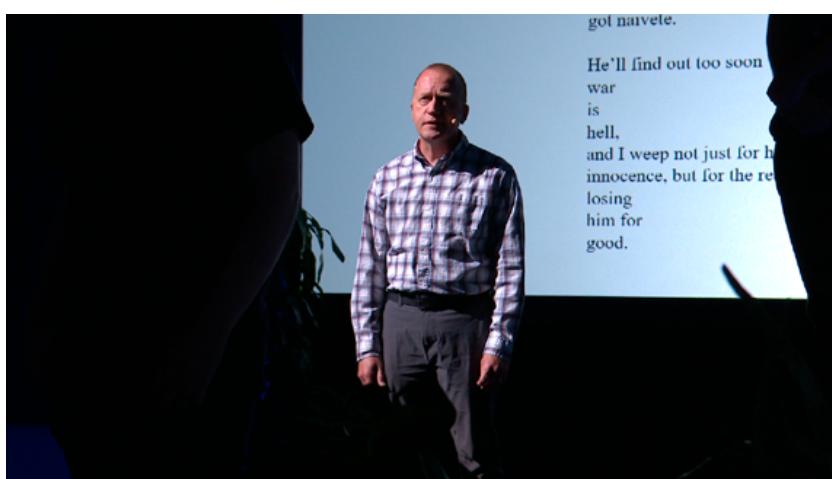
The young soldier that was me looked ahead with
faith in the system, in the cause, and with a bit of
patriotism.

I'm proud my boy has that, but he's also
got naivete.

He'll find out too soon why they say
war
is
hell,
and I weep not just for his loss of
innocence, but for the real risk of
losing
him for
good.

got naivete.

He'll find out too soon
war
is
hell,
and I weep not just for his
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losing
him for
good.



Jon Ostenson

Private Zanini

He's just like all the rest of us
boot camp grunts: shaved head, weary eyes, baggy fatigues,
but the one thing weird about this guy
is that every night, he slides out of
his bunk when he thinks everyone's asleep
and kneels on the floor next to his bed
whispering who-knows-what to God.



Hale Croft

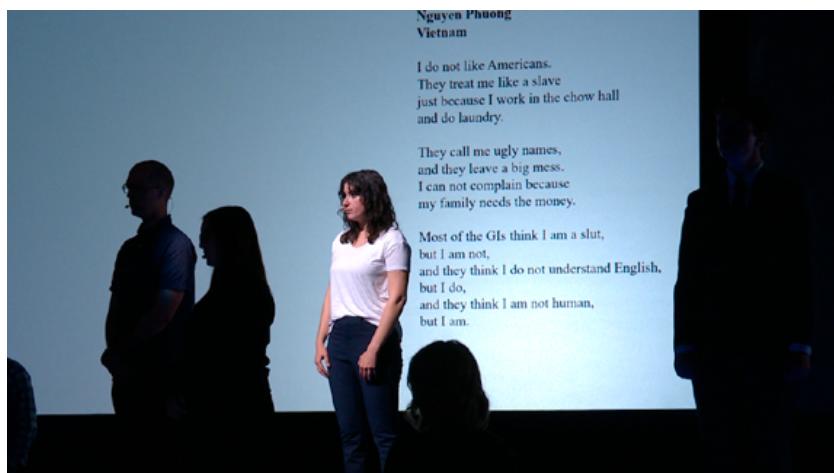
Nguyen Phuong

Vietnam

I do not like Americans.
They treat me like a slave
just because I work in the chow hall
and do laundry.

They call me ugly names,
and they leave a big mess.
I cannot complain because
my family needs the money.

Most of the GIs think I am a slut,
but I am not,
and they think I do not understand English,
but I do,
and they think I am not human,
but I am.



Rebecca Cazanave

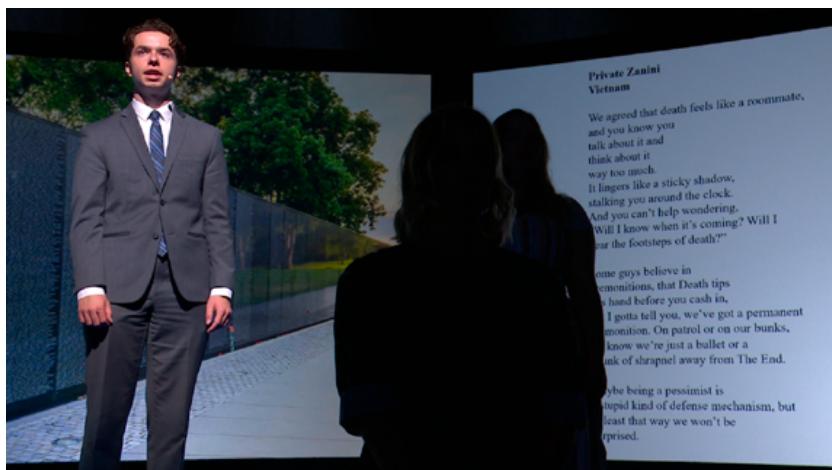
Private Zanini Vietnam

We agreed that Death feels like a roommate,
and you know you
talk about it and
think about it
way too much.

It lingers like a sticky shadow,
stalking you around the clock.
And you can't help wondering,
"Will I know when it's coming? Will I
hear the footsteps of Death?"

Some guys believe in
premonitions, that Death tips
His hand before you cash in,
but I gotta tell you, we've got a permanent
premonition. On patrol or on our bunks,
we know we're just a bullet or a
chunk of shrapnel away from The End.

Maybe being a pessimist is
a stupid kind of defense mechanism, but
at least that way we won't be
surprised.



Hale Croft

Nguyen Phuong
Vietnam

The first time I saw that GI
he smiled at me,
but not like other
GIs smiled.
They smiled at me like they were
hungry and I was the meal.

Sometimes when I cleaned up in the
chow hall after he'd eaten he would
thank me.

Once he gave me a flower.
That made me turn red especially
when all the other soldiers whistled
and yelled.
But he made them shut up.

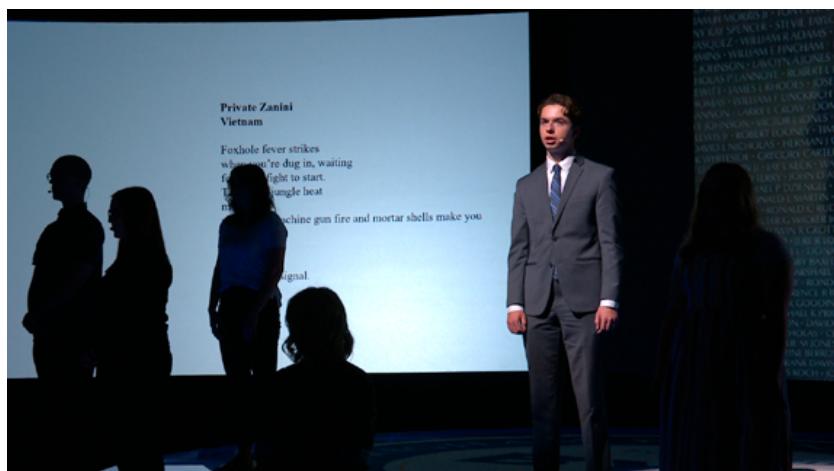
One time he asked me about my
family.
I could not answer only
cry.
He said sorry and
wiped away his own tears.



Rebecca Cazanave

Private Zanini Vietnam

Foxhole fever strikes
when you're dug in, waiting
for a firefight to start.
The damp jungle heat
makes you
sweat; the machine-gun fire and mortar shells make you
shiver.
The cure?
Daylight and
the all-clear signal.



Hale Croft

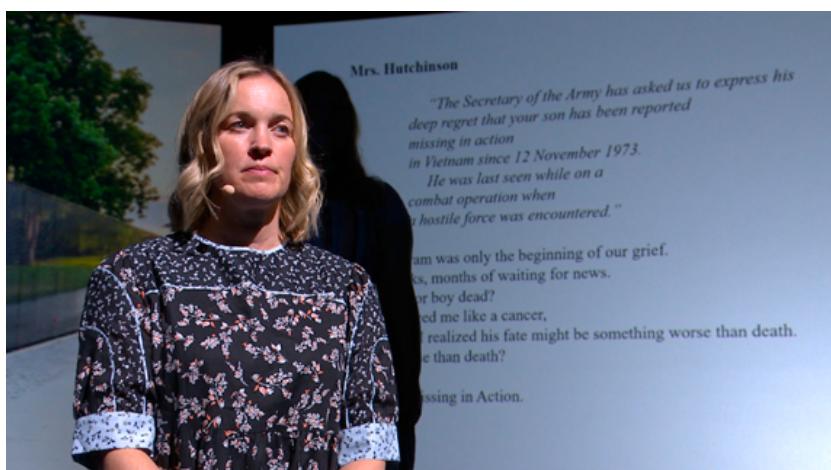
Mrs. Hutchinson

*"The Secretary of the Army has asked us to express his
deep regret that your son has been reported
missing in action
in Vietnam since 12 November 1973.*

*He was last seen while on a
combat operation when
a hostile force was encountered."*

That telegram was only the beginning of our grief.
Days, weeks, months of waiting for news.
Was my poor boy dead?
Worry gnawed me like a cancer,
and in time I realized his fate might be something worse than death.
What's worse than death?

Missing in Action.



Katie Irion

Elizabeth Lane

missing in action
missing in action missing
in action missing

in action missing
in action missing in act
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action missing in
action missing in action
missing in action



Amy Banks

Davy Hutchinson

I never minded
living in his shadow.
But now,
now that
shadow is
longer and
darker.



Jeremy Holbrook

Brad Downing

If you had asked me who,
of all the guys who went to 'Nam,
was the most likely to return a war
hero, I would have said him.
And I would be half right.
He 100% is a war hero, but
he has not
returned.



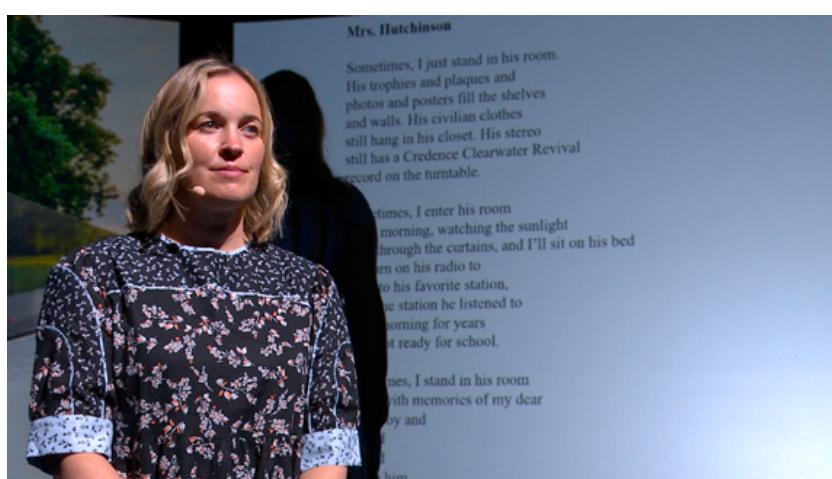
Washington Pearce

Mrs. Hutchinson

Sometimes, I just stand in his room.
 His trophies and plaques and
 photos and posters fill the shelves
 and walls. His civilian clothes
 still hang in his closet. His stereo
 still has a Credence Clearwater Revival
 record on the turntable.

Sometimes, I enter his room
 in the morning, watching the sunlight
 filter through the curtains, and I'll sit on his bed
 and turn on his radio to
 listen to his favorite station,
 the same station he listened to
 every morning for years
 as he got ready for school.

Sometimes, I stand in his room
 awash with memories of my dear
 sweet boy and
 cry and
 cry and
 cry for him.



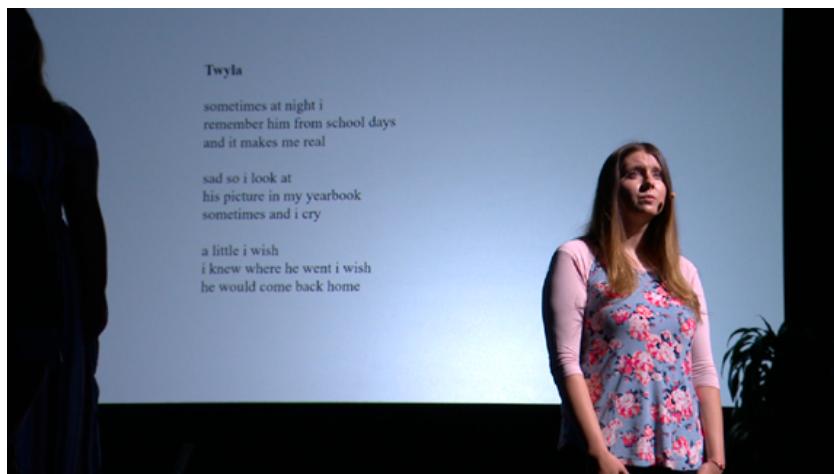
Katie Irion

Twyla

sometimes at night i
remember him from school days
and it makes me real

sad so i look at
his picture in my yearbook
sometimes and i cry

a little i wish
i knew where he went i wish
he would come back home



Madelynn Jones

Elizabeth Lane
Washington, DC

I brought my children, grown now,
to DC to see the sights.
The city overflows with
history, museums, and monuments,
and we saw them all.

On our last day on the Mall,
we made our way to the
Vietnam
Veterans
Memorial
Wall.
Walking downhill, seeing the wall of names
rise higher,
I felt a growing sadness,
a sense of loss long buried but hardly forgotten.

One of my daughters noticed my pace had slowed,
touched my elbow, and moved on, leaving me alone to
search for his name.

It had been more than 40 years,
and my life had gone its own way.
I'd had real joy and real sorrow
in those decades, but I was not prepared
for the emotion that swamped me
when I saw his name and ran my fingers
over the letters carved in black granite.
All the grief flooded back, fresh and sudden,
as I leaned against the wall silently sobbing
over his loss—and mine.



Amy Banks