

# the muse

LITERARY AND ART MAGAZINE

IN STARS THAT GLEAM HIS EYES SO WHITE  
THE POOR MAN'S GAZE, AKIN THE LIGHT OF THE  
EYES STRETCH AND DARKEN TO THE ERIE CRIMS  
SO BEAUTIFUL FALLS, VANQUISHED TO HIS VIS  
EAR AT LAST CLOSES THE GRIM MAN'S TREMBLING  
WHICH BLACKNESS MAY HIS DARK DAMNED HEART BE SE  
MOONLESS NIGHT SPARKLES  
HOPPING LIGHTS MARVEL  
S BOLD WITH ITS RICH CAR  
HEADLIGHTS OUTSHINE STARS  
ANTHETIC SMILES WANDER,  
IR HEARTS ARE NO FONDER, ARREN  
EY WALLOW IN DARK PUBS, PEEDING  
SCAVENGE IN BRIGHT CLUBS, NIZING ON  
A NIGHT NEVERENDING, ACH FULL STR  
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YOUR SELFISH INDULGENCE, CRIP OF GUN  
UNVEILS MY REPULSIONOUS GLEE ESCA  
SI GREW OLDER, S WOUNDED SOUL BE SAV  
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MOLYARD CHILDREN  
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E RISES TO THE SAD MAN'S PAL  
AISY, PS HIS LONG FORGOTTEN GRAY  
AISY AFTER DAISY, ALLY OPEN  
ING HIS HEART WITH COMFORT AND AID  
FLASHES A SHIMMER FROM THE POOR MAN NO  
GLISTENING BLADE.

2018  
Mountain Brook High School

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## *The Muse* Editor's Note

*The Muse* seeks to capture the complex sentiments and experiences of the student body by combining individual voices into a single chorus of truth and beauty. Through art and literature, we may find the most genuine version of student life. *The Muse* staff and I are honored to share the talents of so many students who are willing to share their unique insights into high school life and beyond. With the works of so many compiled in one place, the amount of creativity and skill proves truly extraordinary.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the creation of this online publication: to *The Muse* staff members and editors, of course, for their dedication to uncovering talent and expressing it, to our life coach and *The Muse* sponsor Mrs. Trimm, to the many writers and artists who offered their talents by submitting to *The Muse*, and to Mr. Weatherly and his team of students for their genius formatting skills and an invaluable collaboration.

Without further ado, please browse our magazine as you wish and embark on the journey of human expression, as presented to you by high schoolers. Enjoy.

Sincerely,  
Simona Shirley

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## Narratives and Short Stories

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House Down the Street : by Anne Heaton Sanders

## An American's Renaissance in Dublin

I was finally exposed to my world when I was six years old. Before this change, I was a vain creature, and my world resembled more the two-dimensional world of a sitcom than anything approaching the complexity of the truth I know today. Reality's mouth engorged me at first very slowly, and then all at once. The whale whose stomach I descended into was named "Experience and Trial."

In the fall of 2007, I was living in the suburban outskirts of St. Louis, comfortable in my bubble of childhood optimism, when my parents approached me during one of my toy car launched reveries with world-shaking news.

"Alec, we're going to be moving soon," My father intoned to my young ears.

"Okay," I squeaked my uninterested reply. This tone persisted for some time with me.

"And we wanted to let you know so that you can say goodbye to your friends before we leave tomorrow."

"Alright, I'll do it later."

My parent's eyes met, eyebrows raised at my readiness to pull up roots. To me, however, this bomb-shell announcement projected nothing more than the static backdrop to my Hot Wheels masterpiece. Before my parents released me back into the throes of my Chinese-manufactured masterwork, however, I finally managed to redirect my eager eyes towards their expectant expressions: "To where?"

And thus raced forward the most explosive chapter of my life. Not the most exciting situation, or the most influential lesson, mind you, but the most *explosive* period of change and growth I will ever know. The only homes I had known before this turning point were isolated neighborhoods in Missouri, and my only sense of the grandiosity of civilization was the path to and from the miracle of the slushie machine at the local Chevron. This shift in the backdrop was our move to Ireland, a less-than-tourist destination I had never heard of, much less anticipated moving to as a self-obsessed six-year-old. The ensuing dialogue with my parents reflected to my mind the vastness of my world, enchanting my child-sized appetite for adventure with tales of humanity's unavoidably large diaspora and conquest. I learned to read during this voyage, and voraciously devoured the knowledge that my still-childish mind was starved of as an illiterate. The monumental change in my setting was clearly the mechanism that threw my woozy mind into gear for this brave new world of



ideas and that imparted to me the priceless gift of an irresistible hunger for knowledge.

The premier discovery of my time as a Dubliner, however, was that of a foreign culture. The very new idea that people were different than me blew my mind at that age. My cookie-cutter perception of humanity was obliterated by the revolutionary realization of the existence of millions of lives going on around mine, my own being a proverbial drop in the torrent of humanity's priorities. I realized this sense of empathy and sympathy on a playground in St. Stephen's Green every morning before school. On my way to the school, I would wander through the quiet park, and encounter the same man every time. The bread man was a staple of life in the park, a roaming dispensary of feed for ducks and geese that cultivated and populated the park. For me, he was the tear, the keyhole I could look through where the illusion of adults being automatons intent on ambition, failed. His clothes were worn, his eyes were shining, and his air was of a content man. He had very little, and yet his only goal was taking care of others. Suddenly, standing alone in the middle of a grassy expanse, I oriented myself towards a new worldview devoid of clockwork men and women; they were replaced, as they were, by complex and distinct motivations exacted through our bodies. People became *real* to me, replacing the cardboard cutouts that provided no sense of empathy. This interaction was the empathizing experience I needed to cultivate my perception of humanity.

My life up to my move to Ireland was meaningful, but it didn't feel *real* to a point. The realizations gained from my alien experiences helped shape my sense of priority and empathy, and its lessons were, to me, essential to bringing my reality into focus and pulling me out of the fog of ignorance. These lessons drive the reasoning behind my selection of this period of my life as the most shaping experience to my worldview today.



A State of Mind : by Macey Miller

## Mallory

That first morning at camp is one I will always remember. As soon as I saw her, I knew something was off. She staggered up the stairs to the cabin, her tangled, greasy hair pulled off her forehead with a purple headband. The dark circles under her large brown eyes were an extreme contrast to her pale, white face. I remember how she coughed, covering her mouth with the oversized camo T-shirt she was wearing.

"My throat hurts," she said. "I don't feel good and I just want to go to sleep."

She leaned her head backwards and began to cry. The tears flowed down her face as I led her down the dirt hill from the cabin to find help. Just after we crossed the old wooden bridge, she mumbled with broken words, "I think I am going to throw up."

I whipped around as she began to vomit. The only thing I could think to do in that moment was to hold her hair back. When she finished, I rushed her to the health hut. The whole way there I was bothered by one strange detail: her vomit was blue.

That night after dinner, I returned to find Mallory sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of the health hut, sipping Gatorade. The nurse saw me climbing up the hill and as I walked up the steps she called me inside.

"How is she doing?" I asked the nurse.

"I think she is just homesick," she said. "Let me know if she gets worse or something else happens, but for now she is perfectly fine to go back to the hut for the night."

"But why was it blue?" I asked.

"She must have eaten some blue candy or something before this happened. She's fine."

Later that night, I awoke to a light tapping on my shoulder. I rolled over on my bunk to find Mallory standing there.

"I just threw up again."

I sighed and reluctantly rolled out of bed while another counselor, Brooke, returned Mallory to the health hut.

Trying not to wake the other sleeping campers, I used my flashlight to weave through the line of bunk beds. As I came to her bunk, I noticed something poking out of her sleeping bag. A small box was poorly concealed within the wrappings of her sleeping bag. My heart began to race as I opened

the nearly empty box, only to find a chewable medicine tablet crushed on the bottom. It was blue.

I quickly rushed to the health hut where I found Mallory lying on the old wooden bed; the nurse and Brooke standing by her side. I handed the box to the nurse.

"Where did you find this?" she asked. "Campers aren't supposed to have medicine. Their parents should have registered it when they passed through this morning during check-in."

"We didn't know that she had it; her mom didn't say anything about it and neither did Mallory. I just found it sitting on Mallory's bed. I think she ate all of them."

The nurse lifted her hand and covered her mouth. She quickly walked over to Mallory.

"Honey, where did you get this?"

"My mom gave them to me for my cold."

The nurse and I looked at each other in shock.

"Mallory, have you eaten this whole box of medicine today?" the nurse nervously asked.

"Yes, my mom told me to."

The nurse rushed out of the room, studying the back of the box. I just stood there, frozen, unsure what to do next.

After a moment, the nurse walked in and said, "You can go back to your hut. I am going to monitor her overnight and call her mom and figure out what to do from here."

That was the last time I saw Mallory. Her mother came and picked her up the next morning. In the days that followed, I was bombarded with questions.

"How did she look when she came to camp? Did you notice any bruises on her? What was her attitude like at camp?" the directors asked.

I asked one of the directors later that day, "Why is everyone asking about Mallory?"

She looked at me and sighed, "We suspect that Mallory is being neglected at home."

When I recall that July night, I feel sorrow and guilt rushing through me. I hope and pray that I was able to care for her and make her feel important, feelings I am not sure that she had felt before. I hope that my feelings of frustration and impatience were not evident to her. I do not

## EMMA CULHANE

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know what became of Mallory, but I do know that Mallory has changed my life forever. I hope that, even if only for a moment, I made Mallory feel like someone cared.



Innocence. : by Macey Miller

## Time is a Gift

The woman paced outside of the door, glancing back at the room constantly. She rubbed her tired eyes, then ran her fingers through her long hair. She noticed the bland walls, tile floors, and the clean smell that filled the air. She always heard the creaking karts racing down the lonely halls and the endless, steady beeping of the machines. Suddenly, the door began to open slowly; the woman heard his heavy footsteps, and her eyes were glued to his. The doctor fell into a trance and looked down, fidgeting with his knuckles. With his muscles tensing, he took a deep breath and then shook his head slowly. The woman immediately dropped to her knees and buried her puffy face in her hands.

"Why can't we get this right," she said, looking up. "I can't keep doing this. I can't keep getting my hopes up every time. I can't keep believing that things will improve and that our circumstances will change. Our time is limited."

"They will improve; each time we are making substantial progress. Things will--"

"What progress did you make today then?" She said looking at him hopelessly.

"We accessed a part of the brain today that we have not been able to access before."

"What does that help? It didn't change anything, right?"

"Not today it didn't, but we have plans to go back in tomorrow to get it all out," he said.

"That's what your goal was today, and the day before, and the day before that. I'm afraid we are running out of time. Soon he will start to lose more of himself than he already has. He was such a bright boy just three weeks ago. I'm still in awe how this could've happened. How couldn't I have noticed sooner. I feel guilty, as though I should have known. I should have realized what was happening; it's my duty."

The doctor shook his head again. Putting his hand on her shoulder he said, "We are doing our best, I am doing my best, you are doing your best, and he is doing his best. This is just a process. But you hope for the best because that is all you can do, and that is all you have. Time is a gift." Suddenly, the doctor's pager began to vibrate excessively, and he gave the woman a hug before walking quickly down the hall.

He turned around, looking back at her and said, "Tomorrow will be a better day; it always is."

The woman followed him with her eyes until he turned a corner. She peered in the door at her

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## HOPE METHVIN

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helpless son, connected to various beeping machines. She couldn't bear it. She couldn't bring herself to enter the room. The woman quickly turned around, unable to face him. Then, she fell into a daze, tuning everything out except for the steady beeps of the machines. She stood there with her head down, staring at the lifeless floor. Soon she noticed the beeping speeding up over time, and she heard the metal-clanking of the creaking carts as they rushed down the hall. The carts came quickly into the room, and she stepped out of the doorway. She took her jacket off as her face flushed red. She was escorted to sit in the hallway. The last thing she recalled was the sound of an everlasting, eternal beep.



Through Her Eyes : by Harper Cook

## Blessings

I opened my eyes slowly, squinting, avoiding the sun's broken and jagged rays that shone through the dull, gray blinds. The dust particles soared through the space above my head and gently fell upon my sheets like fresh snow falling onto a thick layer of ice. I sat up, stretching, yawning, wondering about what the rest of my day would hold. I pulled the sheets off my body and turned to face the side of the bed, but my legs were struggling to move with my abdomen. It was as if they made up my entire body weight. I reached the edge and slowly lowered myself down to the seat I had prayed would vanish just twelve hours before. My ever-increasing wonder and curiosity about the possibility of the day dissolved at that instant. Uncomfortably, I sulked to the bathroom where I attempted to look at the mirror but only looked at the wall. I was not tall enough to see above the bottom of the mirror while sitting down, which discouraged me even more. I was in a wheelchair.

I thought about that day. It had been a cool, breezy day in late October of 2014. The leaves had just transitioned from a dull red to a light tint of brown, revealing it was time to descend. The starter raised the gun in the air—a few silent seconds that held excessive amounts of anxiety, nerves, and hope. We were lined up on one mark that stretched across a brownish field, clenching our fists and shuffling our feet. The flag went down as the gun went off and the race began. The nervousness faded with the echo of the shot and smoke in the wind. I moved up in the ranks but made sure to stay in a pack. I took the inside corner of a turn, running over some roots that were springing up from a dry, sad tree. I didn't think twice about taking that route but then, suddenly, I felt a piercing surge up my entire left side. I limped around the tree and saw my coach. He wasn't disturbed by my awkward stride and continued to yell, encouraging me to persist. His words, "We need you Harwell!" resounded through me, enlarging the small amount of courage and strength I had left. I glanced at him for a moment as my body moved unevenly and broken; I knew I was injured, but I also felt inclined to fulfill his expectations. I pushed on, never considering the possible outcomes and consequences for continuing that race...until I did.

It was a cold, depressing room with fluorescent lights that reflected off the tile floor. I peered down at my feet while the doctor barged in, thinking I could avoid hearing the detrimental words.

"Surgery will be necessary." The words stumbled out of the doctor's mouth clean and smooth as though he had rehearsed it.

"But you said I had an eighty percent cha--"



“I said you had an eighty percent chance of running again, but would probably never reach your initial potential,” he interrupted.

“We will think about it,” my mother slowly let out while digesting the news. It had been five months since the day I broke my foot, and I was casted for two of them. Anger and frustration overwhelmed me and the happiness and hope of running again vanished with those simple words. They rang through my head. The desire for competition drove me insane... I needed to be healthy again.

Fast forward three weeks past the surgery and six months after the horrifying race. I slowly spun the wheels of my chair out of the bathroom, bumped into the doorway, and continued towards the staircase of my house. I stopped at the top and looked down the terrifying pathway ahead of me. After emerging from the chair, I lowered myself to where crawling was possible and requested my father’s assistance, “Dad, can you bring the chair down?”

Not waiting for a response, I proceeded with my mission and my dad passed me about halfway. As I carefully moved my legs down to a lower step, different thoughts and emotions overcame me. I hated being injured, helpless, and forgotten. I lowered another step. I felt alone and angry at everyone. The daily journey downstairs devastated me; it was the constant reminder of how far I had to go until I was healthy and could race again.

That spring break my parents tried to make something positive out of a terrible situation. My dad pushed me around while my mother was close by; children ran beside me, dragging their parents along in order to see the animals. We managed to overcome the hill leading to the orangutan exhibit. Most of the apes were born in that cage, taken care of, but had awakened every day to the same thick inches of glass and expected to perform for the faces waiting on the other side. Their expressions were gloomy and mouths sank to the ground as they moped around the rocks. While I concentrated on the monkeys, I felt the presence of another chair come up beside me. I saw tiny, young hands reach for the railing in front of us. It was a simple task but also quite difficult for someone of her age and physical stature. Annoyed, I swiveled my head to see the person that had broken my intense gaze. It was a little girl in a chair slightly more advanced than mine. Hers was cherry red, but her legs seemed strangely skinny for her body: she was born that way. There we were staring at the same exhibit, in chairs, and at the very front of the line to see the excitement, but she was different than I was: she was in that chair for life. She was different because she was smiling, she was exuberant, she was happy—happy to see the monkeys, happy to be with her family, happy to be at the zoo. I questioned how she could be so content despite her condition. The amount of joy and happiness that stretched across her face was immeasurable. I did not know her name, nor her exact disability, but being in her presence lifted my spirits and made me want to act like a child. She made me

want to smile, grab the rail, point my finger, and shout about how there were massive beasts only a few feet away. I remained in my position, as did my new friend, and we adored the monkeys as they moved around the exhibit. After some time, the little girl's parents pulled her chair away and I peered through the space between the crowd as her bright, cherry red chair faded away.

Seven months later, the feeling of the wind in my hair and the competitive drive while racing gave me confidence and joy once again. The result was not great but I felt free and excited. The final steps to my return were in sight, but this time, instead of crawling, I walked with the happiness of the little girl. I remembered her—her positive mindset and gratitude for the blessings she had been given. I stumbled over to the table where water was being distributed and I poured it down my throat. I saw my parents approaching and could not hold back the smile that already covered my face. The sweat ran down my cheeks, my calves were burning, dried saliva wiped across my mouth: I was back.

There is no such thing as a perfect life that produces only success and joy; life is bumpy and gruesome. I was hurt, on the verge of quitting, but a girl, whose situation was *much* more difficult than mine, continued to strive. She continued to find happiness and recognize her blessings. She was grateful for what she had and did not let her emotions, condition, and thoughts discourage her. The girl never appeared distraught and in despair but remained vibrant and eccentric, enjoying the life that she was blessed with and therefore encouraging me to never squander my blessings.



Purple Haze : by Fox Wagnon

## Reliving Past Generations

Driving along a dirt road up to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the gray clouds weighed heavy in the sky. The air was chilled and dank. My heart pounded with grief as I saw for the first time with my own eyes the iconic entrance to the camp. Seeing modern-day pictures and even pictures from the war had not prepared me for this. Getting off the bus, I could not take my eyes off that entrance.

My father, whose father had once inhabited this very camp as a prisoner, joined me on this trip. Walking alongside the infamous train tracks leading into and going through the camp, I could feel the history radiating off the tracks--the thousands of people who had been shoved into cattle cars, terrified, separated from family, starved, and delivered right here. Thoughts of the thousands of prisoners who had come here on these very tracks ran through my head, and I was speechless.

We walked through the main portal under the tallest point of the long building that guards the camp. As I stood at the front of the camp, everything came into view: the one railroad that becomes three, the open area where prisoners were sorted, the two sides, each lined with tall electrified double barbed wire fences curving slightly at the top, the electric nodes lining each concrete fence post, the wooden guard towers lined up along the fences, where SS officers once stood, ensuring death if one misbehaved. Looking to the right, beyond the fences, the remains of the old barracks stood. All of them were destroyed, but their chimneys still remained. To the left, more barracks stood, some of which still appeared to be intact. Then, I saw the vast openness upon which nothing was growing, as if the earth knew that something terrible had happened here.

We began to take a tour of the camp. The guide led us to the sole train car parked at Auschwitz. He said around 70-80 people were crammed into one of these cars for transport. I had always heard this number and I knew the cars were cramped, but I did not expect it to be as tiny as it was.

"Do you remember how Grandpa described his experience on the train?" my father asked me.

"Yeah, a little," I quietly responded.

"Well, they didn't know where they were heading to. After 3 days, their train stopped in Auschwitz. He talks about how cramped the cars were. They decided to either sit or stand, and that's how they were for 3 days. With a few loaves of bread to feed 80 people for 3 days, half the people died before they even got to the camp."

"I still can't believe how little the car is."

We continued to walk through the open dirt ground where every prisoner of Auschwitz had

gotten off their train car, not knowing what to expect. We finally got to the spot where “the Angel of Death,” Dr. Josef Mengele, once stood, deciding with one look and one crack of his whip whether someone was to die immediately or be worked to death. At this spot, many families saw their loved ones for the last time. I looked left and right, at two separate ways that once led to two different fates, and I thought of my grandfather, separated from his mother, father, and younger sister in this exact location.

I had a hard time understanding the immense courage and perseverance it took to survive this traumatic experience. *Would I have had this courage to endure what my grandfather went through?* My grandfather experienced courage every day when he faced gnawing hunger, watched his loved ones experience pain, felt an overwhelming fear of the guards, saw friends march into the gas chambers, endured the nauseating smell of death, and knew that he could face the gas chambers at any moment. After experiencing trauma in the concentration camp, my grandfather had to have courage to wake up everyday in Birmingham, Alabama, remembering these horrific times, to make a meaning of his life afterwards, to share his story and relieve each and every memory, and to live with the guilt of being the sole survivor of his family—this is what true courage looks like. This is a generational courage that he has displayed in his daily life and that my father, my brother, and I have brought into our lives.

We continued on to the destroyed gas chambers, located at the end of the long stretch of barren ground. We saw them both—complex killing machines. Those who were pointed to the left by Dr. Mengele took a short walk here, to their death. These structures that killed so many were destroyed by the end of the war, but their rubble still remains today.

“Even after 6 times, it never gets easier coming here,” my rabbi said to me with tears in his eyes. We gathered at the international monument to those who perished in Auschwitz. There were seven plaques on the monument, each containing the same message in a different language. In English, the message reads, “FOR EVER LET THIS PLACE BE A CRY OF DESPAIR AND A WARNING TO HUMANITY, WHERE THE NAZIS MURDERED ABOUT ONE AND A HALF MILLION MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN, MAINLY JEWS FROM VARIOUS COUNTRIES OF EUROPE. AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU 1940-1945.”



Caged : by Lizzy Walker

## The Tiger Fight

The summer going into 8th grade was an unforgettable one. I finally made the basketball team, grew a few inches, went to the beach a few times, and made countless memories with friends and family. Though all these were great, there is one part of that summer I will never forget.

I still have the text my friend Grayson sent me one hot summer day, asking if I wanted to drive down to Lake Martin with him and his family for a few days. As soon as I saw the text, I flew into my mom's bedroom, nearly slipping as I came to a halt. Grinning ear to ear, I eagerly told my mom about the proposition Grayson had made. I had never been to Lake Martin before, and she decided to let me go. It ended up being a really enjoyable trip, but there is one memory of it that outlasts all others. I'll never forget when Grayson introduced me to one of his close friends, Sid Ortis. From the moment I saw him across the lake, screaming and laughing while doing 360s in his jet ski, I could tell he was a cool guy.

We instantly became friends and could not be separated the entire trip. From the time of that little excursion to the end of the summer, we became closer and closer, becoming pretty good friends by the time school came around. But then, during the last week of summer, something unexpected happened. I was laying in bed watching TV when my mom walked into my room. Hesitating in the doorway, she called out to me, "Hey, James. Can we talk?"

"Yeah, what's up?" I replied.

"You know your friend, Sid? Something has happened to him."

"What are you talking about? What's wrong?" I uttered, concerned and confused.

"Sid... Sid was diagnosed with osteosarcoma this morning."

"Osteo-what? What does that mean?"

"Osteosarcoma. It's a rare type of bone cancer. Sid is going to have to start chemo within the next few days. The best thing you can do right now is be there for him. Send him a text, ok?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm on it."

I was absolutely dumbfounded. I could not comprehend how this joyful, energetic friend of mine had contracted this terrible disease. I visited him later that day and we talked for a while. While he was a little more serious than usual, he could not help but continue to laugh and smile and crack jokes. As I left his house and headed towards the car, my jaw dropped and I ran my hands through my hair, trying

to comprehend how Sid was so calm. In the face of a life-taking disease, he was calm and relaxed and had no fear or worry about him.

The grueling rounds of chemo began shortly thereafter, and I was worried they were going to eat away at him slowly and steadily, like an anaconda wrapping around its prey. I had heard plenty of stories about the side effects of chemo and the physical and emotional toll they took on their patients, and I was concerned. But through weekly visits and late nights at the hospital, his true fighting spirit was revealed to me. Through all the pain he felt, all the throwing up, and all the headaches and enormous pills he had to swallow, he attacked it all with a spirit of fearlessness and courage. He was never scared, of anything. And I mean anything. There was one night at the hospital when he was feeling particularly sick and threw up six times. After the sixth time, he sat up, laughed, and said that cancer was no match for "the mighty Sid."

The giant machines he was hooked up to did not faze him. Their frequent beeps and buzzes instilled fear in me but went unnoticed by him. The endlessly long needles in his shots were no more than little finger pricks in his eyes. He attacked the chemo head on and never looked back, and he never felt sorry for himself. We talked a lot and he was in a happy, joyful mood just as much - if not more than - all of my other friends. He never used his condition as an excuse for anything or let it define or control him and he had his eyes on the future.

Whenever Sid was able to come home for a few days at a time, we would hang out. We saw movies, went to places like Breakout Birmingham, and rode around the neighborhood in his golf cart, terrorizing little kids. I often found myself forgetting he had cancer. Besides his baldness and knee brace, I would never have been able to tell he was even sick. In the face of adversity, Sid stood up, never lost faith, never lost hope, and persevered every step of the way. Even with everything going on around him, he was always so relaxed and joyful and could fall asleep so easily and was never too worried about anything. I started looking at my own life and my tiny problems and the way I often let them control me. Without even specifically mentioning it, he showed me how I should face adversity and handle my problems.

As the months passed by, I saw Sid's physical condition deteriorate. Though his body was weak, his spirit was strong. Whenever bad news came, he would throw his hands up and proclaim that everything happens for a reason. He had a way of turning bad days into good days. His unwavering resilience and faith shocked the community and eventually parts of the nation. He encouraged me to be a stronger person by having faith and never giving up and attacking my problems head on, as hard as I could. That is exactly what he did throughout his fifteen-month journey. Not once did I see his fighting spirit waver or accept defeat. Even when death came knocking, he stood taller than ever, which inspired me to stand tall in my own battles.



## JAMES CHILDS

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Though the progressive disease may have eventually taken his life, Sid showed me what it truly meant to win the battle and he changed the way I live today. He fought like a tiger, which just so happens to be the mascot of his favorite football team. I now take on challenges with a fighting spirit and fight my battles with faith and resilience. And Sid is the reason I do it.



Trees : by Sally Reed Creveling

## A Frightening Night

We were all sitting there, waiting on the police to come while the hotel was flooding. We were in Atlanta for an AAU basketball tournament, and we had already won both of our games that day. To say the least, we were pretty amped up. We decided to head up to our hotel room to rest for a little. However, resting didn't last for very long when I felt a pillow slap me across my face. I looked to see my two roommates, Sed and AZ, laughing uncontrollably. I knew I had to do something, so naturally, I found the nearest pillow and threw it at Sed as hard as I could. I took off for the door, trying to avoid what I knew was coming. When I turned around to face him, he paused for what seemed like hours. Finally, he swung his pillow in our direction, but he didn't hit us. Within a split second, high-pitched sirens sounded, and I felt water pour over me. Sed had struck the fire sprinkler. In complete shock, we could do nothing but sit there. We all knew that we had messed up. We were so scared that we just sat there until my dad came running through the door to help guide us out of the room. When we walked into the hallway, we noticed that it wasn't just one fire sprinkler going off — it was all of them. The whole hotel was on its way to being flooded, and it was all our fault. The fire department showed up shortly after. In the moments that followed, my friends and I were nervous. Three huge men, wearing yellow jumpsuits, began asking me questions about what happened. The only thing I could think about was the constant ringing of the fire alarm. Finally, I explained what happened to the firemen. To my surprise, they didn't believe me. They said the only way the fire sprinkler could be set off was if someone was smoking. I was 15, playing with up to 16 year olds at the time, so smoking didn't even cross our minds. The firemen kept pressing us about, asking if we had been smoking or not. Meanwhile, the sprinklers were still going off. The whole hallway was now covered in water. The firemen were trying to figure out how to turn off the the water supply to the hotel. It had now been an hour since the sprinklers started going off. Other guests from the hotel scowled at us as they walked by. Now, my teammates and I waited. We waited for the FBI investigator to come and determine how the fire sprinkler was set off in the first place. Sitting there, scared out of my mind, I began to think about what going to jail would do to my future. I wouldn't be able to get a job or get into college.

While I was thinking, a tall, domineering man walked toward us with a stern look on his face. As he was walking towards us, the alarm and sprinklers ceased, almost like he controlled them. On his belt buckle I could see his FBI badge. My stomach dropped. He motioned to my teammate to come with him into the room. After what felt like hours, my teammate came out of the room bawling. I was even more frightened now. It was then time for my other teammate to go in. He was the one who actually hit the sprinkler. Thirty minutes went by, but he was still in there. He had been in there for longer than my other teammate. Another thirty minutes went by and then he finally came out. As he walked out,

he looked directly at me with a blank look on face, shaking his head. The FBI investigator motioned for me to come in. As soon as I got into the room I saw my dad. Having him in there with me gave me a sense of confidence. The FBI investigator demanded, "Tell me how all of this happened." I told him the same thing I told the firemen. He then pulled out some handcuffs and threatened that I could be in them because of a mistake my teammates and I had made. He kept asking me the same questions but in different ways. As he was talking, I started to think that if I could show him the pillow we hit the sprinkler with, then that would be enough proof to show him how the sprinkler was set off. I began to look around the room and sure enough the pillow was right where I thought it would be. When I showed the pillow to the FBI investigator, he turned to my dad and told me to go into the hall. There, my teammates and I were stuck, waiting again. They finally came out. The FBI investigator explained the magnitude of our mistake but assured us that we wouldn't be going to

jail. Now it was up to him to see how all of the damage to the hotel was going to be paid. That was the last I ever saw of him. Even though I was never arrested, the experience of almost being arrested left a permanent impact on me. To this day I still think about how different my life would have been if I were actually arrested. This experience taught me many lessons, but the most important one is to definitely watch out for the fire sprinklers when having a pillow fight.



Restricted Freedom : by Margot Midkiff

## Distractor

When my mom broke the news to me, the realization of never getting to see Skip again sent shock waves through my mind. Tears flooded my eyes without hesitation and my hands flew to cover my face. My mom held me as we sat on the bed, crying together for my Dad who had lost a father, and for ourselves who had lost a grandfather and a father-in-law. She slowly dragged me into the living room and to the familiar faces of family members gathered together to comfort one another. The warm embrace of my grandmother, my mom's mom, only made my body more limp as I sobbed into her shoulder.

"Anna Catherine," I hear my brother whispering. "Skip died."

"I know Christopher," I said harshly, between sobs. My mind raced with a million different emotions, but my little brother's innocence about the whole situation brought a scowl to my face. He didn't understand what had happened, so he didn't have the same crushing blow of the loss as the rest of us. He simply heard the news and could not comprehend its impact. Somewhere in the midst of the many emotions racing around in my head, I heard my mom telling me to get dressed to head to my grandparent's house. I drifted back to my room, going through the motions of getting ready for the day. I stopped to stare at myself in the mirror and thought of how pitiful I looked, how my grandfather would never have wanted to see me in this sorrowful state of mind.

The 15-minute car ride dragged by, as if it would never end. I stared out the window and remembered seeing my grandfather the day before, after his heart surgery. His weak and frail state in his last few days was nothing like the strong man who always joked and laughed throughout life. These last memories of Skip were stuck in my mind like a broken clock hand. I did not want these to be the only memories out of the 15 years I had spent with him that I remembered.

When the large brick house came into view, I suddenly jolted out of my fantasy. I climbed the driveway and slowly made my way up the stairs, sensing tears on the verge of flowing, but I held them back. I entered the house and locked eyes with the first person I saw, my cousin Holly. We both immediately broke down again, embracing each other and not wanting to let go, trying to hold onto the memories of Skip and the happy times we had with him instead of the chilling sadness that now pierced the air.

As the day trudged on I could sense people tiptoeing around me and the other kids, not knowing for sure how we were handling everything and not allowing us to be included in certain conversations which they figured we were too young to hear. I longed for a distractor from my misery, someone to cheer me up. I saw Emily coming over to me and Holly a few minutes after we had stopped bawling

our eyes out and calmed down a little bit. Emily, Holly's cousin on the other side of the family, sat down next to us on the couch. None of us knew what to say, but the awkward silence that filled the air only lasted for a few minutes, as we soon became comfortable and began to chat casually.

"So, have y'all seen the new Pretty Little Liars episode?" Emily asked.

"Oh my gosh yes, it's so good," I reply.

"I can't believe that we found out who A is, the show's gotta be over now right?"

"I doubt it, honestly they just keep making twist after twist and dragging the story out."

Emily and I laughed. Talking casually for a minute lifted my spirit, since so far the day had been unbearably serious. Throughout the rest of the day Emily, Holly, and I continued to laugh and enjoy each other's company. I felt my body slowly being pulled out of its slump, and the pain I had felt this morning slowly began the process of fading away. I never thought about the irony of laughing on such a sad day. I couldn't help but smile as I looked around the room, seeing aunts, uncles, cousins, mothers, fathers, and children all interacting with each other and supporting one another in the most vulnerable of times.

Before we left, I glanced at the pictures of my grandfather that had been set up in the living room. I stroked the thick gold frame surrounding a photo of the big, cheery man whom I had known and loved. My heart ached for the loss of Skip and I kept thinking about what I would do if I had gotten just one more day with him. I felt a hand on my shoulder as the tears once again began to well up in my eyes. I turned around to face Emily whose arms pulled me into a hug. In that moment a sense of calmness washed over me, and I knew that with my family by my side, I could make it through these tough times in life and come out even stronger.



Newbern House : by Vann Walthall

## Broken Glass

"It's done," the man calls out, as he staggers into the apartment. It is a dark, musty apartment with a kitchen add-on and a bedroom. The floor tile is cracked and a single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, which barely illuminates half of the flat. The kitchen has dishes piled up in the sink. The man is pale, with a slight tremble in his voice. His eyes are puffy and red, and his pupils are dilated.

"You sure it's done, Joey?" a voice replies from across the room.

"Yeah I'm pretty damn sure, Seth," Joey snaps, as a grimace begins to sprawl across his face. A moment passes, as Joey begins to stumble to his recliner.

"How are you feeling?" asks Seth.

"Horrible... Just horrible," replies Joey.

"Sit down, let me get you a drink. The usual?" asks Seth.

"Please, God knows I need it right now," remarks Joey.

"It got to you huh?" asks Seth.

"Of course it did, I can't stop thinking about it. It's all I've thought about for the whole night, " declares Joey.

"You need something strong then?" inquires Seth.

"Only the best. I'll probably just throw it up again though," Joey giggles, as he starts to gag.

"You're cleaning that up," says Seth. Another moment passes as the two sit in silence.

"Hey man, come in here and I'll make you a drink," says Seth.

"What?"

"I said come make your drink."

"Oh, right."

Joey pulls himself out the recliner and continues toward the kitchen. He sways with each step, and glides his hand across the countertop.

"You know, everyone has thought about doing it at least once, but you were brave enough to actually



do it," says Seth.

"That wasn't bravery, that was a mistake. A horrible mistake," Joey states. He pulls a glass out of the cabinet and fills it with ice. He then pours his drink, his hands shaking.

"You should have killed her sooner to be honest," Seth remarks.

"Shut up Seth," Joey exhales, as he grips his glass and takes a sip.

"No, really! In fact, you should be awarded for it. Like congrats dude, big props," Seth replies.

"Damn it Seth, I said shut up!" Joey screams as he slams his glass against the counter, causing the glass to shatter into his hand. Blood trickles on to the white countertop. Booze mixes with blood as Seth snickers at Joey.

"It's okay, you can just have another drink," Seth patronizes.

"I don't want another drink!" Joey slams his fist against the counter into the shattered glass, "I just want my life back." Joey begins to stumble back to his recliner, tears developing along his eyes. He slumps down into the leather cushions as he closes his eyes.

"You know, this won't matter in the grand scheme of things," Seth chortles from across the room, "None of it does."

"Maybe you're right," Joey smirks as he wipes the tears from his face. "Maybe you're right," Joey grimaces. "Maybe you're right," Joey says as he leans back into his recliner. His vision begins to blur, and his lonely single room apartment fades to black.



Cracked : by Anne Heaton Sanders

## My Own Future

I remember when I joined band. I was smaller, dumber, and not taking it seriously. Now, though, I have been irreversibly changed by this band. Becoming a section leader certainly made me become more aware of how I should act as a role model, and playing bass has forced me to take initiative, but I would say the real push was during my sophomore year. As if the stars themselves had decided to align, my life changed. See, a lot happened last year, my first year of actual high school: the inevitable drama, and my grandiose transformation. Sometime in early autumn, when the heat had not yet left the South, my band director, a stout man with eyes that seeped back into his face and cheekbones that came out like plateaus, stepped up onto the platform. The chaotic adolescents slowly quieted down as a few distinct voices lingered in the air. After a hush fell throughout the room, silent anticipation built up in each person. My band director looked around one last time before opening his mouth.

“Listen, you guys need to realize that you have to start caring, or else I can’t do anything to help you. I don’t think anyone in this room doesn’t care—if you don’t, get out—but if you do, then you need to show it. Show me that you care, because right now you aren’t. Do you understand that? Guys, I try so hard for you; if I could learn these parts for you I would, but I can’t. It’s your show. This show will be affected by you. I can yell and scream and get up in your face, but that doesn’t change the fact that you are the ones marching and playing Friday.”

The man’s speeches never fell flat, always honing in on an important point that affected all, so when his voice rang through the then chillingly silent air, everyone was struck as if by a bullet. No one had not heard a similar speech before, but still his words found a way to crawl into our thoughts. I began to think on this more than usual, and I let the words seep into my life. The next day during marching band, it was hot. The type of hot where it feels as if you could never be cold again, with sweat dripping all over my face and my cheeks turned vermillion. The trombone I held felt fifty pounds heavier than it was, and my feeble arms were straining to hold the trombone up with each passing second. My feet trudged through the now dying grass as the distinct smell of a mowed lawn and teenage sweat and body odor wafted through the air. The band director was cleaning up sets and his face was turning red from more than just the sun. The heat blared down on us as if it had a vendetta, the air remaining stagnant without a single breeze. We fell into straight lines, marched, and reset so many times that it felt as if we were in a 2016 remake of *Full Metal Jacket*. The words kept ringing in my head from before, and I began to practice differently. Before, I had been practicing so that my upperclassmen could have a good show, but I didn’t have any particular feelings towards marching

band in all honesty. Now, I had started to feel the need to push through for myself, not others. As we pushed through practice my arms grew weary, my breath short, and my forehead sweaty.

"Move to the next set," the band director shouted. "Turn around and march it back."

And we did march it back. Like cogs in a machine we did our jobs, but like cogs once again, the band was simply doing what they had to do: no more, no less. This would have been fine if everyone was doing what they should have been doing perfectly: right notes, right rhythms, right step size, stepping in time, hitting their spots. But they were simply moving and playing — few doing more, and many doing less. I suddenly felt something boil in my stomach, like a vile ache coursing through my body. The need to take action pushed through, but I knew my place and remained quiet. We then marched through the same set, going in a connected train of vertical lines, following the person beside us. The band director ordered us to play our music while marching. The cacophony of noise came over the field as we stumbled our way through the loosely connected sets. I stepped off wrong, and it gnawed at me as if I had committed a heinous crime. Each wrong note, each misstep, each mistake was grasped in my mind and held onto for dear life. My lack of water and aching arms mattered less and less.

Once practice ended, I hung out with one of my close friends. His uneven shave stood unnoticed by the owner. His puffy cheeks were a red hue as he turned on the ignition.

"Hey," I uttered to grasp his attention.

"Yeah?" He replied, looking at me out of the corner of his eye hurriedly and then back onto the road. His hands moved rigidly in awkward motions as we turned onto a new street with cars close behind.

"Does it bug you when people don't put in all their effort during practice?"

"A little bit, yeah."

"Because, like, the other day I was talking to this flute player and they were, like, 'I just don't play because I don't care during stands tunes,' or something like that. I don't know. That really gets to me, you know? Like, I used to not care but now it's starting to really get at me. You feel?"

"Yeah I get 'chu."

"I don't get it. I mean, I understand that marching band isn't like everybody's top priority, but they could at least put a little effort into it. I just don't understand why they wouldn't."

"Yeah, I don't know," he offered, shifting the way he sat, his eyebrows crinkling together and his lips,

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## SYDNEY PORTER

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ever so slightly thinned, turning downward.

"I just get frustrated when I see that people make the active choice to not do something when they could. I understand like not doing homework because you could be doing other things and I'm super lazy. But, like, they are there for practice and they just aren't doing it. And during the games when someone doesn't play a stands tune on purpose even though they are just there. It doesn't benefit them not to do it. I don't know. I just don't get it."

"Yeah, I don't know either."

The conversation shifted into a new direction after that, and I arrived home a few hours later. I jumped onto my bed and fed my time with mindless games and reading. The boiling sensation had now quelled, but it never fully disappeared. I watched the hands of a clock ticking by and finally decided something. I never wanted to feel those vile feelings so strongly again, and from now on, I would begin to work for a future I truly wanted to see.



In Light of Imagination : by Rica Hecker

## Forever Home

The waiting room seemed darker than before. As the young missionary found her way out of the winding hallways of the bare hospital, she passed a dozen people with confusion stretched across their faces. They watched her stumble out of her doctor's room, her face as white as the bleak walls throughout the building. She didn't mind the disease; it would go away soon. It was the doctor's orders that she couldn't comprehend. She couldn't listen to him anymore. She would go back to Panama whether it killed her or not. She didn't meet Sebastian and become his *mejor amiga* only to leave and never see him again.

She bought the tickets that night. Before her mother even knew she had taken her credit card, before she could stop her from leaving. She packed her two bags, one of her own clothes and another filled with donated crocs and old t-shirts for her Panamanian kids. Early that rainy Sunday morning, she called herself a taxi to the Birmingham Airport. She left a note for her family telling them she would be back. She boarded a small white plane, filled with tourists and natives. She found her seat squished between an old man and a college football linebacker. She regretted not wearing more comfortable clothes when she felt the stale, itchy seats underneath her. She began writing out exactly what she would tell Sebastian.

"I was very sick when I got home and the doctors told me I have malaria. I got it either from a mosquito here, or from swimming in the Rio every day with you," She wrote in her journal. "They have given me medicine but I am immune to the vaccine, so I could get bitten again and be much worse the second time." She felt her eyes burn as a single tear fell from one side onto her cheek. She had to stop writing and take a moment to breathe. Since she left the hospital on 23rd Avenue South, she had yet to stop and take a moment to realize what she was doing. She had just left her mom without warning and then hopped onto a plane, hoping for the best. She dreaded the seven-hour public transportation ride she would have to endure when she arrived, but at least she would be in Panama. That was all she could tell herself to keep calm. She drifted off to sleep, forgetting to finish writing her conversation out for Sebastian, and more importantly, forgetting to translate it. She was awakened with a sudden jolt and her head pounded as the plane landed. She waited for every person to exit before she took a deep breath, stood, collected her things, and walked off the plane.

She arrived at the airport hotel just in time to board the public transport bus to San Juan. She squeezed in the last available seat, with luggage pressing against her body on every side, digging into her back more and more with each bump in the road. The bus traveled from San Juan to

Boquete, Boquete to David, and finally, David to Cieneguita. Hope filled her eyes as she made her way down the old dusty road with crocs that were worn thin as paper. She suddenly forgot what she had come to do, and all she could remember was her love for this community.

She got off the bus, left her baggage on the side of the road, and ran straight to Sebastian's house. She knew he would be home because it was already 5:47 p.m. and school ended at 5:00 p.m. Sebastian heard her voice and ran from inside faster than he had ever run before. The two best friends stood there holding each other for what seemed like hours. There in that moment, she made the biggest decision she had ever and would ever make. It was a lucky thing she had only booked a one-way flight.



Head and the Hand : by Anne Heaton Sanders

## New York, 1976

Fourth gear. The engine went quiet for a second while James went searching for it. The engine whirred back to life as the gear clicked back into place. He removed his foot from the clutch and took his hand off the gearshift, placing it back on the wheel. It was 5:09 am on a Sunday, and James still had a cigarette in his mouth. He shifted as soon as he heard the calibrator go over 5000 RPM; it was pure instinct at this point. Fifth gear, fourth, third, second. James expertly matched the clutch control with the braking as to not stall. He hit the apex of the turn. A weak smile, a puff of smoke, and a gentle shift of weight on the gas. Third gear. He tossed the cigarette over the top of the convertible, not thinking about where it was heading. It shot right over the clear, curvy, red rear end with the black canvas top inside. When leaving the party earlier that night, James would have been too drunk to put the top up, even if he had remembered to. Ever since his mother died and his marriage became rocky, this became his escape. Alcohol, nicotine, and THC was his way out. Not too far in front of him, a semi truck appeared. James thought it was odd for a vehicle like this to be here this early in the morning. He reached inside the left tartan pocket of his Baracuta G9 jacket and got out another cigarette. In the right tartan pocket he got out his father's old army lighter from Korea. James planned to light the cigarette after he passed the truck. He sped up to the rear of the truck, right into its blind spot. James moved his head to the left, even though he couldn't see anything. He started drifting the car slightly to the left to peek around the massively big trailer. It was clear. James downshifted into second gear. He pressed lightly on the gas pedal and started to move from the left rear side of the truck. Before the former Porsche racing driver had time to react, the semi slammed on its brakes and obliterated a deer coming from the right side. A beautiful red mist splattered on the front of the Ferrari, the fresh blood almost matching the Rosso Corsa paint. James barely clipped the truck, but that was more than enough. The bloody windshield cracked and then shattered, throwing glass all over James's face and hands. The car started an aggressive slide to the left, sideways along the road. Going 80 miles per hour, rear end of his car hit a tree, tearing it completely in half. James flew from his destroyed 1961 Ferrari 250 GT California Spyder, hurling out through the side window and onto the cold, dark road. His body landed with his head looking straight up, straight through the trees. The sun lit his cigarette.





Aging : by Macey Miller

## That Picture

It was a cool Saturday morning in the fall, and just like any other Saturday in the fall down south I was watching football on my back porch. I was accompanied by my longest and best friend by my side and we were drinking our regular cup of Folgers Gourmet Blend coffee. I got up for a second to add an extra splash of half-and-half to my not-quite-sweet-enough coffee. I added a dash of cream and slammed the fridge door closed to return to my spot outside, completely overlooking all of the childhood pictures of my sister and me on the fridge. When I walked back outside, my dad asked me to pour him another cup just the way he liked it: a dash of cream and two teaspoons of sugar (even though I knew he really liked a little more). I walked back inside to do so, but this time I stopped at the fridge a minute longer to actually study those pictures. They were the typical family photos magnetized to the refrigerator that you would expect to see. I could only smile seeing my sister and me playing in the backyard, my first and sweetest dog Lucy, all of my cousins, and of course any picture taken on any holiday. But on my last glance before bringing my dad his coffee, a picture that I had seen a thousand times caught my eye more than any other. It was the one of my sister and me sleeping when we were just about the ages of four and seven. This one was different. Why would my dad want a picture of us sleeping? We aren't smiling or doing anything worth remembering in the picture, but I knew my dad, and he had a reason for it. Closing the door leading to the porch behind me, I asked my dad why he had taken that picture of us and why he had put it up on the fridge. He paused for a second before he answered my question and began to smile. "Because when y'all were little and your mother and I had just gotten divorced, I wanted to be able to tell y'all goodnight on the days that y'all weren't with me," he answered back. When I heard the reason why he had that picture posted to the fridge, tears of splendid sentiment began to stream down my cheek. My initial feeling was wistful, but almost immediately a rapture of love and warmth overwhelmed me. Hearing his explanation only proved how devoted he was as a newly divorced father and how much he loves my sister and me. Some conversations in life you will find that you never forget because of the impact that they make on you, and this was most certainly one of those. After passing by that picture for so many years I found it hard to believe that I could miss something so tender and so sweet.



Butterfly : by Sally Reed Creveling

## East to West

The room was dim and the sun rose outside in the city. Light finessed through the blinds, into the room. My eyes opened as pain shot through the right side of my body. I took three deep breaths and counted to six in my head: one, two, three, four, five, six. At this point in my life, everything felt hopeless. I had been in the hospital for over two weeks now, recovering from my chemo. Simple actions that normally would have taken no thought whatsoever, now required all the strength in the world. Minor things became a struggle. Nothing tasted good. Television was monotonous. Jokes were no longer funny. I found it hard to concentrate. My head turned to the left, looking past the chemical-infested pouches at the door. The silver handle shifted clockwise and slowly it opened. A woman in a powder blue gown with a blue medical mask appeared. She brought a wheelchair into the room. It was time. The first obstacle of the day was here.

“Are you ready?” She said.

I nodded, trying to hide my fears, as she walked over to me with a wheelchair. Her cold hands pulled my body up and turned me towards her. I hoisted my legs up and placed them on the floor. Now I had to stand. All my energy focused on my lower body as I straightened my knees and lifted my chest. My body dropped into the chair. It was finally time to go.

The nurse rolled me out of the room and into the hallway. Bright lights dominated the clinic; it was white as snow. I sat in silence as I was pushed passed the rooms. My body moved closer and closer to the door. Slowly, blurred letters turned to words: REHABILITATION. A chill shivered up my spine. The door opened slowly. A treadmill in the middle of the room struck fear into my heart. The nurse clamped the brakes on my chair and walked in front of me.

In soft words, she spoke, “We can take this one step at a time.”

Reluctantly, I agreed. My chest filled with air and my eyes squeezed into my head. My feet planted in the floor and we counted down.

“Three...Two...One.”

I grunted as my muscles, which hadn’t moved in weeks, ached. My waist lifted off the cushion as I stood with her help. She moved to my right side, holding my hand. The treadmill was only a few feet away. I lurched forward, stepping onto the black rubber belt. My feet lifted one at a time, positioned on the treadmill.

Although I could have lied to her, I said, “I’m ready.”

My fingers gripped the handles as the tread rotated. My brain focused on each foot. Silence eclipsed the room into a deep outer space. Then I heard a click from a CD player in corner of the room. Before I even realized it, a soundwave propelled into my ears. A soundwave that would change my life forever. The guitar's strings smoothly soothed my pain. After the beautiful melody stroked the air, my nurse started to mumble in rhythm with the words of the song.

*"Sometimes I feel like I don't have a partner. Sometimes I feel like my only friend is the city I live in, the city of Angels. Lonely as I am, together we cry."*

More phrases hung up in the air as my soul dwelled on the first lines.

Her voice grew louder. *"I never worry, now that is a lie..."*

Suddenly a chord strummed my heart and a tear the size of California trailed down my face. The drums created a beat that made my heart thump. Each step became easier. My feet became lighter. I felt as if I were a cheetah and no one could stop me. Every single word meant something to my life. I realized that there were others like me and I couldn't quit. I couldn't stop.

My strides became faster and I sang, *"I don't ever wanna feel like I did that day but take me to the place I love, take me all the way."*

Nothing was in my way. I felt like I was sprinting in the street. I closed my eyes and imagined myself running, surrounded by light. My ears heard the final words of the song from my nurse.

She sang now with a loud, beautiful voice, *"Under the Bridge downtown, I gave my life away!"*

The speed on the treadmill now slowed down to a complete stop. My heart broke into a thousand pieces as the nurse helped me step off the treadmill. I faced my wheelchair. The nurse's cold hands on my arm now felt warm.

"Let's get you into your wheelchair," she said.

"No," I replied, "Let's walk. That would make me feel better."



I'm Here : by Molly O'Neill

## Rambling West

*We don't know how large our world is*

As of writing, I have arrived at Sheryl and Robin's house in Riverside, California. Summer Break started a week ago, and I'm glad that I don't have to spend it cooped up in Garden City. I think that is why Sheryl moved out of Kansas, there's nothing to do there.

Immediately after the train left the station, the stifling air drove me to the dining car to get something cold to drink. The dining car was cooler than the coach I was in, so I decided that I would stay there a while. I got my drink and started reading that book Mom and Dad gave me for my birthday. I kept reading until we stopped in Lamar, Colorado, to let more passengers on. It wasn't the screeching of the wheels or the commotion of people boarding and deboarding that made me look up from my book, but instead it was a bright alto voice asking politely for a drink. My head inadvertently jerked to find the owner of this voice. And there she was, in the seat across from me. She was nonchalantly glancing around the car. My heart stopped. Paralyzed, all I could do was not make eye contact. To avoid her gaze I looked at her neck length, sleek platinum blonde hair, pulled neatly behind her ears. Then I looked at her clothes. She was wearing a pleasant sundress with a tasteful floral pattern; it complimented her modest form. I looked at her shoes; clean white sneakers. I looked at her face. Her hair framed her soft face perfectly. The corners of her rouge lips were tucked into a friendly smile. A small crook in her nose caught my eye. I ran out of places to look, so I moved to her eyes. My heart started again. A pair of large, shimmering green eyes were staring back at me.

"Sharla, nice ta meetcha!" She extended a petite hand. She had on multiple slightly tawdry rings that were just a little too large for her fingers. Still in somewhat of a daze, I extended my hand.

"Hello. Um... my name is Redd." As we shook hands, the stone side of her rings turned towards her palm and poked mine. She held onto my hand for a moment, then allowed for the handshake to be over.

"I hope you didn't mind me sitting with you. You just looked so lonely," she laughed. I looked around; there were five empty booths where she could have sat.

"So Sharla, where are you headed?"

"I'm going to Hollywood to be an actress!"

"Really?"

"Yes, Really! Don't you believe me? Just because I don't look like an actress doesn't mean I'm not one!"

She looked like an actress to me. "That's not what I meant. I wasn't sayi..."

"Oh, I know. I was just playing. So where are you going?"

"I'm staying with my sister and her husband in Riverside for the summer."

"That's wonderful!" She was absentmindedly twirling the rings on her fingers. I don't think it was a bored fidget; I'm certain that she was fully engaged in our conversation. But come to think of it, she seemed to move around a lot.

She was magnetic. That's the only way I can describe her: magnetic. For hours we sat at that booth, talking and telling stories like old friends. Subconsciously, I think we both knew we were trying to pack a lifetime of stories into that train ride. The looming fact that we probably weren't going to meet again drove us to speak quickly and reach deep into our souls for things you only say to somebody in the shadow of midnight. Every time the train would turn a bend, I feared that the train station would be there waiting for us. But then I would see Sharla out of the corner of my eye, and she would bring me back to the present, back to her. There were constant reminders of how brief our time was: the setting sun, more passengers getting on and off, our glasses stacking up.

"Passengers, we will be arriving in 5 minutes. Please make sure that..."

I stopped listening, I didn't want to hear it. Sharla and I just looked at each other for a moment. The inevitable came, yet we were both surprised. My neat little fantasy world slipped away when I found out how unbecoming sadness looks on Sharla's face.

"Sharla, I..." I stammered.

The announcer interrupted my mumbling: "We have now arrived! Thank you for choosing Amtrak. Due to the rain, the steps may be slippery. Please be careful getting off the train. Again, thank you for traveling with us."

Sharla reached into her purse and scribbled her phone number on a napkin and gave it to me. I looked at it and put it in my chest pocket. We gathered our things and got off the train. I used a payphone to call Sheryl and Robin to come pick me up. After I hung up we left the station and walked to the nearest bus stop in silence. We were silent anyway. There was lots of splashing and chatter and din, but we didn't dare say a word. Neither of us brought umbrellas; we didn't expect the rain. How naive of us.



## CULLEN (CLAY) HARKINS

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The bus came sooner than either of us wanted.

“Call me when you get the chance. Goodbye for now, Redd.”

“Good luck, Sharla.”

She got on the bus and waved at me through the window. The bus pulled out and she was gone.

I picked up my bags and walked back to the station. People were looking at me when I crossed the threshold. I looked down and saw why.

My clothes were drenched from the rain, and there was a black smear over my heart. I already knew what it was. I pulled the napkin out of my shirt pocket and it crumbled in my hands.

Maybe I’ll see her on the big screen one day.



Marbled Infinities : Caroline Underwood

## Premeditated Prejudice

Hargis Retreat was a yearly routine. And a retreat it was: a mile wide pond with a beaver dam and slithering backpack trails through the woods of Chelsea, Alabama. At Hargis, I learned that forgetting to bring a deck of cards is far worse than forgetting to bring a cell phone, I learned that cleaning up the fishing hut is worth the seat at the only air-conditioned table in the cafeteria, I learned that eating five hot dogs is always acceptable (after a ten mile hike). Finally, I learned that the quiet ones never come back.

Her name has long since left my memory, but her face is unforgettable: she was freckled from her forehead to her chin and had hair the color of a fox's coat. Her sharp blue eyes never squinted: not even at the sun. And she smiled only when she wanted you to know something. She told elaborate stories like the time she went to Egypt and a pharaoh's son dared her to climb one of the Great Pyramids. Or when she went to China to find out if they really do eat dog meat on kabobs. She believed her stories better than we did. And, oh, was she mean. She flipped lunch trays and canoes. She dumped backpacks in the garbage. She stole valuables and she stole boys' hearts. Quiet, she was not, but she never spoke of her real life at home. She wouldn't tell us how she got all her bruises. She wouldn't tell us why her "parents" never pick her up on time. She is the first person I ever had trouble reading. One day, I was brave enough to talk to her when I caught her gazing at a patch of yellow, dried up grass: "What are you thinking about?"

She couldn't even bring herself to let out a breath. She seemed spaced out one minute and the next minute she was completely immersed. I hated her for it. She was an enigma.

We were all given 15 minutes of extra pool time on a random Wednesday. My favorite counselor, nicknamed "Hero" ever since he got the job, was our standing lifeguard. The fight for a spot in the deep end of the pool began with the blow of a whistle. An array of colorful bathing suits and pool noodles jumped into the water all at once. Feet kicking, arms leading, lungs pumping; I reached a spot along the wall to pull myself out of the water. Standing proudly, I faced the other swimmers with my toes curled over the edge, hands on my hips, and watched as some flipped into the water and some floated on top. Caught in awe of the scene, I felt fingers touch my back and a sweet, yet raspy voice in my ear say, "Think fast." The fingers turned into palms and before I could think to take a breath, I hit the water. Seconds passed, and I gulped enough water to start to panic: I thought I was going to drown. At full tilt, Hero dove into the water, hoisted me on his shoulder, and helped me climb out. I coughed and sputtered out every chlorinated drop. I looked up from my pathetic pud-

## LAUREN ELGIN

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dle and there she was, smiling her smile. I was maniacal; my neck was ablaze and tears were welling in my eyes. In my rage, I threw my chin up and marched towards her until we were face to face. Immediately, she flinched hard and her eyes flashed from fierce to afraid. Taken aback by her sudden impotence, I asked, "Did you think I was going to hit you?" But the fear left her eyes and the iciness returned, and she said nothing. Then the whistle blew and I never saw her again.

Her body was found early the next morning behind her home. A single gunshot to the head had decided her demise. I avoided hearing the details; I was already horrified by the images in my head. All I could see were images of her, but she looked dead. It crazed me knowing I had seen her in full color the day before. Rumors spread and by the end of the day, her death had somehow become an inside joke. It disgusted me that no one else could understand how real it was. She had been living with a maid and a man; neither of them her kin. The maid only fed her, and the man only left marks on her: dark, painful marks. And he murdered her.

Murder: the word was too much for me; I could not grasp it at the start. Sick with guilt, I hated myself for hating a girl who suffered through hate in the first degree. The girl had not gone a day in her life without fearing someone. She must have known that there was something missing in her life that should have been a birthright: the right to speak out. She was taught and raised by violence and had no sense of family. She was only eleven and damn near to being an independent person. Swarmed with realization, I finally understood that the antagonism, the superiority, and the spite were all her ways of protecting herself because it was all that she had ever known. But I never wanted to pity her, because God knows she would give me Hell.

After her death, the summer ended. By then, I started to question the goodness in people. I started to look for those that were hurting on the inside, hoping to save them. I stopped making assumptions that people didn't want my help. I stopped, or at least did my best to stop, being ignorant. My understanding of tragedy and real struggle has come from what I have seen in the flesh: she hid her vulnerability and suffering out of fear of being weak. Survival was her ultimate fortress, but it was raided and stolen from her. Had she not been killed, there is only so much saving I could do. Hell, there is no telling whether she wanted to be saved. But I refuse to call her a lost cause. Injustice is served. May she rest in peace and God bless her tilted grave.



floating : Camille Ford

## The Screening

"They'll tell you what to do when you get in there," the head nurse assures me as she ushers me out of the ambulance and towards the overwhelming crowd of people. I'm thrown into the chaos and I maneuver my way through the elbows and bags.

Past the bobbing heads and sweaty shirts, I see the makeshift building on wheels in front of us with the red words "Melanoma MayDay" pasted on its side. A packed staircase reaches from the ground to the front door of the building. Winding down from the top of the staircase, underneath the white umbrella shade, and past the end of the building into the park, snakes an immense line of people, all waiting for their free melanoma screening. The nurses weren't kidding when they said they needed reinforcements...and now.

"Scuzi, pardon," I excuse myself to the top of the stairs. I feel their curious eyes searing through my skin, wondering why I'm blonde, why I look so different and foreign. Romanians are used to darker complexions and brunette hair, but my mother was the odd exception: a fair-skinned blonde. She married an equally pale and blonde Texan when she moved to America so now, even though I'm half-Romanian, they can always tell me apart.

I turn back and flash big smiles at them, trying to act friendly but probably further isolating myself with my unusually enthusiastic grin. They say Americans smile too much and for no apparent reason. I self-consciously soften my gaze and walk through the doors, greeting the nurses on the way in while trying my best to cover my exotic accent.

Once inside and working, I temporarily forget my anxieties as I focus on the task ahead. I help patients fill out their preliminary forms for the screening and I sit by the older citizens, reading the questions aloud to them and carefully articulating the Romanian words as not to misspeak and embarrass myself. Although they understand my questions and respond with ease, I feel them analyzing the sound of my voice, tuning out my questions and evaluating another problem at hand: why I'm different. And they're all about the blunt commentary.

"You're accent's so weird," they remark. "What are you? Swedish? English? French?"

One old lady shouts across the room, "Who's this Moldovan? She speaks like a Moldovan!" The ultimate Romanian insult.

I'm Romanian, I want to say, like you. But I know it's not completely true, so I smile and hide my

frustration, trying to explain myself as quickly as possible and get back to the urgent work ahead. People are waiting outside. Instead of getting ready for their own melanoma screening, the patients are screening me, evaluating me, and then diagnosing me with something likened to an isolating disease: difference.

The “disease” proves less lonely as the screening progresses though, and soon I’m engaged in conversation with people all over the room. They bombard me with questions: “Which one’s better? America or Romania? How many celebrities have you seen? Have you been to the White House?” They’re intrigued by my life and they’re curious about America. Some quickly relate by telling stories about their family in America or recalling trips to the White House and National Parks. Others only know America from movies and TV, but they all have something to contribute. Old men glow and sit taller, remembering youthful travels, and young teenagers radiate energy as they imagine future adventures. Soon I realize that through my inherent feeling of apartness, I eventually reach togetherness, and although I was scared to be different, it becomes exactly what makes me feel connected. While my diagnosis may have been “incurable differences wherever I go,” my prognosis is most definitely a course of deeper unity and connection with people both alike and different, from Romania to America, and to the rest of the world beyond.



mixed : Camille Ford

## From a Window Seat

Once that ache starts there's no stopping it. The tiny ball of tension, glowing at first with miniscule discomfort, magnifies to a flame and radiates throughout my lower back. Trying out hundreds of tiny contortions to lessen its hold, I squirm in all ways possible within my designated space. My efforts are fruitless, as always, and I've accepted defeat. This is what my life is now. We must've hit hour ten.

Interstate 40 stretches in front of me for the gazillionth time in my life. Its sun-bleached surface contains a story of tire tracks and skid marks from a million other cars. It's easy to wonder how many words are our compositions. Is that our skid mark from the time mom slammed on the brakes to avoid an armadillo? The echoes of my squeals as Coke icee rained over my head, landed in my lap, and coated my then ten-year-old hands in a sticky film, are almost detectable still. The icee stains the car roof above me, mimicking the one we've now left behind, imprinted into the road. This is our fourteenth pilgrimage from Birmingham, Alabama to Ute Park, New Mexico where we will live out the next few idyllic weeks, undoubtedly the best of the year. All the memories of my greatest adventures are set in the New Mexican mountains, but not one of these adventures occurred without first an unextraordinary road trip out west. Twenty hours of hell for three weeks of heaven.

The 2000 Honda Pilot is as old as I am. Its once luminous patent leather seats are now dulled from constant messes and worn buttery soft by the three teenage girls currently occupying them. I've acquired the throne. I sit in the one seat of the way back that is not occupied by suitcases, and the seat directly in front of me has been pushed down as a footrest so I can relieve some of the soreness that motionless hours incite. Parker and Addie are sandwiched together, positioning themselves as far away from each other as possible. Throughout the years we've grown too long to be seated side by side by side, an unruly tangle of limbs. The bickering over whose hand crossed whose invisible boundary line prompted this ingenious setup. I'll have to surrender my coveted seat to a sister within the next hour or two, but until then I will savor the feeling of elongated legs and satisfying solitude.

From my seat I can see the whole car. Mom snores in the passenger seat, loudly. She's dreaming of hammocks and treehouses. Without mom there would be no cabin. No growing up in the summer through wilderness excursions or late night campfires. The cabin is my escape, but it's her home. Though she's from Oklahoma I can't picture her teenage self, curly mane flying free, anywhere else. She's made of New Mexican dirt, baptized by the Cimarron River. Her bones are the Ute Park vanilla pine tree branches, and her blood is Clear Creek waterfalls. I guess that's where I get it. We all love

the cabin, but mom and I can't survive without it. Granddaddy built the cabin at sixteen, thirty years later sixteen-year-old mom was being built by the cabin, and now thirty years later sixteen-year-old me is hurtling towards my own personal construction zone.

Dad is a different story. He sits in the driver's seat as far back as he can recline with an audio-book blaring through his headphones loud enough so each word reverberates around the car. *God he's going deaf*. He's learning about astrophysics at 2x speed, while monitoring the angles of the shadows the sun makes as it strikes the Texas plains around us and calculating the electromagnetic spectrum created by the refractions of light hitting our silver hood. Tomorrow he'll perfect his guitar technique on Little Wing or Karma Police, his fingers will flow with the music rather than with the mechanized accuracy of his brother's. He's the smartest person I'll ever meet. Dad and I aren't connected through cabin planks and hiking trails like mom and I, we are tied together by poems and guitar strings, by intense curiosity and overzealous explanations, by Wilco and Gladwell. The melody swirling in my brain right now was introduced to me by my dad, and my love for music, a defining aspect of my personality, is of his cultivation. No one touches the aux cord but John and Ella Cobbs. Maybe it is our love for music that translates into our love of language, or maybe it's the opposite. He can shape a few words into an intertwined maze of complexity and beauty better than anyone I've ever known. He is my greatest teacher and I am his most devoted subject. It's impossible to pick out every story and masterpiece concealed within his head as we continue down the interstate. He carries almost 40 more years of experiences than I do, and all of a sudden, the silence within the car feels like a wasted opportunity to hear one. But there will be time for stories at the cabin, and dad is off in his own galaxy of new knowledge, and this song is really, really good.

This could be the last road trip I make with Parker for a while, and though she's two months away from college, she's essentially gone already. I can crane my neck just enough to read her rapid-fire texts before they're swallowed by the replies of a million best friends. She doesn't want to be here. The jolt of sadness that freezes in my stomach isn't because she doesn't want to be with me, though I have spent the last sixteen years trying to befriend my mythical older sister. I'm not disappointed because she doesn't share the same obsession for this trip as I do, but I'm upset because this is one of those moments. As eighteen-year-old Parker spells out her disdain for our excursion, ten-year-old Parker, the enthusiastic leader of the nighttime game group, slips further into memory. This is one of those moments when our legs are too long for the car because we've shed our stubbier ones. This is one of those moments when I feel myself physically grow older. My hair grows longer, the creases between my eyebrows are slightly deeper, my love of gummy bears decreases minutely, we are getting older, and I am terrified. Parker isn't sitting in front of me anymore, she's on campus with new friends, her new family. I see her almost every other weekend, then its every holiday, then just the big



## ELLA COBBS

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ones until she's hosting her own Thanksgiving dinners. The phone clutched in her hands morphs into a tiny version of herself, a tiny version that needs changing and burping and feeding, but she's good at it. She continues to age in front of me until she yells at me for snooping over her shoulder. We're back in the car, she's back on the cusp of adulthood, and I find myself thankful we have so many hours left.

Addie, just barely a teenager, broods over her current lack of space. She's whined for the past two hours to closed ears that my feet are too close to her elbows, or that someone stole her gum, though the electric-apple wad in her mouth, the size of an actual apple, begs to differ. The connection that will bind Addie and I together hasn't fully formed. It's increasingly hard to relate to someone who's being molded by the things that molded me another lifetime ago. The language between us is mostly composed of taunts and jabs, trying to see how far we can make it under the other's thin skin before dad turns around. I can't see her in the future; she's a blurry silhouette of herself, defined by nothing significant yet. I don't know what she'll love, or where she'll end up, and I'm not sure if she knows either. She is still a flowing personality, morphing into alternate versions of herself with every situation, lacking the restraints created by an understanding of personal beliefs. She's not a moral-less monster, her mind just hasn't hit puberty. It would make things a whole lot easier if she had, though.

Once we've crossed the New Mexico state line, the car is continually pumped with electrical excitement. State lines have always been an odd concept to me. What makes the sides, sliced into division by an invisible line, so different at that one place? Is the dirt in New Mexico that much richer, or are the tumbleweeds in Texas that much larger to create a separation in identity? The five of us are currently confined within our own state lines. We are all off somewhere completely different as we continue deeper into the New Mexican mountains. In a few hours, though, our divisions will dissipate. The cabin will weave us into a patchwork quilt. We won't be John, Katherine, Parker, Ella, and Addie; we'll be the Cobbs for a brief stretch of the year. When we pile back into the car, the boundaries will reform. When we unload the trunk and unpack our suitcases in Birmingham, we will return to our individual involvements and the walls will be rebuilt. The car is a state of transition. Now we are not yet whole, and in a few weeks, when I sit back on the throne, we will not yet be separated. The lack of finality is comforting, and for the first time in the past two days the ache in my back has subsided; I'm not quite ready to get out of the car.



Open Feathers : Simona Shirley

## Relief

Dr. Ley's office is cold. So cold they actually keep blankets on hand for patients. That's ridiculous to me. There's no reason for it to be that cold. The only other doctor's office I've ever been in that's this cold is when I had a sleep study done, but that made sense. The sensors attached my head wouldn't work if I sweated, so it had to be cold in the room. I can't think of any reason for an oral surgeon's office to be this cold on a Friday in February.

My mother stands next to me as we wait for the doctor to come in. An assistant had already been in. She said she would show the X-rays she took to Dr. Ley, and that combined with him getting a look at my tongue would determine whether or not I would need surgery. But I heard her talking to the other nurses and assistants outside, talking about how scary it was, how young I was. When I called to make the appointment, on the referral of another oral surgeon who didn't take our insurance, they informed my parents I wasn't allowed to eat past 6pm the night before. We all know I'm here for surgery.

When he enters, the first thing I notice about Dr. Ley are the wrinkles above his eyes. I remember the brochure I read in his waiting room. He had a child die at 14 years old, from an unspecified "accident." I wonder if my age has to do with his look of concern. I'm only a year older than his son was.

"Okay," he says. His voice is smooth and calm as milk. "Let's see that tongue."

The look of surprise and then confusion is the same look I've already received from my dentist, orthodontist, and another oral surgeon. The entire middle of my tongue is consumed by the mysterious growth. The Thing is the color of dead underbrush after a forest fire in the middle, and a swollen, sickly yellow ring surrounds it, representing the area the necrotic tissue will spread to next.

"When did this first appear?" Dr. Ley says.

"Monday," I reply.

His blue eyes cloud over. "Fast-growing," he says. I nod.

He lets out a small sigh. "Okay," he says. "I'm going to suit up for surgery, and Jenna here will get you all hooked up on drugs."

I offer a strained smile as he leaves the room. My mom moves out of the way so the assistant can set up the table of surgical tools and the I.V.

"Do you want nitrous oxide or I.V. first?"

I decline the laughing gas because it makes me nauseous. The I.V. is cold as it goes into my arm. As the anesthetic enters my veins, my entire body feels heavy and I begin to giggle. My mom's face, frozen in worry before, blossoms now into a wavy smile. The world swims through liquid. I can feel my consciousness slipping by the time Dr. Ley enters and my mom gets kicked out.

"I love you," my mother says as she leaves. I can see the tears in her brown eyes, my same brown eyes, big and round and scared. The world fades to black.

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I wake up sobbing in a small, dark room. I think they keep it dim at first so that patients aren't immediately overwhelmed by bright lights.

"Where's Dad?" I blubber, except that my tongue is now swollen to the size of a grapefruit, so it sounds something more like "Mneh muh?"

The nurse somehow understands my incoherent sobs, and goes to get my dad from the waiting room. I don't know how long it's been. My dad gets down on one knee beside me, grabs my hand and smooths a few stray hairs away from my face with his other hand. My dad is an ex-Marine, and it isn't often I get to see this incredibly soft side of him. Outside the room, I can hear Dr. Ley speaking in hushed tones with my mother.

"The results of the biopsy won't be back for about another week," he says quietly. "I've never seen something like this before... I wouldn't be surprised if it is cancer."

My dad stops petting my hair and instead wipes away tears off my cheeks. "You did great, sweetheart," he says. "You're doing great."

It's cold and way too sunny outside. My mom and my sister help me into the backseat of the big Suburban, which barely fits in the tiny parking space. At home, my sheets are cold, but my grey sweatshirt and matching sweatpants insulate me. The sunset comes through the thin curtains drawn across my window, casting a faintly pink-orange light across my room. My mom tucks herself into my sister's bed across the room and reads.

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It's dark. I hear screaming—ear-piercing, bone-shaking screams of pain. My mother leaps out of my sister's bed and comes to my side. "It's okay," she says in a soft, barely awake voice. We struggle to get the pain pill and the accompanying anti-nausea medicine past my swollen tongue and down my

throat. She hurries downstairs and returns with a Firecracker popsicle, which I hold on my tongue to soothe the swelling and pain until it dissolves.

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I wake to Parks and Rec playing on the television my father had brought into my room. The gray sweatshirt and sweatpants are gone, replaced by a pair of pajama pants from Disney World and a T-shirt. Spit is caked down my face and throat. Standing over me is my mother, holding a pudding cup and a spoon. Her voice rings dully in my ears, forming no tangible words. My head feels heavy and my body feels empty, uninhabited. I close my eyes again.

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The anti-nausea medicine keeps me asleep. I wake up when the pain medicine wears off or when my struggling-to-heal body has been far too deprived of food. I have only eaten milkshakes, pudding, and applesauce for five days now, and I am sick of them.

“When was the last time I took the pain medicine?” I ask my mother. Except my tongue is still a bit swollen, so it sounds something more like, “En as the latht thime I thook the paim medithin?”

“This morning, at about nine,” my mother replies, looking up at me from her iPad. “Why? You need some more?”

“No,” I say. “I wanna try just Advil.”

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It’s been a week since my surgery. There’s still a gaping hole in my tongue held together by taut stitches, and I still have virtually no feeling in the area surrounding it, but I’m off the pain medication. Today, my mom and I are going to try going to the Galleria Mall. The bedrest and uneasiness of not knowing the results of the biopsy have given us both cabin fever, and now that I’m off the meds we can finally get out.

We’re on our way to the Galleria. Ordinarily, my mother would never agree to shopping trips for fun. But we’re both desperate for something to keep our minds off of the lack of news from the biopsy. My mother had called, and Dr. Ley had said the longer the results take, the less likely it is to be something bad. Sounds fake to me.

“What all are we gonna get?” My mom asks. I shrug.

“I don’t know.”

The steady buh-bump, buh-bump, buh-bump of the car as it drives along an overpass lulls us both into the silence of our thoughts. I gaze out the window and watch the city of Birmingham pass me by. Water drips down from my hairline from my freshly washed hair. It felt good to shower this morning, even if it made me a bit dizzy. I hadn't showered in more than a week before that.

The Galleria is quite empty midday on a Friday, except for a group of kids obviously on a long-haul school trip. They all have matching blue shirts on. My mother and I browse the rows and rows of clothes and doodads in Forever 21, not really looking for anything. We point out how ridiculous some of the mannequins look and laugh.

"Are you hungry?" My mom asks as we walk out of the store empty-handed.

"Yeah," I reply. The world has started to swim a bit before my eyes, and I can feel the corners of my vision going black. I stop for a moment to regain my balance and consciousness.

"Maybe we tried to get out too soon," my mom says. I nod.

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We're sitting in a drive-thru line at a Chick-fil-A when the call comes in. My mother gets tears in her eyes as she smiles and nods along with Dr. Ley's voice on the phone. It's been a week and a half, and my mom had just picked me up from a half-day of school. Though my stomach is eager for its first full meal of real solid food, my heart overrules it, anxious to know the results of the biopsy. My mother hangs up the phone and kisses me on the forehead.

"I love you," she says. "It's not cancer."

"I love you too," I say. "Now, let's eat."



Abduction : Fox Wagon

## Rebirth

"I'm tired of trying to see the good in people." I shouted as my strongest contraction hit. I gripped the handle of the car as I yelled again at the cab driver, "IT'S THE NEXT RIGHT!"

He hit the accelerator and made a swift right. The tires screamed against the asphalt and then came to a halting stop in front of the "Labor and delivery hall" I took a \$50 bill out of my purse and gave it to the slightly panicked middle aged man. My bare feet went past the automatic door, and I hit the cold tile floor of the hospital. A nurse met eyes with me and immediately dialed for assistance. I was soon greeted with a heavily used wheelchair, and I set my 39 week pregnant body in it. My forehead was beaded with sweat and my lower torso continued to throb in pain. I layed back my head and watched the tiles pass me like clouds in fast motion. My emotions started to hit realizing I was soon to become a single mother. I can't help that my ex fiance decided that is was ok to have a side chick, and leave his pregnant girlfriend behind. I'm done seeing the good in people, I repeated to myself. No more men for me. Another contraction hit as I entered the emergency delivery room. I was put into a paper gown and placed into hospital bed with my feet propped up, and spread far apart. The time was here. A small statured nurse with her hair pulled tightly back told me that it was time to push. My fingernails clenched into my palms and my eyes scrunched together in pain. All I could think about was how I didn't want my son to end up like his father, or to end up like any man I've ever know. My mind emptied and my body did all the work. I pushed one final time and suddenly the extreme pressure was released. I felt my body collapse in exhaustion, a feeling of overwhelming joy traveled through my veins. My pupils dilated and then began to fill with tears. The nurse grabbed my newborn son and placed his fragile, red- tinted body into my arms. His warm cheeks pressed up against my chest and his high pitched wail filled my ears. I embraced my son with a feeling I had never felt before. And for the first time I saw good in a person.





Mad About the World : Molly O'Neill

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# Poetry

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Road Trip : by Lizzy Walker

## The Poster

Almost,  
if not all,  
girls' bathrooms have  
The Poster.  
The one that says what sexual harassment is.  
The one with  
all the phone numbers.  
The one with  
all your rights as a female student  
listed right out for you,  
as if you needed  
some generic poster from the 90s  
to tell you it isn't okay  
for another student to harass you.  
But The Poster  
doesn't say anything  
about the bits of conversations  
overheard in hallways.  
What am I supposed to do  
when I hear someone say,  
"She can't say no when she's drunk,"  
if I don't even  
know the name of the guy who said it?  
Besides -  
it's my word against his.  
Whomever I report him to,  
he will deny it.  
Maybe I heard him wrong,  
maybe somebody else said it.  
This boy *obviously* respects women,  
and he would *never* drink  
underage.  
It's the same with the guy  
who puts his hands uncomfortable  
and unwelcome places  
on my body in the hallway.  
It's over in seconds -  
there are at least 5 guys in my vicinity.  
The hallways are very crowded between classes.  
And if I report the boy who asked me  
what I do with my boyfriend  
that makes him so attracted to me,

then there will be no way for me to prove it.  
And of course,  
all of these boys  
probably play a sport.  
Investigating him  
for sexual harassment  
could ruin his prospects for a college career.  
Yet,  
somehow,  
when I look at the record for other college athletes,  
I don't think  
even if I could prove it,  
it would ruin anything.

There is no Poster  
telling men  
it isn't okay  
to harass women.  
Only The Poster  
which tells women  
it isn't okay to be harassed.



Those Days Are Over: by Margot Midkiff

## The Garden

Red roses bloom softly in the calm spring air,  
No bruise, blemish or single tatter.  
For the gardener, the protector, raised them with care,  
Watches the wind take their petals and kindly scatter.

Snowflakes fall gently upon the white queen's eyes,  
Her red rose kept over her heart.  
She promises her sister she will no longer cry,  
And rewinds time back to the start.

Black Kitten soaked from the rain,  
Beauty or beast even she doesn't know.  
Thinking of a lost love who once brought her pain,  
It's time for her too reap what she has sewn.

Yellow Beauty who once burned so bright,  
An angel's laughter never growing old.  
Now lying awake in dim light,  
And left to extinguish in the growing cold.



Costiera Amalfitana : by Hayden Jones

## New Year's Resolution

I  
when my grandmother found him  
he was already dead weight.  
6'4" man  
my 5'2" grandmother trying to lift him up.  
first she just wanted to get him  
sitting in a chair  
then she thought she needed to get him to the hospital.  
finally  
she realized she wouldn't be able  
to get him up off the floor.  
she got dressed.  
she called the ambulance.

we don't know how much time we lost  
in those moments.  
it could have been minutes.  
it could have been hours.  
she says she never once  
looked at a clock.

II  
my father isn't there to pick me up from camp  
he sounds distressed over the phone.  
he tells me mom will explain it all when she gets there.

III  
my mother tells me  
as we sip on our milkshakes on the ride home.  
*stroke*  
she says.

it's another 24 hours until he wakes up  
a day or two after that when he speaks again.  
the doctor says "listen"  
and my grandfather says  
"no, you listen to me,"  
then falls back asleep.

IV

my grandmother has never had to make a decision on her own.  
over the next three months,  
my father helps her move into the condo.  
helps her fill out forms.  
helps her deal with his business.  
i see more of my own backside  
than i do of my father.

i stay a night with them one day.  
there are only two beds,  
so i sleep with my grandmother  
while my father sleeps in the room over.  
in the pitch black of night,  
my grandmother wakes me up  
with a shriek to wake the dead,  
a scream to rattle the bones  
of a demon.

V

when they bring him home,  
he still has no use  
for the right side of his body.  
he does not eat.

there are strange people in and out of his house.  
they ask him to bend his fingers,  
to spell his name,  
to read basic sentences.  
things he should know how to do -  
a 60 year old man  
with no preexisting conditions  
perfect cholesterol  
ideal weight for his height  
by all means,  
a man of perfect health.  
it's a fluke,  
the doctors all say.  
i watch him use his left hand to make an unfriendly gesture.

VI

when we visit at christmas,  
he slips off his chair.  
my grandmother falls apart in front of my eyes,  
sobbing,  
saying over and over,



*you haven't been falling, billy,  
you hadn't fallen.  
i can't get you up, billy,  
i can't get you up.*

VII

i don't call as often as i should.  
my grandmother is passive aggressive.  
my grandfather is a racist  
sexist  
homophobe.  
but he tells me one day  
that it isn't getting better.  
all the physical therapy and speech therapy,  
he says it isn't helping,  
and i can hear the giving-up tone in his voice.  
he was ostracized from his siblings many years ago,  
a mutual hatred at the time.  
they still do not speak.  
many of his friends have already passed,  
or will be passing soon.  
and his grandchildren never visit.  
we don't call.  
i rarely even answer their texts.  
and i think  
this isn't how family treats their own.  
i will do better this year.



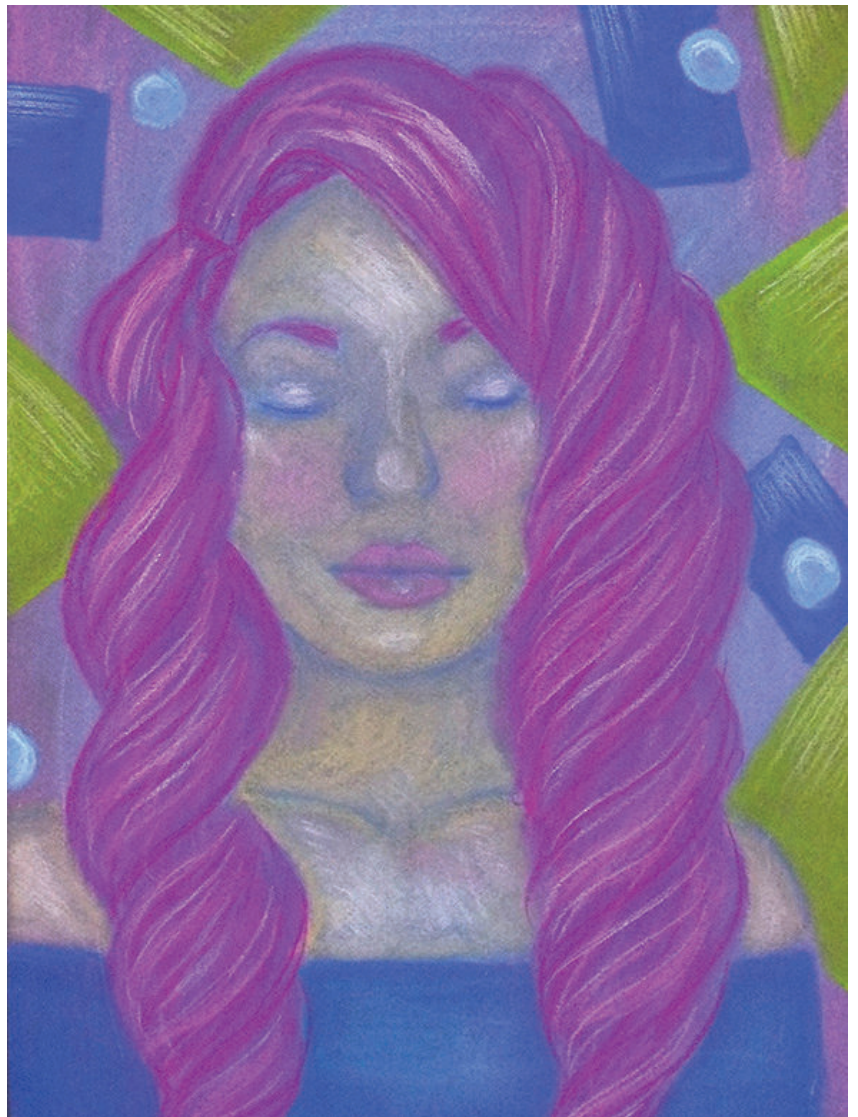
Call Me : by Anne Heaton Sanders

## The Flower Shop

At first, I sold only daisies.  
Anyone who came through the door  
I said here, take my petals  
white as snow  
blooming beautifully in the  
Dixieland spring.  
It was only a few months after  
my birthday.  
My grandmother came in the shop  
day after day  
and I said here -  
a daisy.  
Daisy after daisy after daisy.  
As I grew older,  
I added more and more flowers to my collection -  
lisianthus grew in raised beds outfront  
and out back  
I planted a sakura tree.  
Everyone I met -  
schoolyard children  
strangers I met  
walking the hot Alabama streets, clutching my mother's hand -  
I invited them in.  
Come to my flower shop,  
I said.  
The sakura flowers are gorgeous this time of year.  
And then the lisianthus plants died.  
Instead, rhododendron grew in its place  
red like blood  
like the lipstick of the woman  
I was trying to be.  
The daisies had not died yet,  
but they were wilting,  
drooped over like they were soaked with tears.  
I was heartbroken,  
my very first flowers  
dying in front of my eyes and then one day  
a boy came into my shop.  
He said,  
I can't fix your flowers,  
but I can give you new ones.

And he handed me a bouquet,  
produced it from behind his back  
beamed at me, so proud of himself.  
He told me it was queen anne's lace.  
I didn't want to be rude,  
so I didn't tell him  
that stuck between the white  
wedding dress in flower form  
were snapdragons, too.  
The daisies got better.  
The lisianthus never came back,  
but the rhododendron grew stronger than ever.  
The boy brought me new flowers every day.  
He brought me  
forget-me-not blues  
the color of his eyes,  
and purple heliotropes,  
and yellow lady's mantle,  
even roses, although they were yellow -  
he always claimed he could never find red.  
He didn't like me growing dill  
in my herb garden,  
made me stop.  
Yellow hyacinths were his favorite flowers.  
Slowly, my favorite flower was becoming  
the white-petaled anemone,  
like my daisies,  
except with a ovule the color  
of pokeweed berries.  
And then,  
one day,  
he gave me a lotus flower.  
I cried for three days straight,  
puked on the roots of my sakura tree.  
I almost closed down the shop  
altogether.  
The next morning,  
the daisies were dead.  
I weeped at the sight -  
stems bent over  
like me as heaved,  
ovules turned black as night,  
the once-white petals  
now permanently stained with dirt.  
A patch of cyclamen had burst up  
next to the crime scene.

In place of the daisies,  
I planted purple  
chrysanthemums.  
For over a year,  
I only sold purple chrysanthemums  
and black beauties.  
I dressed in all black.  
I bit anyone who came near me.  
But the sun rose again  
over my Alabama flower shop,  
and I got rid of everything  
except the sakura tree.  
I sold white lilies.  
I grew gladiolus.  
I sold daffodils,  
snowdrops,  
frangipani



Violet Girl : by Harper Cook

## I Watch My Mother and Feel Afraid

My mother carries the weight of it on her back, hunches her over, bends her vertebrae in unnatural ways, turns her hair frail and brittle, causes her eyes, which are my eyes too, the color of the fertile soil of the earth, to sink deep into her cheek bones. She has passed that fear onto me—the fear of never being good enough, the fear of my life becoming like hers. I can see the worry of many things circling around in her head day after day, the money, running around trying to care for the two children she never wanted and the three dogs they forced her into adopting. A physicist, she tells me, that's what she should've been. She never had a college counselor, never saw a college brochure, never toured a campus. Living in a small town in the mountains, she started taking the college math classes at fourteen years of age, and from there went on to the state school that everyone went to, became a lawyer. She never says it, but I think that she would've been much happier if I had not shown up in her belly, surprised her, forced contortions of her body, made her sick. A law career is not compatible with a baby, a toddler, demanding attention, sickly, as my father finishes grad school, has surgery. And three years later, another one shows up, nearly kills her in the act of it, cries, neither of us sleeps and my father is working in across the state border, the lights of Birmingham mirroring our lights in Atlanta. Atlanta was already as far as my mother had been from home, and when my father comes home, says we can't do this anymore, his job is in Birmingham and it's too expensive, and he has two young kids now, her head reels—Alabama, a different planet to a woman who has only ever known the foothills of the Appalachians, roasted pecans bought from trucks off the side of holey state highways. So she pushes me away from the state schools, the schools like hers, wants me to broaden my horizons even as I am looking towards schools I am in love with, tells me not to worry about money even though I don't want to fall in love with schools I know I can't afford. She didn't want kids, she tells me, didn't plan them, but they're her world now, and she wants the best for them. And I can see that the way we turn out keeps her up at night. And I carry that fear too—that I will disappoint her. I watch my mother dream wistfully of the life she gave up, and I feel afraid that her sacrifice will be for naught.



I Am the War : by Molly O'Neill

## May It Be

In stars that gleam his eyes so white  
Holds steady, the poor man's gaze, akin the light of the silent night  
Their veins stretch and darken to the erie crimson shade  
And the shade so beautiful falls, vanquished to his vision that wans  
Fear at last closes the grim man's trembling eyes  
Only through blackness may his dark damned heart be spared from lies

Doused is his soul by the tears of excruciating hate  
Hence flood hellish waves of woeful weeps, in hate soiled is a soul the lord shant take  
May it be a hate soon gone and perished through the final sin  
Such sin that brews patiently from his soul lost within

In darkness echos the beat of his shoes that strike fiercely on the cold barren street  
Inside echos a beat akin to his speeding feet  
In heart beats of fury closes goodness, adrift amongst such agonizing cries  
In hell, alas, do the poor man's legs reach full stride

Beyond the black of night stands a man whose soul, once innocent, wilts  
Holds a pure heart does the agonizing grip of guilt  
No strength nor speed can such precious glee escape  
May it be in forgiveness that his wounded soul be saved

Descends does the silence of night in echoes of the poor man's steps  
Ascends from the sad man hope, from his hearts deepest depths  
Both men yearn for the end of such agonizing weight  
Yet only one man knows of the others fate



Blinding hope rises to the sad man's face  
Free at last slips his long forgotten grace  
In this grace his arms finally open, mirroring his heart with comfort and aid  
Till alas flashes a shimmer from the poor man's glistening blade.

The heart that bled guilt soon bleeds the blackest blood and fear  
Turns warm the poor man's trembling hands, unleashed a hate held dormant for years  
Blood craved so deeply cleanses the poor mans face amidst the sad man's cries  
Among the begs and blood that pour, levels a stare to the poor man's lustful eyes



Tornado : by Sally Reed Creveling

## Somewhat Irrational Rambling

It's been so long since I've spoken of my thoughts  
Or since I've felt welcome to speak of them  
Or since someone seemed to listen to them

Always alone  
Never "enough"  
And it's still something that I'm not used to  
That pain  
Even though it comes from self-infliction

It's the horror of dismal nothingness  
which fuels my fears  
Fearing everything is Man's forte  
Fearing you is my forte

Your disgust in me is frightening  
My "ignorance" is frightening to you  
Our differences are frightening

So  
You should walk your way and I'll walk mine  
And once we circumvent the sphere we call "Fate"  
You won't scare me anymore  
And we'll both have bigger problems  
Because that's how the world works

We move on from our past and forget our dues  
Happy to create new debts  
Because it's still a clean slate  
And that's all that matters

I've hidden from the truth for too long:  
The state of nature from which we've come... well,  
It needs me back in all my thin-skinned glory  
So it can feed on my selfish sorrow

The state of nature needs equity as bad as I do  
It needs us to suffer the wrath of Leviathan  
Who drips all but a taste of mercy

## LAUREN ELGIN

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So that aging will be easy  
And our purpose in life will become clearer  
And accepting goodbyes will be harder  
But Leviathan says it could all be worse

Leviathan is the one who gave us a right to mourn  
A creature who used to tell men that murder is ok  
He's angry the world is a softer place now  
He's angry that we have to walk on our toes  
He said the world used to be evil  
I think it still could be

Leviathan is not the one I blame for it  
I don't blame you either, even if I wanted to  
I blame your lust for the sun and the moon  
You look forward to their arrival but not mine  
I blame your muse  
Because your muse isn't me

I'll wait for you to pick me up  
And take me to the place that Man is born to go  
The sweltering hole where we dump our morals  
Hoping to never see them again

We all do it: numb our pain in vanity  
Guiltily pleading with God not to cast his storm  
Surely He has given up on us by now  
He must see how damaged we are

But if God is who He says He is  
He would never give up on humanity  
Look at the number of chances He has given us  
To fix our resilient mother Earth

Be grateful  
I choose the life that God gave me  
I hope you find your Leviathan inside  
Remember he is there when your hatred starts to hurt you  
Remember that pain so you don't have to feel it

Eventually fate will bring us to the beginning of the end  
Where hopefully by then you'll have learned how to be happy  
And I'll have long since grown out of self-infliction  
So maybe we can simply tolerate each other  
Until the end of the end



Coil Heart : Selim Tunagur

## Clearance Aisle

What is taken is mostly returned in a crippled version of myself  
Picked apart and stripped of what made me a treasure in the first place  
Everything you thought you'd never find:  
It's right here

Expiration and the battle between those who wish to consume  
Who can pay the least possible and take home the best prize?  
How much of me can you put in your cart?  
How much of me are you taking just because you can?

I am apparently here for all leisure  
I am here for the ones who really need me  
Some struggle without me  
I am here for you, too  
And you seem to be doing just fine



Goodnight : Lizzy Walker

## Thoughts of Light

Lying in bed, I hold the hands of my family and quietly mumble my last goodbyes  
As I see the stars illuminate the night sky  
Hearing sobs and grace from the ones I love  
While waiting patiently for the white dove.

The gift of life is at an end  
Yet I still wonder if I will rise or descend.  
Thoughts of light flood my heart with desire  
Yet also with fear of light from fire.

Sin after sin I begin to recall  
While trying to remember the prayers that followed them all.  
I lie awake now, surrounded by loved ones, yet still I am in cowardly fright  
Will the sins gone unpunished decide my fate this final night?

Silently the stars grow bright  
As the clouds behind them begin to part  
Overwhelming the darkness of night  
As well as the darkness that lies in my heart

I cannot help but smile as the light grows stronger  
Yet feelings of guilt remain unconquered  
Denial of this love has made me a traitor  
But all is forgiven as I clasp hands with the son of the creator



Snowy Owl: Leila Radney

## My Mature Manicure

Blackish blue hues  
She painted my nails  
A much darker mood  
Past my goodie-good trail.  
We're matching at last,  
Same bold style and cool gaze  
Baby blues in the past,  
It's my big girl, teen days.



Twelve : Lizzy Walker



## I'll Love You Tomorrow

The moonless night sparkles,  
A shopping lights marvel,  
Glow bold with its rich cars  
The headlights outshine stars.

Synthetic smiles wander,  
Their hearts are no fonder,  
They wallow in dark pubs,  
And scavenge in bright clubs.

A night neverending,  
Consoles your pretending,  
Your selfish indulgence  
Unveils my repulsion.

You blacken out troubles,  
They fade into mumbles,  
I fail from existence,  
You mount the resistance.

You trade out my lectures,  
For meaningless pleasures,  
My loving barrages  
For pretty mirages.

You left my arena,  
A cackling hyena  
Now howling in darkness,  
Your fur's not so heartless.

Be back in the morning,  
But not without scorning  
Though you cause me sorrow,  
I'll love you tomorrow.



Me in the Sky with Diamonds : Ann Douglas Lott

## The Forever Kind of Sleep

"Is she sleeping?" she squeaks.

"When'll she wake up?" she peeps.

"She's been sleeping for a while," she pulls at my sleeve.

I sigh. I'm still. I cannot breathe.

"She won't wake up," I swallow my tears.

"Never? Forever?" she squeals.

"It's forever, you see..."

"Like a forever kind of sleep?"

"Yes," I clench my teeth.

"It's the forever kind of sleep."



love : Macey Miller

## The Thoughts that Plague my Mind

Walking on a cloudy, brisk November afternoon,  
Fog looms over the rocky trail,  
And I desperately try to determine what makes me lose control.  
Control of my tears,  
Control of my thoughts,  
The subject of cancer plagues my mind.

So long it has been something I have avoided.  
I avoided talking about it, thinking about it.  
But now, as a crow caws and as branches rustle  
The ten year old little girl returns,  
The ten year old little girl whose thoughts were haunted by a curse called cancer.

I transform to the little girl who watched her mother  
Her best friend, her biggest fan,  
The strongest person she knows  
In the weakest position.

I transform to the little girl who constantly worried.  
The little girl whose countless sleepless nights

## ELLA NICHOLS

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And separation anxiety

Were solely a result of the

Thoughts that plagued her mind.

I transform to the little girl who had no conception of how serious things were

But always wanted her mother at her side.

The little girl who would skip ballet class

Because attending meant an afternoon away from mom.

The little girl who begged her mother to sleep beside her each night

Because it was the only thing that let her rest peacefully.

And it seemed so silly to her friends,

Why would dance class make her homesick?

Why could she never last a full night at sleepovers?

Why could she never relax?

But her friends failed to understand.

Simply because they could not.

Nobody could understand.

Now, walking along the nature trail with my youth pastor on a dreary, autumn afternoon

the fog begins to clear over the trail,

And for the first time I am forced to discuss these thoughts that plagued my mind.

And for the first time, I reflect.

## ELLA NICHOLS

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And I realize that this experience,  
This time period of my life,  
Has shaped me entirely.

It becomes clear that my obsession with making others feel comfortable,  
Is a result of a long period of discomfort.  
It becomes evident to me that my fear of change  
Is a result of a traumatizing one.

And in this moment,  
On the nature trail,  
With a raven's croak and branches rustling,  
I thank God.  
Not for her doctors,  
Not for her life,  
But I thank God that he timed it so perfectly.  
So perfectly that my siblings cannot remember.  
I thank God that their youth and their innocence place this time period out of their memory.  
For I know that their lively, carefree spirits would not exist,  
If they knew the thoughts of cancer that plague my mind.



conflicted : Macey Miller

## Sloth

Lazy and hungry  
Sleepy and slow  
I lay with my mouth  
Wide and open  
Waiting for food  
To enter my tummy  
Yummy  
Yummy  
Yummy  
Gulp





## Precious Tune

Inside a cat so lovely strums a tune.  
A gorgeous tune to signal all is well  
And show more love than words could ever tell.  
Through such music my heart shall heal through you.

Look past the tune to see where beauty lies  
In shining gentle eyes that know so much  
And paws that bless me with the softest touch  
Sits a love too rich for money to buy.

In time your precious tune will slowly fade  
With each purr and pet I brace my poor heart.  
Of fear so great for when we have to part  
And then shall joy and light succumb to shade.

Yet love and tunes exceed such dreaded grief.  
I swear the love we share will not feel brief.





Spoder Fish : Ethan Harradine