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Course: ENGL 121 Styles of Acad & Prof Prose (Nature Writing)

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Description: This assignment was an open-ended essay, around 1,000 words, in the style of nature writing. The goal was to write nature, to write oneself, and to write one's relationship to nature.

Title: Not Today

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Emile Greer

Not Today

Pumpkins: I'm afraid of high places. I'm not afraid I'll fall; I'm afraid I'll jump. The French call this *l'appel du vide*—the call of the void. I felt it one evening as I leaned against the gnarly grey trunk of a dead tree on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. The sun glowed softly near the horizon, bathing the canyon's red rocks in warmth and color while the clouds formed a pink and orange blanket in the sky, matching the shades of the rocks' jagged formations. But it was not just the colors that took my breath away. Looking into the canyon was like looking into deep ocean. The beauty of its expanse, both in space and time, was unfathomable. How many lives had passed during this canyon's formation? My eyes traced the lines in the rock—layers of time. I looked into the immensity before me and heard the call of the void, like Descartes in his struggle with the infinite. My foot twitched. A few steps forward and then death. How long would it take? Would I bounce off the sides of the canyon first? At science camp we dropped a pumpkin off the 10-meter high dive. It only took 1.2 seconds to hit the water. 1.2 seconds to explode orange pumpkin bits all over the pool. But the fall down the Grand Canyon is way higher than 10 meters. And I'm not a pumpkin. In moments like this, death seems a passing thought. A *what if*? Death is a falling pumpkin—orange and powerful like the sunset and the Grand Canyon.

Balance: I felt the call again as I knelt on an overhang above Rio de Janeiro, gasping at the shimmering water and jagged mossy mountains which rose up from the glistening city and the beach like the back of some giant reptile. It was mid-morning. My heart beat fast from the Redbull and from the words of my paragliding instructor breathing on the back of my neck: “Keep your eyes on the horizon. Don't look down. And don't stop running. Never stop running.” The slope was steep, uneven, and wet with slippery grass. I waited for the signal. What if I tripped? My instructor and I would tumble over the cliff, wrapped in our parasail like a soft taco. I thought back to the calming

words in Game of Thrones: “There is only one God and his name is Death. And we only say one thing to death: Not today.” I ran to the horizon and I flew. It felt just like I had dreamed of as a child—when I would wake up and bury my face in my pillow, trying to fall back into the dream and into the air. Lying awake panting, I wondered, *wouldn't it be great if I were in that dream forever, never to wake up?* And then I realize that's death calling again. Part of me gets taken away after a great night. Part of me died in the parachute in Rio, in the air above the beaches, the women, and the music. It makes sense. After such a beautiful experience, something should be left as a token of gratitude to keep the balance. Death is how the world keeps balance.

Summits: What draws us to high places? Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves were on a quest to the mountain—Frodo and Sam too. We name mountains, we map them, and we climb them. The mountains once tried to take my grandfather. We had hiked up on our skis to the highest point on the lip of the snow-covered crest. When the sun shines, summits are enchanting. The world sparkles and your breath is short from the wonder and thin air. But when the summit turns angry, it is ruthless. That day, the summit greeted us with its white wrath. The wind had swept up the mountain and all I could see was white. I bent over my skis, planted my poles and pushed myself forward to the edge of the precipice. My grandfather followed behind. Through the helmet and the goggles and the layers and layers, I always felt his presence. So I knew he was not beside me when I looked back against the paralyzing wind to see him fallen over. By the time I reached him the wind had blown off his hat and hood. Icicles had formed on tufts of his facial hair, clinging to his tough, red skin—red like the Grand Canyon. The wind screamed at my grandfather, and he spattered back, out of breath with anger. I grabbed him and we slowly slid down the ridge out of the wind. Death was an enemy.

Bridges: A Rabbi once told me there are signs on the Tappan Zee Bridge that read: “Don't jump. Life is worth living. 24-hour hotline. Phone ahead.” He asked me what would I say if I were the one who answered that phone. I still don't have an answer, and that thought leaves me alone carrying the weight of an unfathomably heavy sadness, as if the lens suddenly zoomed out on my life

and on the world. To the jumper on the Tappan Zee, death is an answer. I jumped in Rio for different reasons. I jumped because I wanted to feel mortal. I remember a scene in the movie Troy when Brad Pitt said, "The truth is, the Gods envy us. They envy us because we're mortal, because any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we're doomed."