ENGL 120: Reading & Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Kimberly Shirkhani

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Sita Sunil

The History of a Mushroom Enthusiast

by Sita Sunil

One by one, the candidates are evaluated and eliminated. They each get a day to be processed and rejected; a tour of the collection, a lunch at the university library cafe, and a chance to woo the interviewer by presenting credentials of international scholarship accolades and groundbreaking journal publications. They seek the position of the assessor himself—Dr. Joseph Morton, a tired old man sporting a leather hide jacket, cowboy hat, and blue-tinted spectacles.

"Oh-ho-*ho*, I like them all right," says Dr. Morton, of the tens of scientists he has judged in recent weeks. He chuckles by expelling minute bursts of air through his nose. "Everyone I consider has done *fascinating* work. That last one went caving and studied *stalagmites*. I do envy him." He sighs silently. "But could he do *this* work? Could he make *this* place his home?"

The place he's referring to? His fungus fortress. The International Collection of Vesicular-Arbuscular Mycorrhizae (INVAM), comprised of several intricately cluttered greenhouses, each harboring hundreds of fungus species from around the world. This is Dr. Morton's home.

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The very first place Joe called home was a "rinky-dink" ranch in "rinky-dink" Hardin, Montana.

"I didn't know my mother," he says matter-of-factly in his soft, scraggly voice. His mother, shortly after giving birth to four children each one year apart, was placed in a mental asylum. "She was churning out these babies, and then her business failed, all while being abused by my damn father. Can't blame her that she had a breakdown!

"My father was very… domineering. I would be presenting my animals at the fair, in front of two hundred damn people, and he'd scream at the top of his lungs, 'Joe, you're damn useless as tits on a boar!" Although Dr. Morton's voice refuses to yell (his version of yelling is speaking very rapidly), he unleashes expletives like a fiend. He blames this on the imprint of "his damn trash-mouth father."

His father restricted Joe to working on the farm after school. He couldn't join football or band because gear and instruments were expensive. "You have to pay to play," he recites in retrospect. He reverted to the only available outlet for his loneliness: academics. Joe devoured homework. He thought of learning as a dear friend. The valedictorian of his high school class, he had a staunch determination to escape Hardin.

On his graduation day, Joe's father died. Aged 56, he was a chain-smoking, overweight man dependent on blood-thinners. He had saved Joe no money for college.

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Eighteen years old and desperate for cash, Joe started working on an oil field. In a barren landscape populated by drilling rigs, he spent a year scanning the earth for fuel. It was punishing physical labor, but a lucrative existence. Joe could now put himself through two years of school.

Voracious to return to learning, he resettled at Montana State University. He decided to pursue botany (because, “If there’s one thing that’s damn interesting, it’s plants.”) He was on his way to a PhD when an unforeseen obstacle arose.

The Vietnam War was in full swing. America implemented a draft system of random lottery by birthday, and Joe’s was the second one picked. “It was a fair process,” says Dr. Morton, “but not fair to *me*.” At the thought of warfare, his small eyes open wide with panic and his mouth quivers beneath his mustache.

Thankfully, Joe ended up evading combat entirely. He became an Arabic linguist.

He spent a year in Washington, D.C. to study the language. While there, he met a girl named Sonja, nicknamed Sunny. “I thought, hell, I better ask her out.” They hit it off. But at the end of training, the military announced that all Arabic linguists were being sent to the island of Crete, where there was a station monitoring the Middle East. “So I said, ‘Sunny, let’s get married, let’s go to Crete. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll go to the States, get a divorce. It’s a win-win. We’ll go snorkeling, it’ll be great.’ Her mom *hated* me.” They got married after dating for less than three months.

On Crete, the two argued savagely every single day over “the most rinky-dink of details”. It was a year and a half where they had no one to turn to but each other. But the assignment lasted a year and a half, and they learned to compromise. They have now been married for 44 years.

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Sunny was a medical technologist who could land a job anywhere. Joe wasn’t getting a job that satisfied him anytime soon; his qualifications were fluency in Arabic

and had a half-baked botany education. So upon returning to Montana, he resumed school. But this time, he just wanted to get his degree already.

A "mycologist", who studied fungi, said he could help Joe get a PhD in just three years. So Joe studied with him and spent three years researching fungi causing diseases in wheat ("because wheat's all anybody cares about in damn Montana") and finally received qualifications to be a plant pathologist.

Joe and Sunny then chased odd botany jobs around the country. From Lubbock, Texas (or as Dr. Morton likes to call it, Lubb-*ick*. "The biggest change in the damn topography was a crack in the sidewalk.") to Arcata, California (which was pleasant, but he couldn't make enough "damn money" to stay). He desperately applied to more jobs. He only secured an interview for a professorship at West Virginia University.

There was a student there who was interested in fungi Joe had never heard of, called *mycorrhizae*. "Hell, I couldn't even spell the word," says Dr. Morton, "but this student needed resources, and there were no fungi to work with, and I thought, I have to do research anyway if I want my damn tenure, so I started collecting these fungi, and inspecting them, and it got more particular from there."

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Thirty-five years later, at age sixty-seven, Dr. Morton strolls through the INVAM, probing at pots of fungus. With his cowboy hat and coat off, he looks like a mismatched sort of insect – dragonfly bespectacled eyes, mantis-like gait, with shoulders hunched, hands ready to spring. His head is beetle-like, overwhelmingly bald. Surrounded by the strange greenery, he blends in comfortably.

The collection is the world's largest of this category of fungus. "Mycorrhizae aren't your *typical toadstools*," Dr. Morton says with a laugh. Mycorrhizae are a farmer's best friend, although farmers may not even know they exist. They form symbiotic relationships with terrestrial plants to amplify nutrient uptake. "If your eyes are glazing over," he says, "basically, they're really important."

So important that scholars from around the world are coming to Morgantown, West Virginia to vie for Dr. Morton's position and take over his collection. He's retiring. And he's not going to let just anyone take his place.

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Dr. Morton is renowned throughout the Agricultural Science department for being the absent-minded-but-adorable professor. You can expect him to be tardy to class, because he got caught up in chatting with hallway passerby. He often starts from his lecture notes, then grows frustrated with the restraint and expounds the class material in animated stream-of-consciousness monologues. He rollerblades into class when he expects the day's material to be particularly vapid. He once experimented with low-concentration bleach and unwittingly poured a thin layer onto his favorite swivel chair. Then he temporarily sat in that swivel chair to do work, forgot he had class to teach, sprinted down the hallways to the classroom, and proceeded to teach his class, then wonder merrily why his students were in extraordinary spirits. It turned out that he had two perfectly placed holes on the posterior of his jeans.

He certainly loves his job, but, "No matter how useful my collection is, or how many awards my research wins, or how the students or Sunny say different, I feel damn useless, sometimes." He takes a trembling breath. "I've always kind of despised myself.

But this is the first place, with the first people, honestly, where I've belonged. So these amazing scholars coming through," he says of the candidates, "one of them will get this place. And the one who gets it's got to own it."

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When questioned about his upcoming retirement, silent tears cascade down Dr. Morton's face. "I don't want to leave the collection," he mumbles, his eyes half-closed, "and my students, and all the wonders this place has given me. I've learned so much. The idea of picking up and going somewhere else…"

He clasps his hands behind his back and gazes admiringly at all the fungus around him. Then he smiles a small, bittersweet, wrinkly-eyed, infinitely kind smile. "But I've been doing the same damn thing for 35 years! I want to do something I've never done before." He thinks hard for a minute. "If it doesn't work out," his eyes go wide, "I'm screwed. But thinking of where I've been, I have a feeling it'll work out. "