**English Practice Exam**

**Part** A:

A Brother’s Murder

By Brent Staples

It has been more than two years since my telephone rang with the news that my younger

brother Blake - just 22 years old - had been murdered. The young man who killed him was

only 24. Wearing a ski mask, he emerged from a car, fired six times at close range with a

massive .44 Magnum, then fled. The two had once been inseparable friends. A senseless

rivalry - beginning, I think, with an argument over a girlfriend - escalated from posturing, to

threats, to violence, to murder. The way the two were living, death could have come to either

of them from anywhere. In fact, the assailant had already survived multiple gunshot wounds

from an incident much like the one in which my brother lost his life.

As I wept for Blake I felt wrenched backward into events and circumstances that had

seemed light-years gone. Though a decade apart, we both were raised in Chester, Pa., an

angry, heavily black, heavily poor, industrial city southwest of Philadelphia. There, in the

1960's, I was introduced to mortality, not by the old and failing, but by beautiful young men

who lay wrecked after sudden explosions of violence. The first, I remember from my 14th

year - Johnny, brash lover of fast cars, stabbed to death two doors from my house in a fight

over a pool game. The next year, my teen-age cousin, Wesley, whom I loved very much, was

shot dead. The summers blur. Milton, an angry young neighbor, shot a cross-town rival,

wounding him badly. William, another teen-age neighbor, took a shotgun blast to the

shoulder in some urban drama and displayed his bandages proudly. His brother, Leonard,

severely beaten, lost an eye and donned a black patch. It went on.

I recall not long before I left for college, two local Vietnam veterans - one from the

Marines, one from the Army - arguing fiercely, nearly at blows about which outfit had done

the most in the war. The most killing, they meant. Not much later, I read a magazine article

that set that dispute in a context. In the story, a non-commissioned officer - a sergeant, I

believe - said he would pass up any number of affluent, suburban-born recruits to get hardcore

soldiers from the inner city. They jumped into the rice paddies with ''their manhood on

their sleeves,'' I believe he said. These two items - the veterans arguing and the sergeant's

words - still characterize for me the circumstances under which black men in their teens and

20's kill one another with such frequency. With a touchy paranoia born of living battered

lives, they are desperate to be real men. Killing is only machismo taken to the extreme.

Incursions to be punished by death were many and minor, and they remain so: they include

stepping on the wrong toe, literally; cheating in a drug deal; simply saying ''I dare you'' to

someone holding a gun; crossing territorial lines in a gang dispute. My brother grew up to

wear his manhood on his sleeve. And when he died, he was in that group - black, male and

in its teens and early 20's - that is far and away the most likely to murder or be murdered.

I left the East Coast after college, spent the mid- and late-1970's in Chicago as a graduate

student, taught for a time, then became a journalist. Within 10 years of leaving my

hometown, I was overeducated and ''upwardly mobile,'' ensconced on a quiet, tree-lined

street where voices raised in anger were scarcely ever heard. The telephone, like some grim

umbilical, kept me connected to the old world with news of deaths, imprisonings and

misfortune. I felt emotionally beaten up. Perhaps to protect myself, I added a psychological

dimension to the physical distance I had already achieved. I rarely visited my hometown. I

shut it out.

As I fled the past, so Blake embraced it. On Christmas of 1983, I traveled from Chicago to a

black section of Roanoke, Va., where he then lived. The desolate public housing projects, the

hopeless, idle young men crashing against one another - these reminded me of the

embittered town we'd grown up in. It was a place where once I would have been

comfortable, or at least sure of myself. Now, hearing of my brother's forays into crime, his

scrapes with police and street thugs, I was scared, unsteady on foreign terrain.

I saw that Blake's romance with the street life and the hustler image had flowered

dangerously. One evening that late December, standing in some Roanoke dive among drug

dealers and grim, hair-trigger losers, I told him I feared for his life. He had affected the

image of the tough he wanted to be. But behind the dark glasses and the swagger, I glimpsed

the baby-faced toddler I'd once watched over. I nearly wept. I wanted desperately for him to

live. The young think themselves immortal, and a dangerous light shone in his eyes as he

spoke laughingly of making fools of the policemen who had raided his apartment looking for

drugs. He cried out as I took his right hand. A line of stitches lay between the thumb and

index finger. Kickback from a shotgun, he explained, nothing serious. Gunplay had become

part of his life.

I lacked the language simply to say: Thousands have lived this for you and died. I fought the

urge to lift him bodily and shake him. This place and the way you are living smells of death

to me, I said. Take some time away, I said. Let's go downtown tomorrow and buy a plane

ticket anywhere, take a bus trip, anything to get away and cool things off. He took my alarm

casually. We arranged to meet the following night - an appointment he would not keep. We

embraced as though through glass. I drove away.

As I stood in my apartment in Chicago holding the receiver that evening in February 1984, I

felt as though part of my soul had been cut away. I questioned myself then, and I still do.

Did I not reach back soon or earnestly enough for him? For weeks I awoke crying from a

recurrent dream in which I chased him, urgently trying to get him to read a document I had,

as though reading it would protect him from what had happened in waking life.His eyes

shining like black diamonds, he smiled and danced just beyond my grasp. When I reached

for him, I caught only the space where he had been.

Read the attached essay entitled “A Brother’s Murder” by Brent Staples. Answer each of the

following questions in complete sentences supporting each answer with evidence from the

essay.

**1.**Explain why the BEGINNING of the essay is effective. (2 A/1 C)

**2.** In reading this essay, one recognizes that the narrator feels remorse for not being

able to reach out and help his brother earlier, but there are other significant insights

in this essay. In your own words, explain one OTHER significant insight you have

gained as a result of reading this essay. (3 T/ 1C)

**3.** Explain TWO devices of style used in this essay. For each device of style explain the

impact it has on the reader and why it is effective. (Note: figurative language is one

device, i.e., simile, metaphor, and personification are all one device. You may not

discuss them as separate devices.) (6 A / 2 C)

**Part D: Essay**

There are several literary elements in the novel including symbolism. Explain one

important symbol and how it is used to develop a major theme in the novel. (60 marks)