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WAKE UP!

"You can be giving the most stimulating, interesting lectures to sleep-deprived kids early in the morning, when they're at their sleepest, and the overwhelming drive to sleep replaces any chance of alertness, cognition, memory, or understanding."

"Changing School Start Times," page 6

Cover by Brittany Elizabeth Darby-Caulder, Talking Rock, GA

FEEDBACK

To submit your feedback or find the articles mentioned here, go to TeenInk.com

The Heisman Controversy

"It's about character, not just capability." This line from Kevin Schroeder's article "The Heisman Controversy" was extremely meaningful to me. The opinion piece talks about the dispute over whether professional athletes – specifically college football players – should still receive the prestigious Heisman Trophy despite doing terrible things off the field. Recent recipients of the award have been accused of violating NCAA rules against bribery and even committing heinous crimes as bad as sexual assault.

This article spoke to me like no other. I've played soccer since age eight, and it has always been instilled in me by my dad/coach that being a good sport – shaking hands with players at the end of a game, not being disrespectful to referees – is as important as scoring and playing well. I thought that Kevin's piece was extremely eloquent and gave great background information so that readers could understand the issue regardless of their knowledge of sports.

The question of whether athletes should still receive awards for phenomenal performances on the field even if they have committed atrocious acts off the field is not easily answered, but "The Heisman Controversy" does a fantastic job of explaining the issue. I completely agree with Kevin that character is just as important – if not more important – than your on-field performance. I hope that in the future athletes can take this into consideration and try to be better role models for fans.

Ishai Melamede, Brooklyn, NY

Overwhelmed

"Overwhelmed" by Stefania Gheorghiu is a story I can definitely relate to. Oh, and yes I have had plenty of crushes. One thing I know for sure is that I will never feel a greater love than the love of my parents. Yes they can be overprotective, but they have a reason for it. They love me like no other. No

matter how much trouble I get into or how bad my attitude is, they will always love me. They will support me in whatever I decide to do. Stefania refers to parents' love like flowers. Parents want to protect the flower they created with care and dedication. That exactly describes the love I receive from my parents.

Michaela Ketcham, Defiance, OH

Happiness Is Contagious

The nonfiction piece "Happiness Is Contagious" by Georgia Gray was very enlightening for me. In her piece, she describes how she uses exclamation marks to spread positivity around her.

I myself have mocked several of my friends for their "unnecessary" use of exclamation marks. I guess I never really saw them as a tool to express oneself – that is, before I read Georgia's wonderfully composed article.

In the online world, which is so full of cynicism and hatred these days, none of us should be complaining about things as harmless as exclamation marks, especially when they can contribute to putting a smile on someone's face.

Thank you very much for sharing your opinion, Georgia!

Ujjwal Khanal, Kathmandu, Nepal

A Voice

Teen Ink is wonderful. It has opened countless doors for me, helping drive my aspirations of becoming a writer; because I was published in *Teen Ink*, I wrote hungrily, leading up to attending Carnegie Hall as a result of the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. *Teen Ink* has a unique, amazing system for teenagers across the globe to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences online and in print.

Along the way, as my eyes devoured the printed lines, I still looked at the horizons that continuously broadened. Along the

way, my aspirations have only solidified, and the ink in my journal has never dried. *Teen Ink* has opened so many doors, but I've never forgotten to prop some doors of my own.

So, thank you, *Teen Ink*, for the way you let us have a voice. For letting us speak, cry, laugh, sing, debate, and learn.

Ellen Zhang, Troy, MI
Author of the published poems "Letting Go," "Loveful Lust," and "Renewal"

Hollaback Girl

There's not an issue of *Teen Ink* without an article that makes you realize how messed up our society is. In the January edition, that article is "Hollaback Girl" by Yaasmeen Piper. She describes her experience with street harassment and the fear that anyone who has been harassed by a stranger on the street experiences.

Yaasmeen begins the piece by vividly recalling being catcalled by a middle-aged man when she was only 14. Immediately after that, she provides statistics that highlight the large number of women – and men – who have been harassed and abused while innocently walking outside.

This article truly captures the terror of street harassment and the anxiety that most people feel when they realize that they are being targeted. The line "My face burns red, and in my palms I can feel my heart pumping" is breathtaking. It shows the physical effects that go along with the fear when being harassed. That line brought even more suspense to the story and made me feel

sympathy for Yaasmeen, as well as other victims.

The section I appreciated most was the third to last paragraph, where she explained the sadly common misconception that a woman wearing provocative clothing deserves to be harassed. I am so glad Yaasmeen addressed this issue so others could learn. The statement "Who you are, what you wear, or your sexual orientation should not impact your safety or comfort walking down the street" ties everything together and is the cherry on top of an informative and persuasive opinion article.

Hannah Fleishman, Brooklyn, NY

Multiply by Ed Sheeran

I totally agree with Margaux Alexander's review of "Multiply" by Ed Sheeran. She wrote about Sheeran being an incredible role model. He never gave up on his dream of becoming a musician, and he managed to stop abusing alcohol at a young age.

Margaux described Sheeran as a "one-man band." It is hard to imagine that he is able to sell out all his shows and perform by himself. Considering that there are very few artists who could pull off the "one-man band" routine, that is simply amazing.

I also agree with Margaux's description of Sheeran as a singing poet. I truly appreciate his ability to turn a simple concept into beautiful lyrics. Thank you, Margaux, for writing this review of such an amazing artist.

Berenice Mendoza, Phoenix, AZ

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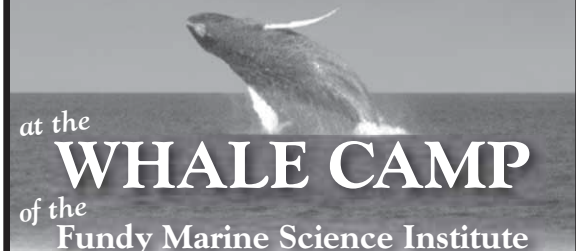
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Changing School Start Times

by Julia Osterhouse, Dorr, MI

One thing I notice about my friends – my peers in general – can be summed up in the phrase: “I’m, like, *so* tired.” Some of us need to get up as early as five to catch the bus. My alarm goes off at quarter to six. In schools across the country, early start times are nothing new. However, in the past few years, solid research has suggested we should rethink school start times.

Infants sleep away most of their days – 14 to 16 hours – because their brains need to develop. Similarly, during puberty, teenagers need between nine and ten hours of sleep a night. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, significant changes occur in the cerebral structure during adolescence, mostly while we sleep.

At the same time, it’s surprisingly natural for teenagers to want to stay up late. This may seem

paradoxical, but it’s due to an unavoidable shift in the adolescent biological clock. The brain normally produces a hormone called melatonin when it thinks it’s time to go to sleep. Throughout puberty, melatonin secretion occurs later at night as we mature, making teens stay awake later. Researchers at Brown University call this a “phase-delay,” which will reverse itself after puberty.

It’s obvious that teenagers don’t get enough sleep. The National Sleep Foundation conducted a survey this year that found that 58 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds often sleep less than seven hours a night. In 10 California high schools, 4,317 students had an average of 3.1 hours of homework per night, according to a study in the *Journal of Experimental Education*. With 75 percent of middle/high school students participating in extracurricular activities and 57 percent taking part in non-school-related activities, according to a national survey, how can we be expected to get enough sleep when the average start time in U.S. high schools is 8 o’clock or earlier?

Why should any of this matter? As Cornell University psychologist James B. Maas, PhD, stated, “You can be giving the most stimulating, interesting lectures to sleep-deprived kids early in the morning ... when they’re at their sleepest, and the overwhelming drive to sleep replaces any chance of alertness, cognition, memory, or understanding.” Fifteen years ago, a survey of more than 3,000 high school students found that those who reported getting C’s, D’s, and F’s in school got 25 minutes less sleep per night and went to bed 40 minutes later than students who got A’s and B’s.

The consequences aren’t just academic. In a study

of 10,000 16- to 18-year-olds conducted by the University of Bergen and the University of California, teens with symptoms of depression took longer to fall asleep and woke up more frequently than non-depressed teens.

Still not convinced? Drowsiness and fatigue generally cause more than 100,000 traffic accidents per year, and teen drivers are at the wheel in more than half of them. A study observed two high schools in Virginia and found a correlation between earlier start times and more crashes.

Changing school start times will be difficult. It’s only natural for schools to be concerned about the impacts on bus schedules and after-school activities, but the health benefits are well worth the effort. The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota conducted a study on the impact of changing school start times on academic performance, behavior, and safety in urban and suburban schools. Both

reported students taking fewer trips to the nurse, eating breakfast more often, and completing most of their homework during school (because they were alert enough to). Later start times produced a calmer atmosphere in the hallways and cafeterias, and fewer students saw school counselors to discuss academic or personal stress.

We’re at a point in our lives where sleep is necessary for our successful development and progression. Changing school start times will vastly improve the quality of our education because students will be healthier and more eager to learn. If we teenagers do our part – get to bed on time – will the school boards do theirs? ‘Cause we’re, like, *so* tired. ♦

It’s obvious that teens don’t get enough sleep



Photo by Liat Greenwood, West Orange, NJ

Can You Hear Me Now?

by Kathleen Musiak, East Longmeadow, MA

Imagine being placed in a country where you don’t speak the language. That’s what it’s like to be deaf, speaking only ASL (American Sign Language), and be placed in a high school filled with kids who don’t understand you. Hearing students are rarely given the opportunity to learn ASL, or even offered an explanation of deaf culture. Deaf students nationwide are mainstreamed into regular schools without well-trained interpreters or ASL classes available. Schools should be providing interpreters to help deaf students commu-

nicate, special education classes to help them learn what they missed, and sign language classes for the hearing. Without these steps, deaf and hard of hearing students cannot thrive.

Some people think that it is wrong to “force” a deaf child into a regular school, but others believe it benefits their education to learn how to work with hearing people. Who is right? Maybe both.

Special schools for people with disabilities often lack funding for classes like art and gym, and consequently, schools for the deaf generally have lower academic standards. But deaf children who are mainstreamed into regular schools so they can “get a better education” often have social difficulties. They can end up as outcasts as a result of miscommunications if their needs are not met.

For deaf students enrolled in hearing schools, interpreters are vital. They help students socialize with

peers and allow them to communicate with teachers. Communication issues can bring a student’s grades down dramatically. Think about it: what if you were sitting in the classroom, trying your best, but the teacher spoke only gibberish? You would either completely lose your social life by trying to study 24 hours a day, or just

plain fail. This could easily happen to deaf students who are mainstreamed without support.

Special classes can help students find a happy medium. Many hearing or non-disabled students have seen other students taken to a different room

for part of the day. These classes are important. In these rooms, students can relax and study the information they might have missed.

The time spent in special classes versus regular classes differs for each student, making it difficult for unprepared schools to keep up. Students who are hard of hearing may miss a lot less than students who are

completely deaf. Sometimes having friends in mainstream classes can help shorten the amount of time a student spends in a special classroom, because they can use each other’s notes.

Schools with mainstreamed deaf students should be required to offer sign language courses, because everyone deserves the right to communicate. Friendship is important for everyone. What’s it like to be without that support? If a student is sick one day and cannot come to school, she doesn’t have the ability to ask her peers for the classwork if she cannot communicate with them.

Deaf children deserve better treatment and are too often not given the chance to shine. Based on my experience, I know that things need to change. All schools with deaf students should be required to have well-trained interpreters and special, separate classes, and to offer American Sign Language courses. Even a bit of information on deaf culture during orientation could make a huge difference in the lives of deaf students. ♦

Without the help they need, deaf students can’t thrive

Author’s note: “I am a hard of hearing student who was mainstreamed in preschool. Even though I survived, none of the criteria listed in this essay were offered in my schools. I believe that if they had been, it would have brought my middle school grades up from D’s to A’s.”

The Rising Voices of Philadelphia

by Sarah Nam, West Chester, PA

points of view

Kamaya swung our joined hands back and forth as we walked through the cluttered streets of Eighth and Butler in Philadelphia. The August heat rolled off the concrete, and the unrelenting humidity clung to our bodies. It was a Tuesday – garbage day. The stench of rotting trash stalked us as we passed men lounging on their stoops and listened to the ringing bells of the corner stores. Kamaya pointed out places and showed me each important building and traffic light. A small yard bounded by a gray fence was where her mom had been married for the second time; Kamaya had worn a “really, really pretty white dress with yellow flowers.” The church she attended on Sundays was on the corner of Hunting Park, and her grandmother’s house faced Popeye’s Chicken Diner. Kamaya always took her 70-year-old grandma “really yummy dessert with icing and candles on top.”

Other kids at the camp had their own stories to share, stories woven with innocence and hurt, laughter and pain. Some stories were worse than others. Antwon, a 13-year-old boy, kicked pebbles on the street as I walked beside him. He dug his hands in his pockets and focused on the pavement, broken open by years of wind and weather.

“That’s my stepfather’s house,” he said, nodding toward Fifth and Butler Street.

“What do you guys do there?”
“Just video games.”
“What about your other father?”
“What about him?”
“Do you visit him?”
“He was shot last year.”
Like I said, some stories had more chapters of hurt than of healing.

Around 350 steps from Antwon’s stepfather’s house was Caviana’s house, a block down from the Eighth Street Community Church. She told me that even on hot days, she and her friends Nekeema and Imani would sit underneath a tree to talk and listen to music. I smiled as she described sitting cross-legged and barefoot while the leaves from the trees danced before their faces. They were just three teenaged girls savoring the taste of summer before

taking on the world.

And then there was that traffic light between Hunting Park and Butler Street. John, who was 19, talked while we waited for the walk signal.

“Yeah, my life has been nothing but great after my father left,” John said.

“How so?”

“Well, after my father left, my peachy mother went to jail and decided to come home with a wife. It’s really funny if you think about it. Don’t you think?”

Five seconds later, I offered him the melted Tastykake I had been saving in my pocket. He accepted it.

Author’s note: “During my two weeks in inner-city Philadelphia, I learned to see beyond the city’s stereotypes of hurt and loss. Yes, there are parts of the city that are broken, but I learned that its very heart beats as loudly and strongly as yours or mine.”

If you walk about two blocks down from that intersection, you come across a fire hydrant. Timmy, a nine-year-old, frowned as he squinted into the sun.

“Timmy, what was your favorite part of the summer?”

“Well, um ... oh, I know!” He held my hand as he skipped beside me.

“All right, I’m listening.”

“Last time someone opened the fire hydrant and we all played in the water. There! There! Over there!” Timmy pointed at the fire hydrant in front of Marcia’s Grocery Store.

“Did you guys get in trouble?”

“Nope, no one really cared,” Timmy said with a goofy grin.

He leaned over and licked the dirt-encrusted wall. I told him that was a very unsanitary thing to do, but he insisted he had to. He smiled up at me and said that was how he got his good luck.

All these stories created a road map of the hauntingly beautiful city of Philadelphia. Traffic lights told stories of angry red outbursts, mellow yellow memories, and cheery green incidents. Street signs were written in the language of the people. For each child I spoke to, different pinpoints on the map of Philadelphia held

different meanings – miles of ignorant bliss and kilometers of bitter sorrow.

My favorite memory of Eighth Street, Philadelphia, took place on the subway ride to a Phillies game. Kids danced and cheered as the neon underground lights whizzed by. The older kids rapped and laughed at their clumsy improvisation; the ground beneath my feet shook as the young ones tapped against the window and banged their hands against the seats. Antwon break-danced on the floor of the moving train, his eyes twinkling in the lights.

As we passed beneath streets and buildings, I wondered how many other stories I was trespassing upon. I listened to the whistle of the wheels on the invisible track and paid close attention to the singing of the kids around me. At that moment, I could hear the voices of Philadelphia rising all around me. They were faint at first, but slowly they accumulated into a deafening roar. ♦

A Way With Words

by Alex Helm, Double Oak, TX

He sits at one of the wooden tables in the school library, surrounded by novels on low shelves and colorful art that hangs from the ceiling. He’s focused on a large red book in front of him: *Merriam Webster’s New World Dictionary*.

“This isn’t the fun one,” he says.

Only a word wizard like him would know which dictionary is fun.

He gets up and walks to the corner of the library to get the dictionary he prefers. He returns with a much larger gray tome full of medical terms and other jargon that wouldn’t interest the average teenager. He sits with it in his lap, flipping through hundreds of thin pages, a look of concentration on his face. This is his definition of enjoyment. This dictionary is what he uses to memorize the spellings of words. After all, he is the Texas state spelling bee champion.

Lokesh, an eighth grader, has always had a passion for words. He started spelling competitively when he was in first grade.

“I’ve always liked words,” he says. “The spelling bee seemed to be a good thing to broaden my horizons on words.”

Although he lost in round one of his first spelling bee, he came back the next year and won. Since then, he has succeeded in every spelling bee. Today he is one of the

best spellers in the nation.

Spelling comes naturally to Lokesh. Even though words that are given in spelling bees are often rooted in other languages, Lokesh, who speaks English as well as several Indian languages, enjoys learning the derivatives of all kinds of words. It’s what he loves to talk about.

“You really want to look at languages, their patterns and the English language,” Lokesh says. “If you know those languages ... it can help, but it can also hinder you.

For example, you could be using rules that in Spanish may seem correct, but when it got Anglicized, the rules don’t make sense anymore.”

Some languages’ rules are harder to learn than others, according to Lokesh. He says that Irish Gaelic, Yiddish, and Hebrew have seemingly random rules, often don’t follow a particular pattern, and can sometimes change when translated to English. “Once they get Anglicized, I don’t know whether it’s completely Anglicized, halfway there, or the native spelling,” Lokesh says.

For example, a *cc* sound in Italian makes the *ch* sound in English – so in the Italian word *cacciatore* there is a *ch* noise and the *i* is silent, which can make spelling the word difficult. But it’s perfecting these kinds of spelling rules that interests him the most.

To master his skills, Lokesh has worked with a spelling coach since the fourth grade. The duo spend hours poring over rules so Lokesh knows what rules to follow

For each child,
points on the map
held different
meanings

He is one of
the best spellers
in the nation

Shattered Season

by Michael Wolfrum, Defiance, OH

“**L**ion Blue, 7-51. Go!” Coach called from the sidelines.

It was a blitz on the rollout pass. The offensive line, myself included, ran our blue steps, and nobody made it through our lockdown line. However, two of my teammates were having trouble passing back the backside tackle. We are taught that if we can’t pass them back, we just shove them down into the line. So they did what they had been taught and shoved him down. That one act defined my entire junior year of football.

Apparently, this clumsy defensive tackle couldn’t regain his balance. Somehow he fell on my left foot, and we both rolled.

I saw my opponent lying on the grass beside me, hurt. I think he just had the wind knocked out of him – but I’d heard my foot crack, and a sharp pain shot up my leg.

Just play it out; there are 25 seconds until halftime, I thought.

Since I wasn’t sure if I was injured, I tried walking. As soon as I took a step, I knew something was very wrong. It felt as if there were no bones in the middle of my foot. So I hopped, which Coach did



Photo by Rosa Garza, Andrews, TX

not like.

Coach always urges us to overcome adversity, whether it’s fatigue, a halftime deficit, or a bone-crushing hit. “Toughen up, Wolfy! Don’t show it!” he yelled from the sideline. The left guard and some other teammates also encouraged me to brush it off.

Since just 25 seconds remained until halftime, I decided to stay in. We were up 21-7, but Coach wanted to score again, so he kept calling passes to get in the end zone. The pain at this point was excruciating, and it was getting worse with each step.

I had a false start on the next play, making Coach even more furious with me. At this point, I really didn’t care whether or not we scored. I just wanted the longest 25 seconds ever to be over.

Coach called another pass play, which was good for me; if there are only four people rushing the quarterback, I’m free. Thankfully, no linebackers blitzed, so I just snapped the ball and took two steps back and stood in the middle of the field. However, our quarterback decided to run the ball since he saw no one downfield to throw to. So I had to block for him. I’ve never given such a terrible effort. We ended up kicking a field goal. Finally, it was halftime.

Once we made it into the locker room, I immediately went to our trainer to get my foot checked. When I took my cleat off, I saw a gruesome sight. The bone was jutting out and my toes were all pointing to the left. Of course, when I saw that, it started hurting even more.

The trainer asked, “Do you want me to get a towel so you don’t have to look at it?” Then he went to find my mom so she could take me to the hospital.

Coach said, “I’m sorry I told you to shake it off, Wolfy. I was just trying to make you tougher.”

The trainer gave me a pair of rickety old crutches. I’d never used them before, which showed when I dropped one and nearly fell down the locker room stairs. Somehow I maneuvered to the car.

The doctors took some X-rays and asked how I did it. I don’t know what they were expecting me to say; I was still in my football pads, so I thought it was pretty obvious. After the X-rays, they had an ambulance take me to St. Vincent’s in Toledo for emergency surgery. I somehow forced myself to sleep on the way.

When I arrived, I couldn’t sleep any more because my foot hurt so much it was almost unbearable. It didn’t help that I had four doctors poking, prodding, and examining it.

Coach showed up at 1:30 a.m. to see how I was doing. At this point, I was so exhausted I felt about to pass out. “We won 44-12,” he told me. “Dakota did well in your place, but we’re still going to miss you in the middle of the o-line.”

As soon as I took a step, I knew something was very wrong

I had already been told by the doctors that my season, along with my foot, was shattered. I couldn’t take it; I didn’t want to sit out the entire year, especially since I’d worked so hard to get this far. *It’s not fair*, I kept telling myself. After all my work, I had nothing to show for it except a broken foot and months on crutches.

After Coach left I thought maybe I could sleep a bit, but they had me hooked up to so many machines that I didn’t find peace all that night.

At 5:30 a.m. the doctors came in to poke at my foot some more, and this time I wasn’t so nice. “I’m going to kick you if you keep doing that,” I growled. They took me for more X-rays and prepped me for surgery. At that point I was looking forward to being knocked out just so I could rest.

The surgery went fine. They crossed two screws around my big toe since that was where the most damage was. I spent the rest of the weekend at the hospital. I didn’t enjoy my stay, but was happy that my foot was fixed and I was on my way to recovery.

That brings me to where I am today – in a cast and on crutches. Coach always says, “You never know when your last play is going to be.” My last play just happened to be on that cool Friday night. ♦

Past Scars

by “Erin,” Harvard, IL

My parents call me into their bedroom. My mother is standing in the corner, my father sitting on the bed. I can tell from the tone of my mother’s voice that I have done something wrong. As soon as I set foot in the room I know what it is. They want to talk about what I’ve been hiding for the past year, what I’ve kept hidden under long sleeves and bracelets, shorts under my pants when I’m changing in gym.

My muscles are tense. It’s hard to breathe. My palms are sweating. I don’t want to be here. I’m only 12 years old. I know most girls my age don’t have to speak about this with their parents.

I feel ashamed, embarrassed, guilty. Mainly, I feel like crying. Every sound my mother and father make seems muted. It’s hard to focus, but five words cut through the confusion and bring me back.

“Are you listening to us?”
I don’t know who said it. I wasn’t

paying attention, so I nod.

“Well, say something!” That’s my mother, her voice high and wavering.

“I don’t know what to say,” I mumble, my eyes falling on my lap. I’m scared to look up. I’m worried that if I do I’ll start to cry, or my parents will.

“Why would you do that to yourself?” my father asks. I can hear the strain in his throat.

I’ve upset them.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I just hurt. I deserve to hurt.”

My mother starts to cry. “Let me see,” she says. “Let me see your scars.”

Moving like I’m stuck in a huge pot of molasses, I slowly remove my sweater. Faint white lines are a map on my wrists from last week. Next I pull up the sleeves of my T-shirt so my parents can see my shoulders. Those scars are deeper, and there is a fresh cut. When my father sees that, he starts to cry.

This is the second time I have seen my father cry. The other was when his father died.

I slip down my pants and expose the scars across the front of my thighs. They’re not as deep. I only recently realized that no one would see if I cut my legs.

I stand there with all my scars showing

I stand there with all my scars showing. I feel sick, ashamed. Ashamed that I caused myself this much pain. Ashamed that I’ve upset my parents.

Suddenly, my mother steps forward and wraps her arms around me. “I love you so much, sweetie,” she says softly, her face wet with tears.

I am surprised at the hug, and I cling to my mother as if my life depends on it. Now I’m crying, hot tears streaming down my face. Sobs wrack my body as I repeat “I’m sorry,” as if saying it over and over will make it better.

With my mother holding me and crying, and my dad crying as well, I realize how terrible I feel for making my parents feel this way. I never like to upset them, and by doing this, I have upset them greatly.

I feel shame, deep shame.

When I used to cut myself and watch myself bleed, it reminded me that I was alive on the inside, even though I felt dead. The physical pain that I inflicted temporarily relieved the emotional pain I felt every day. I thought I was getting rid of the emotional pain, but it just made everything worse.

When my parents found out, it was the lowest and highest I’d felt in a long time. I felt happy that I had finally gotten this huge secret off of my chest, but when I saw how upset my parents were, I felt terrible. This feeling of regret and shame for hurting them is what helped me quit and what still keeps me clean today. ♦

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A Victim to Heroin

by "Allison," Groveland, MA

A part of me died on July 28th, 2014. My best friend, my boyfriend, and my partner in crime passed away in the early morning, just hours after I spoke to him. His killer was silent and deadly. This enemy had taken control of him months before he died.

Heroin. It's not just my enemy – the thing that stole someone I truly loved – but, strangely, it is also something I have become obsessed with learning more about.

Heroin's addictive power began taking over my friend in December 2013 and continued eating away at him until his death just eight months later. He kept his secret hidden for months. I failed to realize this was possible with heroin because I didn't understand it could be taken in other ways besides injection. Smoking or snorting heroin is a psychologically easier way for a teen to start using the drug, and is also harder to detect.

Over time, I noticed my friend was moving sluggishly and having trouble understanding simple things.

At the time, I didn't know these were side effects. Others include nausea, vomiting, itching, diarrhea, rashes, sexual dysfunction, bruised or scabbed skin, involuntary kicking, cold flashes, and muscle and bone pain. The senses become dulled too. My friend's sense of smell was virtually nonexistent. His vision worsened, he could never hear a thing I said, and he wouldn't notice if someone brushed against him.

There were other signs – not necessarily physical – that I should have noticed. This guy who had always been into fashion had let his appearance and hygiene deteriorate. People constantly commented on the same pair of pants he wore for weeks on end, the bitter smell emanating from his body, and his surprising weight gain.

He personality began to change. He became deceptive and lied constantly. He stole and had angry outbursts. Money became his one passion, because he used it to feed his addiction. He also began acting up in school. He went

from being an honor roll student to barely showing up. Instead, he stayed home to drink, got arrested, and did drugs at work. Other behavioral signs that someone is using heroin include deceptive behavior, avoiding eye contact, increased sleep, slurred or incoherent speech, loss of motivation, withdrawal from friends and family, repeatedly stealing money, hostility, and decline in self-esteem.

The fact that I did not recognize these signs in time to save my friend haunts me every day. But that is another mark of a heroin addict; they make sure to keep it hidden from those they are closest to because they know their loved ones will fight the hardest to make them quit.

A heroin user's journey typically begins with prescription painkillers such as OxyContin, but once that habit becomes too expensive, the addict will turn to other drugs with similar effects. A major contributor to the rise in heroin use in the U.S. is the fact that the drug is dirt cheap. My friend initially

said that heroin was just something he was "trying out." It wasn't a problem, he claimed. Anytime anyone asked him about it or displayed concern, he was instantly defensive.

Heroin is a particularly dangerous street drug because it is impossible for users to tell how pure or clean the heroin is. Drug dealers often mix it with other harsh chemicals, not only to make it stronger but to sell more of it more cheaply. Street heroin's lack of purity leads to overdoses and deaths, and the problem is only getting worse; from 2010 to 2012, heroin overdose deaths doubled in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Heroin not only harms addicts, but it has a huge effect on their family and friends. My friend took "bad heroin" or "dirty heroin" the night he died. That night we had a fight and I refused to go see him like I had planned; he was acting crazy and angry, and he wasn't himself. The last thing he said to me was, "No one will ever love you the way that I love you."

When I responded to his text the next morning, it was already too late. ♦

My friend kept his secret hidden

The Tao of Kairos

by Tillena Trebon, Flagstaff, AZ

"Trot!" the trainer yelled. I nudged Kairos in the ribs. He huffed in annoyance. "Come on, buddy. I know it's hot, but pick it up a little bit," I hissed.

Kairos was an immense horse with a bulky build and hooves as big as my outstretched hand. His abnormally large eyes were a dark brown that made you want to dive in to learn all his secrets. If Kairos were a human, they would tell him not to play poker.

"Make him go faster! He's barely moving," barked the trainer. Austin was a stout man with scraggly gray facial hair. To my surprise, I was intimidated by this small man.

Sweat dampened Kairos's dusty coat. He gave me a scornful look out of the corner of his eye and picked up speed. As we rounded a tree, Kairos swerved, nearly throwing me. I yanked him back, then felt a sudden pain in my leg, then another. My eyes darted to my calf. It was covered in black and yellow spots that were moving.

Wasps. WASPS! I felt a scream welling up in my throat – or maybe that was the anaphylaxis starting. I knew I should conserve as much air as possible; in minutes I would be unable to breathe. I'd be unconscious in a few more, and then I would suffocate. I pulled Kairos to a stop.

The wasps were everywhere. Zap. Zing. Zow. I was stung on my back, my arms. I felt the venom pulsing through my veins. I jumped off Kairos, who seemed pleased with the sudden end to the lesson. He planted his plump face in the nearest patch of grass and nibbled away. Well, at least he's calm in a crisis.

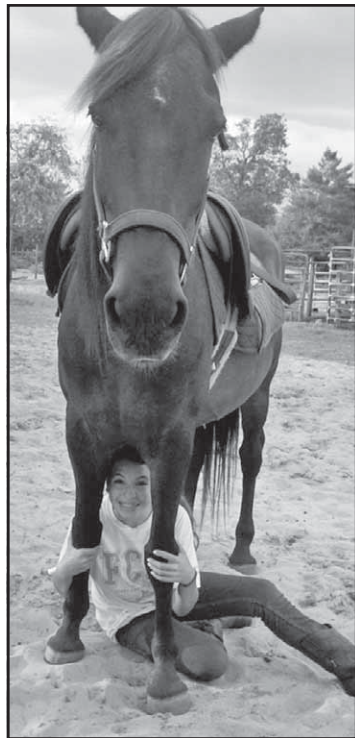


Photo by Daniela Miranda, Panama City, FL

I unzipped my saddle bag and grabbed my EpiPen, Benadryl, and cell phone. Gasping, I sprinted to the trainer, the sun stabbing my eyes and the wasps stabbing my limbs. I kicked off my boots and threw them as far as I could. No doubt they were filled with stinging insects.

"Allergic to wasps," I panted, fumbling with my phone. Three numbers. 911. How hard could this be? Very hard. My hands were shaking and puffy. I could barely see the numbers on the phone, let alone press them.

"Get the case off!" I shoved my EpiPen at Austin. "911? I've been attacked by wasps. I have anaphylaxis! Where am I? Umm ..."

Suddenly I heard the click of the EpiPen needle and sounds of distress. "I-I seem to have pricked myself," Austin said.

My eyes moved from the blood pooling in the trainer's dusty hand to my EpiPen. If I hadn't been so afraid, I would have laughed. Austin seemed to deflate. He sank to the grass clutching his chest. His breath came in gasps and wheezes. I don't remember how I managed to tell the ambulance how to find us.

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"Hey, are you okay?"
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"Do you need help?"

I tried to locate the voice. A man with wild brown hair and tennis shoes was staring at me. I tried to focus, then nodded. He reached for the Benadryl in my hand and tore at the packet. I sighed and collapsed into the grass.

"Do you have an ambulance coming? Because that guy doesn't look so good either," the runner said.

I nodded absently and glanced at Austin. The man handed me a Benadryl. He took another package and went to work prying it open. I popped the Benadryl in my mouth and felt it fizzling on my swollen tongue. Then another. The tightness in my chest began to loosen.

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"Are you allergic to bug stings?" grunted a deep male voice.

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"You're going to feel a pinch in your arm." He wasn't kidding.

Austin was still sitting, EMTs crouched around him. I felt an arm cinch around my waist pulling me to my feet. "What about Austin," I slurred.

"EpiPens aren't good for people with heart problems, but he'll be fine."

The paramedic led me across the meadow. Two ambulances were there along with a fire truck and a few squad cars. Lying down in the ambulance, people scrambling in beside me, doors closing, I caught a glimpse back into the meadow. Kairos's head was bobbing up and down as he grazed. I envied the horse. In the years to come, I would need the steadfastness that he possessed.

Then Kairos looked up. I met his huge brown eyes and let them skim my soul. For a second, I was sure that he had read my mind. Then I was pulled away, sirens blaring.

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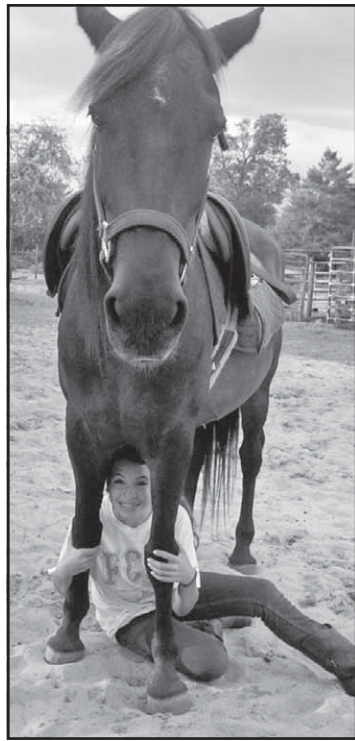


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Good-Bye, Normal Life

by Jennique Peterson, Cameron, WI

health

I was eight when my normal life got ripped out from under me. As a fourth grader, life wasn't all that difficult. Nothing weighed on my mind except choosing which friend to spend the weekend with. That weekend in 2005 started just like any other.

On Saturday, Abby had a slumber party for a bunch of girls. We spent the night watching movies, munching popcorn and candy, and drinking out of heart-shaped water bottles. I just couldn't get enough water. I must have refilled my bottle and gone to the bathroom at least 15 times. I missed a lot of the movie because of those treks.

I was a frustrated kid. For the last few months, sleeping had become a chore. I. Could. Not. Fall. Asleep. At all. Ever. I spent those nights watching the fish float up and down in my lava lamp. Why would a kid who usually slept like a rock suddenly not be able to rest? I was exhausted all the time. I would cry during the night, out of frustration, and then my mother would climb into bed with me. Even with her there, I couldn't drift off. I tried everything: sleeping exercises, counting sheep, and even sleep medicine. Nothing worked. I thought I was going crazy.

After I got home from Abby's, I told my mom about being so thirsty and peeing like crazy. She talked to my dad, who has type 1 diabetes. On a hunch, he decided to check my blood sugar.

As I inspected his glucose monitor, I became nervous. "Dad, I don't want to. I'm fine, really," I said.

"It won't hurt," he assured me. "Just a little pinch, just for a second." He pricked my finger, drew a drop of blood, and put it on a strip. I recall noticing that both my parents held their breath, although at the time I didn't understand why. The meter beeped with its answer. My father's reaction said it all.

My blood sugar was 453 – a clear sign that something was wrong. I didn't know that a normal level was between 80 and 150. There it was, looking us dead in the face: a clear sign that my normal childhood was over.

Although it was pretty late at night, my father, mother, and I got in the car and headed to the emergency room. When we arrived, my father explained what was going on and we were immediately ushered into a private room. The EMT was an older man in a blue jumpsuit with long hair. He reminded me of a hippie janitor, but he was nice. I remember him swiftly putting a long needle into my bony left wrist. It hurt, so I tried to think of something else.

The hippie janitor hooked me up to an IV and left. I looked at my parents' faces. It hurt to watch them. They had seen their beautiful little girl turn into a skeleton over the past few months. The sleepless nights had etched dark circles under my eyes. I looked like a zombie. Their faces were somber as they put it all together: the exhaustion and frustration, the mood swings, the many bathroom runs and empty glasses.

It hit my father like a brick wall. Diabetes can be inherited, and his fear of having one of his children endure what he had always in his mind. I later found out that he cried on my mother's shoulder, thinking it was his fault.

They both put on their best fake smiles as a volunteer walked in holding a teddy bear with warm

eyes and soft fur. It would be the first of many hospital stuffed animals. I greedily reached for the bear and cuddled it close. The next nurse who came in I didn't like too much. She lifted my shirt and said she would count to three. She lied. As most nurses do, she stabbed deep into my skinny stomach on two, not three. Little did I know that I'd have to endure six or more of these shots every day for the rest of my life.

Then the doctor came in, unhooked me from the IV, and talked to my parents briefly. We were going home! I was so happy. I was fixed! All better! I was wrong.

When we got home, I crawled into my grandma's lap and cradled my wrist with the sharp needle still in it. My grandmother rubbed my back and held back tears as I finally, for the first time in months, fell asleep.

The next morning I discovered I didn't have to go to school. I was so happy – until I found out I was seeing a doctor, as well as a dietitian and an endocrinologist, instead.

The waiting room had a children's table and many used coloring books and crayons. I began to color as my mother talked to the receptionist. I looked around the room at all the sick kids and wondered how many had colored in this book. I wondered how many of the kids who had passed through this room were still living. I looked around to make sure my mom wasn't near, grabbed a red crayon,

and scrawled "Jennique was here" in my best fourth-grader handwriting. I thought I was going to die, and I wanted to make sure that if I did, no one would forget me. Maybe someone would read what I'd written and know that I had been here too.

I was taught how to "count carbs," give myself shots, and check my blood sugar. Then I realized it wasn't over. This was just the first of hundreds of doctor visits. I didn't want to understand, so I didn't. I kept crying about how it wasn't fair. It was my first lesson that nothing in life is fair.

Shots scared me, and I refused to inject myself. I couldn't get over the idea of purposefully making myself hurt every time I ate. My mother had to hold me down on the bed, and I would thrash violently while my father gave me a shot. It must have been awful for them, but if they hadn't done it, they would've lost me.

That week I must have aged ten years. I was thinking about things no eight-year-old should have to. I worried that if I made one mistake I would go blind, lose an arm or leg, or die. That makes a person grow up.

I had seen my father give himself insulin injections every day, but I didn't worry about him, didn't wonder why. Now, for the first time, I understood. I cared. I worried. Because I had diabetes, I now cared about others. I cared about their struggles and pain. I wanted to help them. I wanted to understand.

My normal life ended when I was eight years old, and my new life began. I went back to school a week later in the same body, but everyone could tell that I wasn't the same girl.

It has been 3,135 days since my diagnosis. Since D-Day I have given myself 16,000 shots. I have pricked myself 13,000 times. Each shot makes me grow wiser, smarter, and kinder.

People ask me if I would choose to not have diabetes, given the chance. My answer always shocks them. "No. I am glad I have diabetes." It has molded me into an incredible person I feel I wouldn't be if I hadn't suffered what I have. I have an unbreakable bond with my father, and diabetes has helped me decide what I want for my future. On February 22, 2005, my life changed – for the better. ♦

Scrubadubdub

scrub.
scrub.
scrub.
i used to be defined
by how many times
i could scorch my hands
under a tap
until the skin peeled away
from my hands
and the way
i would not dare to
touch the door handles
or curtains
or anything
in case the bacteria
would crawl into my pores
and slowly
kill me
i was afraid
that the viruses only i
could sense
would jump from
my fingertips
onto my sister
or my mother
or everyone
i did not want to
let go of my shackles
because although
OCD was my curse
it was also my protection
my safety net
against the terror of losing
the ones that i love
and of forfeiting my own life
to the diseases my mind
could conjure up
but living in a self-made prison
is not really living
just surviving
and i want to do more than just breathe
i want to be
happy
and more importantly
immune to my own imagination
i will overcome this
so good-bye to
scrubadubdub
and hello
to
freefreefree
by Eleanor Hurton,
Christchurch, New Zealand



Art by
Gianna Santucci,
Merritt Island, FL

Fighting My Demons

by "Rebecca," Lewisville, TX

My breath quickened as I strained to hear the teacher across the room. I couldn't hear my friends' voices over my thumping heart.

Where are they in the alphabet?

Harris?

Oh God.

Jackson?

Oh God, oh God.

My breath caught in my throat as the teacher called my name. "Here," I choked out, and she breezed on to the next.

It's ridiculous, I know, to get so worked up about attendance, but this simple ritual used to terrify me. All I needed to say was "here," but it felt like a performance. Speaking in front of others used to be so frightening that I avoided speech class, a freshman class, until junior year. I never made new friends because I was too anxious to talk to anybody or even make eye contact. I never went to the bathroom at school because I was afraid to ask for permission. Every social situation felt like a big deal; I never understood how others made casual conversation with strangers.

I experienced my first panic attack when I was nine. I had to give my first speech – in front of a class of eight people – and I was so terrified that I stopped breathing and blacked out. No one had ever explained what a panic attack or anxiety disorder was, so I didn't understand until years later, when I

saw a character on TV have a panic attack. That was the first time I didn't feel so alien.

I never thought my situation could get better. "I'm just shy," I would say. But "shy" did not explain my obsessive worrying. Not until I turned sixteen, when my anxiety grew exponentially worse overnight, did I realize that I needed help.

The night before my birthday, I suddenly panicked, unable to let go of terrifying thoughts that I'd lose the people

I loved. Though my thoughts were completely irrational, it really seemed to me that one misstep could lead me to a tragic fall off the edge of normal life and into a canyon of tragedy.

That night I stayed up and worried, experiencing an eruption of anxiety symptoms I had never dealt with before. I remember crying as I tried to explain to my mom what was happening, and I looked at the clock, seeing that it was midnight. "I'm sixteen," I muttered through the tears.

I spent the following weeks huddled on the couch, watching TV with my mom, or huddled on my

I was obsessed with the thought that I would die



Art by Ryan Raybon, Chicago, IL

friend's couch, watching TV with her. I refused to be alone, obsessed with the thought that I would die or my loved ones would leave me if I was not constantly by their side. I was afraid to be alone with my thoughts; I knew that the terror would consume me if my mind left its state of numbness.

I later found out that my severe anxiety was linked to obsessive-compulsive disorder. At first, I didn't understand how this could be, because it didn't fit with what I thought I knew about OCD. Then I read an article by actor Mara Wilson, who explained that for some, OCD is like having a song stuck in your head – but instead of a song, you're plagued with vivid, horrible thoughts.

My tormenting thoughts were about how I would somehow lose the people I love. They made me constantly anxious, stopping me from going anywhere or doing anything. It was the worst feeling of being held down, unable to breathe.

When I finally began seeing a therapist that summer, I felt some freedom and hope, though not immediately. Therapy gave me a place to organize my thoughts and see my problems from an outside point of view, which gave me some answers about what was causing these feelings. I began to feel safer as I learned that my obsessive worries were not about real threats.

My therapist believed that medication could help, so I saw a psychiatrist and was prescribed a medication to treat anxiety associated with OCD. It didn't fix everything immediately, but it did make things seem brighter, and then slowly improved my life profoundly.

After taking the medication for a couple of months, I became able to talk to people without getting nervous, and I learned how to show my personality instead of hiding it. I am still an introvert, but treatment helped to dissolve my fears of interacting. I became more confident and independent, no longer needing to cling to others. The medicine helped free me from anxiety, and therapy taught me not to focus on irrational worries.

Life has become so much brighter. The world used to feel scary, but it only feels that way if you isolate yourself. When my symptoms began to affect me the most, I had not allowed myself any support. I cut myself off from my parents and surrounded myself with negativity. Once I opened up and sought help through therapy, I was able to connect with positive people who reminded me that life is fun. Being treated for social anxiety has helped me make friends and do what I want with my life without inhibition. ♦

Skin and Bones

by "Wendy," Cannon Falls, MN

"I want to go home," I whispered over and over. Tears ran down my face. I missed my home, my friends, and most of all, my family. I couldn't go home, though – not until I got better. I had demolished my body, and it was time to start feeding myself again after a year of starvation. It was also time to accept that I had anorexia.

It all began in eighth grade. Until then, everything in my life had been pretty good. But I had always seen myself as overweight, so I decided to go on a diet. I saw plenty of skinny models and tiny actresses on TV, so I decided I would stop when I looked like them. That was when the misery started.

I refused to eat anything unless I knew exactly how many calories it had. Everything I ate made me feel guilty, even a piece of lettuce. I became weak and tired, yet I could never sleep. I had a tough time concentrating on anything except food. I was always counting calories to make sure I didn't go over my limit. I felt horrible, but somehow I had convinced myself that I was getting healthy.

People looked at me and remarked how skinny I was, but I never believed them. My body was using the little energy it had left to fuel vital organs like my heart. As I starved myself, my hair fell out, my nails broke a lot, and I was constantly freezing. In the summer I wore sweatshirts and pants. Finally my mom saw what was happening and took me to the hospital. If she hadn't, I think I would be dead today.

I was extremely upset to be in the hospital. At first I couldn't stop crying, but finally I moved on and was just sad. I filled out a ton of papers, met my nurses, and got my

room. The nurses were really nice and gave me a stuffed animal and a blanket. I got my first snack there. People complain a lot about hospital food, but everything tasted amazing to me because I had been starving myself for so long.

Eating became easier and easier. I started to enjoy food, though I still couldn't admit it. I met other girls who had eating disorders, and it helped me to talk to them, since they understood what I was going through. Some of them were being discharged, which encouraged me to keep trying to get better. Some had returned because they were still battling anorexia, but that motivated me too. I knew I needed to try hard because I didn't want to live my life in and out of hospitals.

The first thing the girls said to me was "Don't say the F-word or the C-word." I soon learned they meant *fat* and *calories*. I was quiet at first, but after a while I opened up. We played games and talked a lot. Soon I realized my eyes looked

brighter and my skin had more color. My hair got shinier and my bones weren't jutting out as much. It was time to go home. I was excited but scared I would fall back into my bad habits.

I'm home now but still battling anorexia. I'm so thankful for my family supporting me every day, even though I pushed them away at first. I'm also thankful for my best friend, who stuck by me. I now know that trying to be society's version of perfect is unrealistic. Being thin is not worth ruining my life. Looking back, I see I was not the beautiful, petite girl I longed to be; I was a bony monster. My number-one goal is not to have a thigh gap or visible ribs; it's to be happy. I can't say I will ever be happy with my body, but I'm trying, and that's a start. ♦

Everything I ate made me feel guilty

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The Cancer Curse

by Tayler Osborn, Iowa City, IA

The first time I heard it, I was eight years old. Sitting red-eyed and confused in one of the twenty or so pews of a small church in Oakboro, North Carolina, I listened as the preacher explained to the rest of the church family that my Aunt Cheryl and her family gravely needed their prayers. Some terrible thing called cancer was growing inside her, and she wasn't going to win the fight.

Later, I listened in the backyard of my grandmother's house. I sat on the swing between two dogwood trees and, pretending to be occupied with the squirrels trying to invade the birdfeeder, eavesdropped on the adults' conversation, filled with foreign words like "chemotherapy" and "hospice."

Well, therapy is talking like Momma does when she's sad. Is "hospice" like "hospital"? I mulled the words over in my head and tried to shape the syllables with my mouth. I was too young to understand, but considering the amount of food everyone was bringing over, it couldn't be good.

"She been fightin' this since she was twenty, poor thing," said a large lady, cradling a glass of water between fingers hidden beneath stacked gold rings. "It seems to follow your family, don't it?"

I dragged my feet beneath the swing and ground the dirt into my sandals, ruining the white leather. *What does that mean?*

I counted up from my eight to twenty. *Twelve. Twelve, and then I'll have to go too?*

Panicked, I tried to pick up the adults' exchange and connect the dots, but they had fallen silent and my sister was tugging me toward the sandbox.

I heard it again five years later, holding my mother's hand in the oncology office. The oncologist explained that what we had hoped was a harmless lump was actually a cancerous tumor.

Her blunt-cut brown hair and glasses made her look doctorly, so I trusted her as she told me that the small, malignant lump wasn't anything I needed to worry about. She explained that my mother had already had three melanomas removed since the age of twenty, so her screenings had helped catch it at an early stage.

"It seems to follow your family, don't it?"

Surprised, I removed my hand from my mother's and shot her a look. *Three tumors in twenty years? Why didn't she tell me?*

"It can run in some families," the doctor explained. "Sometimes there's a mutation that can be identified. In some cases, there are tests that can be run, but by looking at the family history, I..."

My mother cut her short with a sharp glance.

My mother had it at twenty, too.

A few months later, I spotted an envelope on my mother's desk. It showed a black and white logo that looked like the pictures of DNA from textbooks. I sat on her bed and tried to decipher what the doctor had sent. Gibberish. There were so many words: white blood cells, hemoglobin, malignant, surgery, genetic, chemotherapy, mutations. But I found that the words fit in my mouth better than before. I didn't choke on them, just stumbled.

My mother walked in and found me staring at the packet. She told me that she and my grandmother had been tested and were positive for a mutation in their BRCA1 gene. There were genes that helped suppress tumors, but theirs were damaged, which meant that cells had a higher chance of growing uncontrollably. It meant cancer, and it was hereditary.

"We're not sure what's going to happen in the future, sweetheart," she said, sliding the papers through my fingers. "We can talk about getting you tested when you're older, but it doesn't mean anything just yet."

It means we have the Cancer Curse. These things only happen in Lifetime movies, right?

It didn't hit every one of us, and it didn't always mean the end, but the results came with their own timer. The women in my family who had developed cancer had all discovered a malignant tumor by the age of twenty.

For weeks I lost sleep and hours reading everything about cancer, but it was too much information for me to integrate. Everything from the sun to water seemed to carry some cancer-causing danger. I pushed it to the back of my mind. It didn't hit everyone, so I was fine, right?

It had been five years since it had been made real to me, five years since cancer had been close enough to touch me. But there I sat again, red-eyed and confused, in one of the twenty or so pews of a small church. It wasn't North Carolina this time, and there was no preacher asking for prayers. I was sitting one pew behind my cousin John, who was staring with glazed eyes at the black casket holding his brother, David.

Only a few weeks earlier, I had seen David alive for the last time. John and I had spent an hour in his car as he explained how different David was going to look when I saw him. I halfway listened, but it was hard to imagine with David's photo hanging from the rearview mirror. He had his arm slung around John's shoulders, and they were smiling, dirty from tackling each other in a game that had start-

ed as soccer.

Once we worked up the nerve to go up to David's hospital room, I stood outside his door, the mantra *Be happy* running through my head. Taking a deep breath, I walked in to find someone I didn't recognize in that hospital bed. He was swallowed in a robe and covered by a web of wires connected to noisy machines. I felt a hand on my back guiding me to the chair next to the bed. I tried to sit, hoping no one would notice that John's presence was the only thing keeping my hands from shaking.

The man who had seemed to hold more happiness and life in one body than I had seen in any crowd had shrunk down to little more than bones. The beanie he had on to keep himself warm swallowed his head, and blue-gray skin stretched over his protruding cheekbones.

I stayed by his bed holding his limp hand. He was too weak to respond, but I saw tears leak from closed eyes, letting me know that he heard me begging him to hold on and fight. It terrified me just as much as it broke my heart to see him. Maybe it was selfish – as a matter of fact, I know it was – but I didn't see just him in that bed.

Suddenly I snapped back to the funeral because of the sudden silence. I reached over and gently squeezed John's shoulder, in part to let him know that I was there, but it wasn't selfless. I needed to know *he* was there to feel grounded.

My hand slipped off his shoulder as he stood to walk past the casket; he and his mother led the procession to the parking lot. One by one, people rose to follow them and say their final good-byes to my cousin. I sat, detached, as the pews emptied. Autopilot took over, and my legs lifted me and carried me forward.

I knew I wouldn't be able to go to the burial, so I found John, promised to stop by later with food, and hurried to my car. I made it all of about three miles before I pulled off to the side of the road and let out the sob that had been building in my chest since I had parked at the funeral home earlier that morning.

Cancer was real again. It had taken my cousin, and I could very easily be next. I had just started my second semester at college. I had a job and new friends, and with my nineteenth birthday just a month away, the dreaded twenty loomed just around the corner. Weren't birthdays supposed to be exciting?

Taking a shaky breath, I wiped my eyes and pulled down the visor to fix whatever makeup might miraculously be left.

You could always get that test.

It had been a long time since I had thought about that. It had crossed my mind, sure, but not in a way that made me pick up the phone to call my mother for the first time in months. Not in a way that made me tell her to set an appointment in June, that I'd be coming home to find out if I carried the Cancer Curse and see if I had an expiration date.

And that was exactly what it felt like – an expiration date. Like I had it stamped on the bottom of my foot, like a milk carton. The date might not be clearly written yet, but the lines were slowly starting to form, and I wanted to know how to erase them before they were permanent.

Putting my car into drive, I pulled back onto the road and turned on the radio. An upbeat melody filled the car as I merged into traffic. I had set the appointment, and now the waiting game began. ♦

The results came with their own timer



Art by Arushi Kuchhal, Noida, India

Tonsillec-tastrophe!

by "Sarah," Wilmington, MA

I let out a desperate gurgle of panic as I watched the pool of red forming on the hardwood floor. My mother rushed in, yelling, "What's wrong?" Then everything moved in slow motion. I saw my mother's face go white, and I could tell she was thinking what I was thinking: that I was going to die.

They said it was a routine surgery, and any complications would be "no big deal." How could a simple tonsil surgery go so wrong? Approximately 500,000 tonsillectomies are performed each year, and most go the same way: a quick surgery, a couple weeks of mushy food, and on with normal life. Not me. My surgery and recovery were anything but routine.

My parents and I arrived at Boston Children's Hospital around 7. A nurse escorted me to my temporary hospital bed for pre-op paperwork, a change into hospital clothes, and an IV. I was fine with everything except the IV.

There's nothing I despise more than needles.

"My veins are small, just so you know," I warned the nurse.

"Don't worry," she said. "Just one small pinch, and it will be all done." She smiled and started to set up the IV in my right hand. I gripped my mother's hand with my left and watched the nurse's every move.

Her happy-go-lucky expression faded into a frown as she fished the needle around under the skin. "Wow, they are small," she mumbled. She pulled the needle out and covered the spot with gauze. "Hold this. I'll be right back." She forced a smile and left.

A few minutes later a doctor came in. "Hi there," he said, kneeling beside my bed. "I heard you have some tricky veins. Mind if I take a look?"

Yes, I do mind, I thought, offering my left hand.

I watched the young doctor the way I'd watched the nurse: like a hawk. He too fished around a little but eventually got it working. His methods were painful, but effective.

"Do you want to punch me in the face now?" he said, jokingly. He knew it hurt.

"No," I lied.

I sat still, trying to keep my mind off the IV. I had never had surgery before and soon realized that learning all about "what to expect during and after a surgery" from Google probably hadn't been the best idea. Even though there were interesting facts, the most highlighted topics were what could go wrong.

"I have a bad feeling about this," I said to my mother.

"There's no reason to be worried. You're in the best possible hands." She gave me a warm smile. "Plus, it will be over before you know it."

My dad piped in, "It's a tonsil surgery ... come on, how can they mess that up?"

The nurse told us it was time. I took a deep breath. My parents were right. There was no reason to get all worked up. This surgery was going to help me breathe better.

Lights glared in my eyes as I heard the faint sound of my name. "Sarah ..." my mother called. I started to become more aware of my surroundings – and my unbearably sore throat. The space where my tonsils had been now felt like it was filled with a million tacks. Each time I swallowed, the tunnel of tacks constricted, piercing my skin.

How could a simple surgery go so wrong?

The nurse handed my father the discharge information. "The most important thing is to not eat anything but liquid-like foods for a couple weeks. And nothing red. We don't want to mistake a red Popsicle with actual blood. If you happen to see any blood in your saliva or on your pillow, call an ambulance."

If I could describe my state during the next six days in one word, it would be "miserable." I couldn't eat anything that appealed to me. It was torture for a diehard pasta lover: I was only allowed pasta if it was overcooked and chopped up into a million little pieces, then drenched in chicken broth.

To be honest, a spoon was unnecessary. It would have been more efficient just to drink it. Along with eight glasses of water a day, that was my new diet. I just couldn't get used to it. Not being able to eat normally made me reach a new level of ravenous hunger.

One week after my surgery, I cracked. My stomach turned as I looked at my twentieth bowl of chicken broth and pasta.

"Mom, could you please make this a tiny bit more appetizing? Maybe add some grated cheese or something?"

My mother sighed. "I can add some butter to give it flavor, but grated cheese is a no-no."

"A little cheese isn't going to hurt," I pleaded, swirling the soup with my spoon.

"Fine, just a little."

I inhaled that bowl of soup with glee. A few minutes later, I felt what I assumed was post-nasal drip running down the back of my throat. Disgusting.

I spit into a tissue, and that was when I realized it was blood. A lot of blood.

Choking, I screamed to my mother, who ran in and froze. She was in shock, a state I would have been in if I wasn't trying ever so hard not to die. My mother, in a panic, dialed 911.

"My daughter – she recently had a tonsil surgery and she's bleeding, like *really* bleeding. She can barely breathe!"

Following the 911 operator's instructions, my mother got a trash bin and had me lean over it so the blood wouldn't flow down my throat. That limited the choking, but now I could see just how much blood I was losing. By the time the EMTs arrived, I was severely nauseated and feeling woozy.

The EMTs came in nonchalantly. One even asked me my name and what was going on. Seriously? We've got a real genius over here, people. It might be a good idea to stop asking questions and take the girl throwing up blood to a hospital.

Soon, but not soon enough, they loaded me into the ambulance with my mother next to me.

"We don't know if it's safe to move her," the EMT whispered to my mother. "We have some doctors rushing over right away, but all we can do is monitor her. She's starting to clot, which is good, but it's an arterial bleed; those have a pretty strong flow."

Could this get any worse? I thought.

In my peripheral vision, I spotted a man with a needle. Of course.

Even though I despised having an IV put in, I was too disoriented and lethargic to react. I just remember doctors performing an evaluation and then rushing me to the nearest hospital.

Once there I was prepped for emergency surgery to stop the bleeding. My vision was starting to fade, but I remember my grandmother and mother holding each other tightly and reassuring me, "Sarah, you're going to be fine, just fine."

The surgery was a success, but I had to stay in the hospital for four days. The doctors explained that this kind of thing was completely unexpected. In other words, they had no idea why my artery broke open in my throat, but they were confident that they



Art by Claire Burn, Henrico, VA

"My daughter can barely breathe!"

had fixed the problem.

Sure, they fixed the problem. They fixed it so well that after being discharged, I bled again exactly one week later, like clockwork. It was not nearly as bad the second time, but I was hospitalized again. Once again, they were stumped.

Each disastrous day added a new challenge. My recovery time was pushed back another month. That was my first year of middle school, and I was surprised that anyone knew my name when I returned two months later.

Even then, things didn't go back to normal. I was underweight and anemic. I could barely walk to the bathroom and back without getting winded, never mind walking to and from class, so I went to school for half days. I had so much makeup work that during the last two weeks of my recovery, I hired a tutor to help me catch up. Ultimately, most teachers didn't even give me a grade; they just marked an M for medical.

Each time I tell this story, I get the same reactions: "Oh my God, that's terrible!" "Wow! From a tonsil surgery?" However, some people say I'm lucky, which I could never wrap my head around. "I almost died and wasn't myself for over a year. How is that lucky?" I would say.

Looking back now, I do see why. I am lucky, not because this terrible thing happened, but because of one important thing: I *almost* died. "Almost" is the key word. I'm lucky because I survived. ♦

At Home at the Shelter

by Sally Jo, Alpine, NJ

One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.

When I first came across this fact, I couldn't grasp the immensity of it. I was aware of domestic violence, but I hadn't realized it is so prevalent. Domestic violence, I learned, is far from rare; it may affect my family, friends, teachers, neighbors, or even me.

For about two years, I have been volunteering at an incredible nonprofit organization that helps and houses domestic violence victims. Shelters help women get back on their feet and give them a place to live while they figure out their next job and house; shelter staff take care of the children with childcare, activities, and tutoring.

After just one visit, I knew I wanted to return. Everyone there made me feel comfortable, like part of their community. I became engrossed in this cause and organized a project to

raise money for a new boutique at the shelter. I was invited to speak at the check-giving ceremony, received the Volunteer Award on behalf of my school club, helped paint the boutique, and attended its opening ceremony.

Summer approached, and I knew I wanted to spend more time with the kids at the shelter, so I volunteered to be a camp counselor. It was exhausting chasing the kids around and constantly keeping an eye on them during field trips, but I loved every second of each nine-hour work day. The campers' high energy and smiles were absolutely contagious.

As the days passed, the kids slowly opened up to me. They shared stories about their families. They told me their favorite songs, movies, and

games. They ran to me when they needed to cry. They asked me to hold their hands when crossing busy streets. They hugged me each day as though they hadn't seen me in years, exclaiming, "Where have you been? I missed you!"

The kids slowly opened up to me

It's hard listening to them without tearing up. Once, on a subway ride to a field trip, my buddy for the day – a chatterbox – was talking about dinosaurs. When he suddenly went silent, I followed his big brown eyes across

the train car to a father and son who looked like they were having the best time. The young son was climbing all over his exhausted, red-faced dad, who was grinning and playing along. I smiled at them, but when I looked back at my buddy, I saw pain in his eyes. He said, "I have a dad too," then

became silent again. I tried to cheer him up, but that was a moment I will never forget. This four-year-old had more emotional scars than I could fathom. This memory makes me want to do everything I can to help these kids.

On a happier note, when we were on the train for another field trip, a stranger looked over at us and commented, "The kids love you! You're doing a great job." This was one of the best compliments I have ever received. It means so much to me that the kids enjoy spending time with me.

I have met amazing staff, children, and mothers at the shelter. They inspire me to continue working with these critically important organizations. The shelters' mission motivates me. I've discovered a cause that I will dedicate my time and effort to for the rest of my life. ♦

A Twin's Journey into Autism

by Kristina de Mora, Ridgewood, NJ

I am one of those rare people who has the good fortune to be a twin. My sister, Isabella, and I share many traits, tastes, and opinions, but there is one important difference between us: Isabella is autistic.

Autism affects one in 88 children. It is diagnosed more frequently than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined. Thousands of families are affected, including mine. The special care and services an autistic child requires can place a significant financial burden on families. Isabella has received occupational, physical, and speech therapy, as well as applied behavioral analysis. People who don't have firsthand experience with it may view autism in a negative light. Some ask ignorant questions about my sister and make hurtful comments.



Photo by Alicja Madloch, Short Hills, NJ

For instance, we were shopping for shoes once when Isabella picked up another customer's water bottle and drank from it. The owner of the bottle screamed at my sister and accused my mother of raising a teenager with no manners. She yelled, "What's the matter with her?" I stepped in and apologized, explaining that my sister is autistic, and my mom gave the woman money for a new bottle of water. The woman then quipped, "Well, she looks normal." I told my mom later that I struggle to understand how people lack tolerance and why they react with such vehement anger. She told me that I shouldn't judge because I really do not know anything about that stranger.

I still struggle at times – it is hard to view intolerant people with compassion, especially when they mistreat your loved one. But I am starting to understand that teaching others about autism is ultimately more powerful than reacting in anger.

Because I want to share my family's experiences, I volunteer with a number of organizations that help people with autism, including the Autism Theatre Initiative, Pony Power Therapies, and the Brooklyn Autism Center. I have also spoken about autism at a number of local groups. I urge people to be kinder and try to teach them that those with autism can lead successful lives too.

My latest endeavor is a collaboration with the Alpine Learning Group (a school for children and adults with autism) and a bake shop called Baked in a Cup. We created a specialty cupcake called the Alpine. Every time one is sold, a portion of the proceeds goes to the school.

Last fall, my mom and I volunteered with a local 4-H Club to clean up a local cemetery. We were hesitant to bring Isabella into this unfamiliar setting,

since changes to her routine and new faces can overwhelm her. But, we decided to give it a try, and Isabella had a great time. She enjoyed being outdoors, exercising, helping, and socializing. She participated by raking leaves and picking up garbage. She laughed and did several of what we call her "happy twirls," where she turns around in a circle one time with a big smile. She never looked scared or overwhelmed. She posed for a group picture with the other 4-H volunteers and held up her fingers to make a "4." We make an effort to include Isabella and take her out to community activities as often as possible.

On my journey through life with my twin sister I've gone through the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. At my high school, there are several sets of twin sisters, and I have felt envious of their close relationships and their ability to participate in typical teenage activities. I've felt angry that Isabella can't always share the same experiences as me. However, I am now gratefully experiencing a new stage – acceptance.

I love my sister, and I love having her in my life. I have grown to accept and appreciate her for who she is. Just last night, I was studying for my math mid-term and she came in the room at just the right time and said, "You're awesome." She is kind and never judges. She hugs me, kisses me, and shows me genuine emotion and love. She makes me laugh so hard. She loves the theme song from "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air," and when we play it, she dances with abandon. She is fearless, and as a result is a much better ice skater than I am. She continues to better herself by writing in her journal every day.

Yes, I wish I had a twin to equally share all of life's experiences, but Isabella gives me so much, just in a different way. ♦

Some people ask ignorant questions about my sister

UNIVERSITY OF Michigan

Ann Arbor, MI: As a high school senior, I have toured a lot of prospective colleges. On typical college visits, I attend an informational presentation, complete with slide show and statistics, followed by a walking tour, complete with tour guide and history. And though I did take the “official” college tour at the University of Michigan, my visit didn’t stop there. It ended in the Big House, complete with over 113,000 “tour guides.”

In mid-October, my mom and I flew out to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for my first visit to the University of Michigan. Since U-M is my first-choice school, I wanted to give myself a chance to forge as much of a personal connection to the school as possible before applying, including attending one of its legendary football games. This was the first, and only, college football game I’ve ever attended.

Knowing how iconic U-M’s football games are, I even went so far as to plan my visit around the Michigan

vs. Penn State game, since I had applied to both schools.

Saturday, October 11th, at Michigan’s only night game of the year, the Wolverines kicked off against the Nittany Lions. U-M played well throughout all four quarters, highlighting key players such as Jake Ryan. And as a pleasant surprise – considering Michigan’s losing streak this season – they won 18-13.

When you think of the University of Michigan, you probably think of the Big House. Built in 1927, Michigan Stadium quickly became an iconic symbol of both the school and college football. It boasts a legacy of pride, tradition, and excellence. I found it inspiring that even though 2014 was not one of Michigan’s most successful football seasons, the Big House has drawn 100,000-plus attendees every game since Nov. 8, 1975.

As I stood in a sea of Blue and Maize, I wondered what it is about Michigan and the Big House that makes it one of the most iconic homes to college football. Why do so many – from near and far – withstand freezing temperatures and snow to watch Michigan football? When one thinks of college football, why does one automatically think of U-M?

Before visiting, I knew of my interest and love for U-M. However, I didn’t expect to find such an overwhelming number of supporters like me. Since U-M has the largest number of living alumni, it isn’t unusual to come across another Victor anywhere around the world. I found this out first-hand on my way home from Michigan. As I sat – in Michigan apparel – waiting for my connecting flight in the Denver Airport, a passing stranger cheered, “Go Blue!” as he walked by. Even back home, I find

It boasts a legacy of pride, tradition, and excellence

people commenting any time I sport the Blue and Maize.

Besides school spirit, it seems to me that almost everyone – alumni or not – seems to know something about U-M. Whenever I mention the school, talk of its Ohio State rivalry, its most famous alumni, and football usually follow.

My visit to U-M reassured me about my first-choice school. My desire to attend was strengthened even further after attending the game. During my visit, I had the opportunity to learn not only from my tour guide, but also first-hand from the 100,000-plus others that gave me a tour into the life of a Wolverine. I realized that U-M embodies everything I want in a college: social connections, academics, pride, and deep commitment to top-level achievement. I want to attend a school that I can be proud of and support long after I graduate. ♦

by Camille Keh, La Cañada, CA

UNIVERSITY OF British Columbia

Vancouver, BC, Canada: Vancouver is settling into its rainy season, and I am settling into life at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver campus.

UBC boasts a reputation as one of the top schools in Canada, with a student population of 50,000. This means a wide range of classes and extracurricular activities. We even have a Quidditch team. I love the diversity; in my first term, I have met classmates from all the continents except Antarctica. (For that, the Vancouver Aquarium has penguins. Cute, fluffy penguins.)

And the campus is beautiful. It is located right beside the beach, and students can be seen jogging on wooded trails around campus. There are always art displays, and squirrels are everywhere. The campus is very big, which could be a downside because consecutive classes can be located at different ends. For those who like city life, downtown Vancouver is a 40-minute bus ride. The seclusion adds to the beauty of UBC, but makes it a bit inconvenient to work off campus.

The residences are varied enough to cater to students’ different preferences, from single-gender floors to co-ed floors to suite-style apartments. I’m not a huge fan of the mandatory meal plans for first-year students, though. The dining halls’ food isn’t very good. However, there are plenty of other choices around campus. There is a great sushi bar, pizza places, and at least three Starbucks.

One downside of UBC is the cost: upwards of \$20,000 per year, and even more for international students. Most of my friends at UBC believe that the cost is worth the quality of education.

Overall, UBC is a great school for those who want to challenge themselves academically, have many options for extracurriculars, and meet a diverse student population. ♦

by Sherry Yuan,
Richmond, BC, Canada



Photo by Anastasia Tishena, Sunny Isles Beach, FL

Colby-Sawyer COLLEGE

New London, NH: Colby-Sawyer, located in the beautiful White Lakes region of New Hampshire, has to be one of the most picturesque colleges in the world. When standing on campus and looking in every direction, you’ll see that you are surrounded by a postcard picture of mountains. To go along with the scenery, the Georgian-style rustic buildings are nice on the eyes as well.

The campus is easily navigated, as all of the buildings are just a few steps away. New London is a quiet, small town, the perfect place for students to work on their studies, while still offering them what they need from a town. Cities like Lebanon and Concord are only a 20-minute drive away.

The college offers 30 majors as well as six courses of study. At Colby-Sawyer, you are not just a number; you will know each person’s name as you walk the campus, and enjoy one-on-one relationships with professors. Small class size ensures that

each student is accounted for and is getting the most bang for their buck. This college is an easy place to get focused and not fall behind in your studies. The internship program will also make sure you are more than ready for the real world of whatever field you study.

Colby-Sawyer offers 24 varsity sports and an intramural program to satisfy athletic students. With most of the teams in the Division III bracket, it’s easy for high school athletes to continue to play their sport while earning a top-of-the-line education. Colby-Sawyer is also known for its strong financial aid services to help students reach their dream of a college degree at a reasonable price.

The looks on the faces of the students say it perfectly – all smiles. Colby-Sawyer College is the place to be. ♦

by Andrew Carbone, Lynnfield, MA

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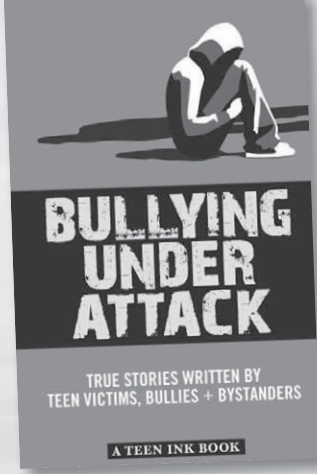
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Declaring My Independence

by Nick Paris, MI

Ceasing to rely so much on others was a decision that made me stronger. My turning point: a cross-country meet last year. Before that, I had always looked forward to practice. I used to be upset if I missed a practice. I used to rely more on others than myself.

Most coaches don't make runners run 12 miles on the second day of practice, but ours did. He made everyone run the same distance, regardless of their ability. I knew that was not the right way to train. Despite my dislike of his methods, I learned to deal with them so I wouldn't get injured. Still, I was a frequent critic of his workouts. A few runners referred to me as "the anti-coach" because I voiced my view of what would be a better workout. Because of these long practices, my time for homework was hours less per night. He made cross-country a huge commitment. The only reason I didn't quit was: I liked running.

To me, a great coach is like a great teacher. It's the teacher's job to help each along their particular path to understand the subject, though you still need your own study habits and dedication to succeed. Similarly, a coach

guides you to your personal athletic maximum so you can race your best. But Coach's workouts seemed to set us up for failure, with only the top 10 percent of the team able to do them. And he had a "my way, or the highway" attitude: missing practice was illegal, being tired was a sin, and injury was disgraceful. As harsh as that seemed, I still pushed myself hard and improved, but it was never enough for him.

The first time I thought of my coach in a completely different light was the day before the meet at Stony Creek. At the start of practice, he furiously scolded us for not running our hardest during the last meet. He explained that instead of our easy before-race run, he was going to give us a very hard workout.

A few minutes after he sent us off on that intense run, he passed by me and a teammate in his car, screaming, "Why the hell are you running so slow?"

A few minutes later, we came upon him standing in the sidewalk. His face was red and his shirt was unbuttoned, unlike his usual tidy look. He asked us to stop so he could point to the group in front of us and say, "Those guys are better than you, and if you don't run with them like I told you to, you will never be as good as them."

"Why are you running so slow?"

"We are on pace!" I retorted. "They're going too fast!" "I don't care. If you're not with them, you won't be as good as them. I'm tired of you two running together. If you keep this up I'll make sure you never run together at practice again."

I was blindsided by that comment. But my brain, deprived of oxygen, processed it as motivation. During that practice, my friend and I ended up running really fast, and I did run well in the meet the next day. But when I analyzed Coach's words afterwards, I realized his idea of motivation was so full of negativity that it was actually more of an insult.

It wasn't until the following week's meet that I knew for sure that relying on my coach was inhibiting me. Coach had insisted on the JV team wearing our sweat tops and bottoms, although they were nothing special. The garments were so worn from years of use, most had holes. Since it was 60 degrees, I took my jacket off after warmup. Coach didn't reprimand me during our stretching, so I didn't wear my warmups to the starting line. Then I felt a strong hand on my shoulder and spun around to see Coach. "It is clear that you have no pride in your team because you did not do what I told the them to do," he growled. "If you don't want to be on this team, you know how to quit."

His words hit me like a sucker punch. I felt like a piece of stale gum – chewed up and spit out, with no value. I could have gotten more upset, but like the last time, my brain just passed it off until I could think straight.

During that race, I could hear Coach cheer on my teammates, but he directed no words at me. It devastated me to realize that he didn't care. Cross-country is not a very popular sport, so those who go to meets are the ones who really care. I know any runner would agree: the people who come to cheer you on are your motivation for trying hard, but the most important spectator is your coach. Coaches' words of encouragement are specific to each runner, and their voices are the most important ones you hear while running. A coach will say things like, "Keep up this pace and you will get your best time!" and "If you stay in this position, we win the meet!"

Those encouragements provide you with the mental strength to ignore the pain and succeed. But now Coach's words, which I used to rely on, were missing. This lack of encouragement could have made me give a bad performance. Luckily, I didn't let it.

How did I let myself rely on someone who can just dismiss me from his mind? How can a grown man be this rude to a kid? I thought as I ran.

The more I thought, the angrier I got. That anger manifested as power. I finished third with no congratulations from Coach and a new resolution: I wouldn't rely on him any more.

The moment I made this resolution, I released myself from reliance on Coach's so-called wisdom. My new-found independence also inspired me to do my homework on my own. I had fallen into a bad habit of looking up answers online or asking friends for help before I even tried the problems. Beginning that Monday, I started setting two alarms to ensure I got to school on time; I even installed an agenda application on my phone and kept all my plans in it, rather than having my mom remind me.

Since then, I have stuck with my resolution and created many more habits of self-reliance. I have become a person who is not easily swayed by the opinions of others. I know who I am and what I stand for, and people can't persuade me to doubt those beliefs. Furthermore, I have improved my grades. Now I don't need to hold anyone's hand as I travel along my path in life. ♦

Dictionary of the Deep

by Lydia Stevens,
Pismo Beach, CA

Zero feet. It may feel like a chokehold on deck, but once the frigid water starts creeping in the cracks around my cheeks and forehead, I wish that neoprene hood were even tighter. It cradles my chin, a comfort, while the boat lurches in every direction in the swirling surge from Mexican hurricanes that send surf wrapping around the coast and up the channel. Draped over the banister of the upper level, the tanks bang against each other like unsynchronized wind chimes while the ocean mist sprinkles my face with every rolling wave. Every time I take my bounding step off the deck, splashing into the water, I remember the first breath I ever took underwater. The elation I felt that fateful day rushes again into my chest like the air I slurp from the regulator, my teeth clamped down on the mouthpiece to prevent water from flowing down my trachea.

Seven feet. In the same pool where my swim team cranked out countless laps of butterfly, I was convinced my earliest breaths underwater would be my last. Never would I have guessed how addicting that twinge of terror and adrenaline would become, the perfect fix to complacency. I never would have known how below the surface the sunlight refracts in rays, a fan of velvety beams.

Twenty feet. Out in the open water, divers guide their hands down the anchor line in single file, stopping every few meters to equalize and push air bubbles out through their ear canals. A pop, and then instant relief. I close my eyes and listen to the environment without the contamination of human voices. Parrotfish crunch on coral in the reef below, preparing to cloak themselves with a nightly mucus bubble, a translucent nightgown. Kelp swishes in the tide with lobsters scurrying up and down the long stems. And if I'm really lucky, I hear the high-frequency squeaks, whistles, and clicks of a pod of dolphins, a passing moment never forgotten.

Thirty-six feet. Thousands of brittle stars congregate on the sandy bottom. I turn to my dive partner and signal the "okay" sign (never a thumbs-up because that means go up to the surface, and nobody wants to do that). Now it's time to observe beauty in a place where vocal exclama-

tions don't exist, only hand gestures. When I spot a bat ray nuzzled down in the sand, I move my arms up and down by my sides as if to imitate the ray's movement and hope someone will see me. Sometimes it's a gift only for me.

One hundred feet. Two and a half city blocks underwater. Every color fades to shades of blue and gray. There's no jetting up to the surface in an emergency. Tiny gas bubbles built up from time at depth can expand within arteries, causing decompression sickness known as "the bends." Run out of air and the only thing to do is remain calm and signal to a buddy to share – a plea for the ever-important alternate air hose known as the "octopus."

Quiet observation, silent reflection, inaudible expression. The red hand of my depth gauge swivels around its axis as I descend.

The necessity for pure, simple communication increases, forcing me to figure out how to express myself effectively. Having the opportunity to break away from the typical interactions of my day and spend even just an hour communicating in a manner so atypical to most is absolutely captivating. Instead of words, which flow easily, I talk with my hands, with my eyes, with my whole body. Everything but my mouth, unless it's to crack a smile. Now, I weightlessly float along, clapping with delight. ♦

*I remember
the first breath
I ever took
underwater*



Photo by Gerald Thompson, Sarasota, FL



Photo by Emma Smith, Belleville, ON, Canada

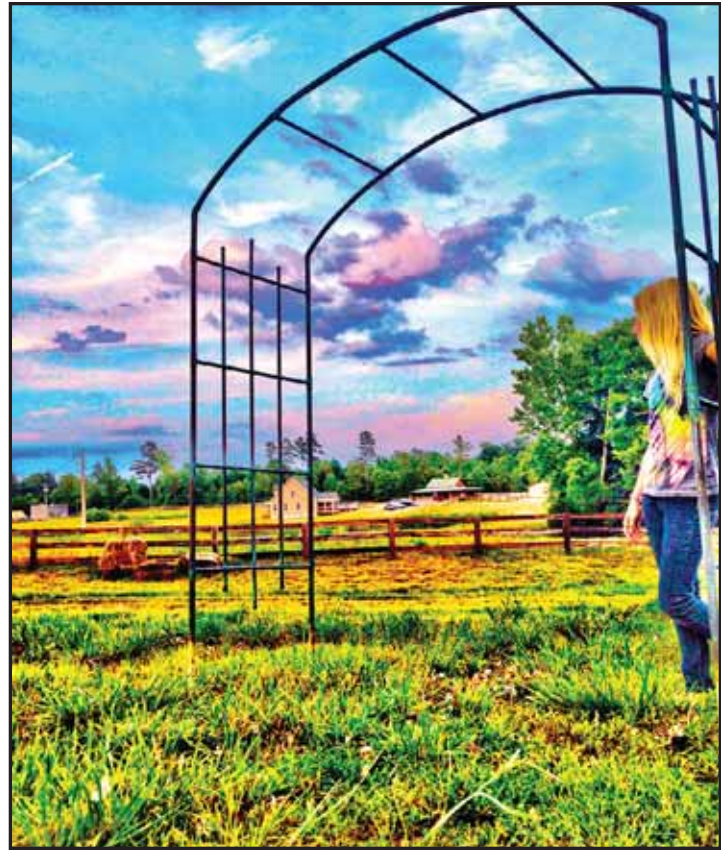


Photo by Emily Kustka, Cary, NC



Photo by Nicholas Mancini, Parkland, FL



Art by Rebecca Huang, Taipei, Taiwan



Art by J.S. Wong, Victoria, BC, Canada



Photo by Ekaterina Yashchenko, Almaty, Kazakhstan



Art by Ashley Tsang, Johns Creek, GA



Photo by Andrea Newland, Ava, NY

My Favorite Place on Earth

by Alayna Stinson, Flowery Branch, GA

I lived in Florida for 12 years. The town had one paved road running through its middle, dirt roads branching off like a spiderweb. Everything was within walking distance. My mom, her boyfriend, my baby sister, and I were surrounded by family. Weekends were filled with trips to the beach and visits with friends. I was accepted into the gifted program at my middle school. I was first chair alto saxophone in both jazz and symphonic band. Everything was going great in my life. I was pretty happy.

Then my family and I were faced with a tough decision. My mom had applied for a job in Oregon. I hadn't even heard of Oregon, and I was completely against the idea of moving. I was scared. I did some research. The weather looked really nice; it was absolutely beautiful there; there were a lot of hippies and music festivals. Suddenly I felt bored and wanted a change just as much as my mom, who had lived in Florida all her life too. I welcomed the uncertainty and risk.

During the summer of 2012, we packed up everything we owned in a giant U-Haul, which towed one of our cars. Another truck followed behind, towing our other car. We were on our way. We flew through



Photo by Shalom Gohlsion, Woodburn, OR

Georgia in a day, easy as pie. We had music blaring and walkie-talkies so we could communicate easily between the two trucks and call each other by our trucker handles. (Mom was Mama Bear, I was Silver Panther, my sister was Tinker Bell, and Mom's boyfriend was Big Bird.) Excitement bubbled inside me; the wind that blew my hair around gave me encouragement.

In North Carolina, we drove up winding mountains, windows down, taking pictures of glimmering waterfalls. We drove through a little of Tennessee, straight through Kentucky, and saw a bit of Indiana and Illinois. I was disappointed at how similar these states looked to Florida and grew increasingly anxious to get to Oregon.

While in Missouri, we crossed a huge bridge where only one lane was in use. It seemed to lurch beneath our tires, and the sound of construction dug into our skulls. I asked my mom where we were and she said "Good ol' St. Louis." The city was completely different from anything I had ever seen. Tall buildings loomed in the glare of the sun; there was hardly a hint of greenery. It smelled like artificial hope. There weren't many people wandering the streets; it reminded me of the zombie apocalypse. I

decided this was my favorite place on Earth.

On we went, and we spent the night at a dingy little hotel in Kansas. As we parked our vehicles, we noticed a tree – a vibrating tree. There was no wind, and yet the leaves were shaking and objects were dropping to the ground. In the blackness of the night, it looked like a monster. We cautiously approached and gasped in amazement. Bats! Hundreds of bats! They clung to every inch of the tree and squeaked and darted at the ground. Every time we turned, there was one swooping by our heads, catching a stray mosquito. For a long time we watched the lively tree, talking about how grateful we were to see such a rare sight.

We hit Nebraska and got two flat tires. It was the middle of the night, so we slept in a Walmart parking lot. Tensions were high; my mom started talking about turning back. Thanks to my pleading, we continued on through Wyoming, bordering on Colorado. We stopped in a town where they gushed over this monumental piece of history we just absolutely had to see. It was a tree that had grown through a rock. It sounded a bit exciting at first – a break from the harsh laws of nature. The "tree" that they spoke of was hardly more than a weed, only slightly taller than me, but the rock itself was humongous. White sage grew all around it, so we picked some to burn in our new house to rid it of evil spirits. The area was fenced in, right in the middle of the highway. I stared at the desert mountains expecting to see a road runner being chased by a slow coyote. Tumbleweed drifted lazily across the road. My lips were starting to crack from the dryness. I decided this was my favorite place on Earth.

In Utah, the mountains were powdery red and the ground seemed like it would crack open and swallow us whole at any moment, splashing us into an ocean of lava that would burn us to charred chips. I took a lot of pictures and imagined armies of ghosts marching between the canyons. I had a lot of nosebleeds from the dry air, but that was all part of the fun. I decided this was my favorite place on Earth.

We visited family in Idaho and then finally arrived in Oregon. There was a rest stop right at the border where we pulled over to cheer. There were hugs, tears, and laughter. It was the middle of summer, and it was freezing. Actually, it was about 70, but for a bunch of Floridians, it was coat weather. We blew on dandelions and rolled around in the dry dirt. Even the bugs were different; not a single roly-poly, and the ants were ginormous. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue I had never seen before, and the air seemed purer than anything that had ever entered my lungs. For the first time, it seemed like I could actually breathe.

We lived crammed into a small hotel room for about a month, sharing two beds and a single bathroom. It was slightly miserable. We moved to a nearby town, and I started school. The kids were different, more aloof, and they watched me rather than approached me. But I made friends, some of whom I still keep in contact with today.

We moved to another town that had a population of 3,000. I had never been so in love. It was incredibly community-oriented; the students all knew each other and welcomed newcomers. Soon I had the town memorized like the back of my hand. We would all layer up in the fall, walk down the street

to a park, and pretend we were being chased by assassins. The sky was a marble-gray that made me feel like I was living under a metal dome, and there was almost always drizzle on my clothes. It was wonderful. I knew I belonged here.

The high school was a hop over the fence away, and during football season I would watch the players and the marching band practice. I would sit on the bleachers and wave to them as they jogged by. I had my first chair in jazz band back, and I was in advanced English. I was rarely at our house because I was always hanging out with friends.

Nighttime was my favorite time. That was when I would really go out and play. I would walk around the neighborhood by myself. Blackness would envelop me, and I felt like anything could happen. A time portal could open up in front of me; a cult could come chanting behind me on the sidewalk. Sometimes I would go to the park and swing or watch the older teenagers mess around. Other times I would lie on the track and stare at the cloud-hidden stars, let the coolness of the air kiss my skin. This was truly my favorite place on Earth.

My time in Oregon was the greatest gift. Not a moment goes by that I'm not grateful for the experiences it gave me: watching the snow drift down, hiking up mountains that seemed straight out of a fairy tale, walking on beaches that sang of sorrow amidst the fog. I discovered that if you sit in a hot tub for an hour when it's 20 degrees outside, when you run from the security guard, you can stand behind a tree sopping wet and half-naked and still not be cold. There were people I met I wish could have stayed in my life longer, and there were hardships that have made me kinder. Because of Oregon, I have a new perspective on life that involves more than what's right in front of me.

Alas, all good things must come to an end. My mom didn't realize how much she needed the support of our extended family, and Oregon was much more expensive than Florida. Her mom was in North Carolina, sick and possibly dying. So in the winter of 2013, with the streets iced over and snow piled to the side three feet deep, we headed south, to North Carolina – our second time driving completely across the United States.

We stayed in North Carolina for three months, and now we live in Georgia. I plan to return to Oregon for college. Actually, I would rather hitchhike across the country and meet as many people as possible, experiencing all that I possibly can. If life wanted me to be a working stiff in a cubicle, it shouldn't have allowed Oregon into my consciousness.

I have a desire for new experiences now. I crave them and feel lost within the strict boundaries of monotonous day-to-day life. I'm going to revisit St. Louis and the rock in the tree and Utah, and I'm going to walk through L.A. and breathe in the polluted smog cloud. I'll visit Las Vegas and Denver and New York; I'll visit tiny towns in Montana and Wisconsin.

I'll try my hardest to explore the rest of the world, to sweep through cathedrals in Italy. I'm going to visit all Seven Wonders of the World. I'm going to drive through the grassy hills of Ireland and visit farm towns in Romania. I'm going to have dreadlocks, and I'm going to be the happiest person on the planet because I'll be one of the few who has a real grasp of how it works. To understand the world, you must first explore it. ♦

My time in Oregon was the greatest gift

The sky was a blue I had never seen before

The Market

by Shagun Taparia, Jaipur, India

The sun beating down on the car is almost as harsh as the city itself. You pull your hair up up up, but of course, you cannot tie it. You always forget the freaking hair ties at your freaking house.

“Now, Shagun, be reasonable. You can either come with me or stay here in this overheated car.”

“Reasonable? Me? No, thanks. I’ll stay here.”

Your mother looks at your brother for reason. But there are certain things, like shopping under the hellish midsummer sun, that unite a brother and a sister.

“Sorry, Mum, you’re on your own.”

High-five your brother in the back seat. When your mother leaves, the sense of victory does too.

Everything sticks: hair to neck, shirt to skin, flies to garbage, your calf to the dashboard.

Everything stinks: your brother’s feet, your own sweat, the open sewer, petrol fumes from the ancient car.

Your brother speaks, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Isn’t there something ... like a place which is air-conditioned, where Mum can shop? Oh yeah, it’s called a mall!”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

You exhale loudly, ending the argument. Shopping unites; heat divides and rules. Bored out of your mind, you turn your eyes outward, beyond the confines of the car – toward the Real World.

Hey, hey lady. Beautiful scarves. Look at the colors! Two for hundred! Two for hundred! I give you fair price, don’t I? Newspapers in seventy-six different languages. What do you need? Quick, boy, what do you need? Don’t waste my

time. Unload it faster! Clean it quicker! Move, move, move, move, coming through! Everybody is short on time. Everybody is running late. Everybody.

The following play unfolds in every corner, practiced, rehearsed and memorized right down to the period:

Customer: “Seven hundred? You’re nuts! I’m not giving a rupee over six hundred.”

Shopkeeper: “Six? Ha! Look at the quality. You ain’t gonna see such quality anywhere.”

Customer (walking away dramatically): “You think I’m a fool? Not a rupee over six hundred.”

Shopkeeper (waving, beckoning): “Okay, okay, wait just a minute. You

seem like a reasonable lady/guy. I’ll give you a special price.” (Conspiratorial whisper. It is, after all, a special price.) “Six-seventy-five.”

Customer: “Six.”

Shopkeeper: “Six-fifty and I’m losing money.”

Customer: “Yeah, right. Six.”

Shopkeeper: “Six-fifty is best price. I have a wife and children to feed.”

Customer: “Okay. Six-forty-five and the deal’s done.”

The shopkeeper hides a smile. Six-forty-five is a hundred rupees over what he expected.

Everybody is so reasonable. Everybody is so fair. Everybody.

The best lassi in the city! We have the best lassi in the city. Just a taste and you’ll be hooked! Come, come and drink our lassi! In this market, there is little difference between cocaine and sweetened milk.

If you turn right at that painted red pole, you enter the seedy underbelly of the market. There is no visible differ-

If you can keep up, you survive



Photo by Elizabeth Erler, Lexington, MA

ence in the people, just a change in stance and a quickness of the eyes that locals like me can understand.

Unlock your (stolen) phone; buy (broken) laptops, fresh stock (not really) of banned meat, the best (fake) foreign liquor. If you come here, we’ll smile and flirt, and we’ll joke around and slip money out of your pocket when you are looking at obscenely colored dresses. Don’t be offended. It’s a business.

A conundrum: too hot to close the window, but too smelly to crank it open. A strange shiver runs down your back. A heat shiver, not a winter shiver.

A guy sells fake Gucci glasses to a blonde foreigner for two thousand rupees. She has no idea she could have gotten them for Not A Rupee Over Two Hundred, Period.

Foreigners are the longest-running joke of this market. They give the price you ask for. Not one can bargain to save their lives. Foreigners! Ha! But they shouldn’t feel cheated – you see, our shops run on them.

You wonder if all the shopkeepers hold weekly meeting to decide the prices of everything they sell, deciding not according to race, religion, or even

gender, but the language a customer speaks. For English-speakers: eight thousand. For other foreigners: five thousand. For Hindi-speakers: one thousand. For local-dialect-speaking brothers and sisters: five hundred.

The principles of laissez-faire are well-established here. Doesn’t matter in the least what the government says. If you can keep up, you survive – or else!

A drunk brawl erupts and ends with similar swiftness.

A quiet, illegal transaction involves guns.

A policeman wonders out loud if a specific shop had its liquor license renewed. Money passes under the table, and he walks out with two bottles of wine given as “gifts.”

Beggars scream tales of various distresses.

Small children run around laughing, not a care in the world.

More foreigners cheated.

Just another day at the market. Yeah, just another day. ♦

Women of Ivory Coast

by Fatim Haidara, New York, NY

My dad comes out of his room to find my brother, Adam, and me watching TV. He looks at both of us and then says, “Fatim, take out the garbage.” Without any argument I grab the bag and walk down the stairs, but I quietly fill with rage as I ask myself, *Is this fair? Adam was sitting right there doing nothing.*

I am a 13-year-old girl who was born and raised on the Upper West Side of New York City, but my parents are from Ivory Coast. I live on 116th Street; Africans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Columbia University students are all around, blasting music, selling ginger juice, rushing to class. But to notice what really goes down on 116th Street, you have to live there. When I open the door to my apartment and look to my right, I see men eating at the big wooden dining room table. When I look to my left, I see women sitting on small chairs, gathered around a bowl of food warming the top of a small table. In my culture, the women are not allowed to eat with the men. A thousand

questions explode in my mind: *Do you think women are not human too? Why do you act this way?* Sometimes I feel like the men in my community treat women more like dogs than people.

The worst part is that Ivorian women defend their subordinate status. When a law was passed two years ago that improved women’s legal and financial status in Ivory Coast, women spoke out in huge numbers against the “Americanization” of the country.

Behind closed doors, I’ve started speaking out against the way my community treats women. Recently, after a family dinner at my cousin’s house, my uncle asked my 7-year-old female cousin, “Could you sweep up and wash the dishes please?” I looked at my small cousin and became extremely upset. Instead of just standing there, I said, “I’ll do it, Mariam. You can’t even reach the sink. Go watch TV.” I did the dishes and swept the house, then told my mother what had happened. “Sometimes men are crazy,” she said.

I agree with her. But I also know that she loves her

I speak out against the way my community treats women

A True High School Story

by Ethan Gueldenzopf, New City, NY

A true high school story includes every emotion under the sun. It includes looking up at that sun and absorbing the warm radiance. It includes wondering why you have to see that sun for another day. It includes love and angst and confusion and confidence and self-pity and loathing and loneliness and acceptance and happiness.

I'll admit it: I'm high-strung. It's my greatest flaw. It is also my greatest strength. I think too much, I



Photo by Mack Sweet, Canandaigua, NY

worry too much, and I have trouble rolling with the punches. However, I also savor those sweet "life is beautiful" moments more than other people. High school contains both punches and precious, happy moments. For me, the split is 50/50.

Every once in a while, I get a few weeks when I want to explode, cry, die, and run away all at once. In one case, I had an AP exam, two music competitions, and daily rehearsals for my first paid gig as a drummer – all in one week. This, of course, was on top of nightly homework, tests, clubs, constantly getting screwed over by my peers, and that distant memory called sleep. I was a mess. I was under so much pressure, I constantly felt like I was going to crumple up into the size of a few molecules, the way matter does inside a black hole. (Astrophysicists call that "spaghettification.") A major side effect was being unable to decide whether to persevere or say "screw it," slam the door, and go to sleep on top of the blankets while still wearing my clothes. It's quite the paradox, actually. Being unable to make that decision only adds to the pressure, further spaghettifying you until you can't see straight.

Despite these rough times, I often find myself in the most amazing moments – the type that are so overwhelmingly perfect that I begin to feel sad then and there because I realize that I will never get the moment back again in my life.

I have trouble rolling with the punches

One of my favorite examples is pit orchestra. In spring of sophomore year I played drums for my school's production of "The Drowsy Chaperone." I had performed many times before, but for some reason there was a special feeling that opening night. Everything was great. I felt good. I looked good. I was so effervescently excited that I noticed how sweet the air tasted. And best of all, I knew the musical cold. I was ready to sit at my drum throne and be the engine that powered the production.

I stretched my forearms one final time and sat. The house went dark. As we played the overture, I was in my element; I remembered what my passion is. I reveled in the fact that, unlike most, I have known since I was eight what I want to be when I grow up. As I sat there pounding away in that sensational moment, I was happy to be me. I was happy to be in high school. I was happy to be busy. And most importantly, I was ever so grateful for the simple truth that I was alive.

Anyone who says "high school is a roller coaster" is a liar, and anyone who doesn't object to that cliché is an imbecile. Those people can come talk to me when they find a roller coaster that includes love, angst, confusion, confidence, self-pity, loathing, loneliness, acceptance, and happiness.

Oh, and spaghettification. ♦

Picture Perfect

by Brandon Wei, Vancouver, BC, Canada

"Backs straight. Chins up. Smile."

We sit around the table, my relatives and I, pretending to listen to my mom giving us instructions as the photographer takes our family portrait. It's Grandma's eightieth, and, as is tradition, she sits front and center, a brilliant smile on her face. The photographer keeps shifting the camera atop its tripod, trying to get different angles, but each time, he says, "Something isn't right."

My great-grandmother died at the age of 79. An aneurysm in her stomach burst and she bled out. My grandmother had colon cancer. My mother has celiac disease. Should I be worried? With all these intestinal issues in the family, I was, unsurprisingly, diagnosed as mildly lactose intolerant. It's not the worst scenario in the world, but it does leave me wondering about all those times I ordered pizza and asked for soy cheese, only to be greeted by an all-too-familiar stomachache an hour later. I always convinced myself that it was nothing, just eating too much. Or maybe some dairy products had come into contact with my order. Nothing major.

Too bad food isn't the only thing that gives me stomachaches. I get them when my family goes to drop something off at Grandma Wei's house and my mom waits in the car while my dad and I go inside. I get them every time Aunt Elaine calls and I'm told not to answer because my dad is not happy with her at the moment. I get them every time Uncle Miles joins us for a dinner out and laughs at my mom's special requests because of her food allergy, telling her to "get over it." It does seem cold, but my mom says that's the universal solution when you grow up

in the arctic tundra that is Winnipeg: to get over it.

Ironic, since no one can seem to "get over" their problems in my family. My mom and my aunt, two very stubborn, opinionated women, had some sort of fight decades ago. As a result, I haven't seen Aunt Vicky or my cousin Nicole in 13 years. I'm 19. They say time heals all wounds, but how can a wound heal when it is never treated?

I haven't had a stomachache in a while now. It's unnerving. You think I would feel better, happier at having a calmer intestine – but is it really calm, or just numb? And does it matter? As long as there's no pain, everything is fine, right?

I wonder if I pretend the ache doesn't exist because that's easier than pretending the problem doesn't exist. The real problem is not one that can be blamed on a bad Caesar's pizza. It would be so much easier to just ignore it and live in that picture-perfect world, even with all its cracks and wrinkles. Facing a lie is difficult; confronting the truth can be excruciating. Maybe even more excruciating than a stomachache.

And so here we all are, the whole family reunited for the first time in a decade for the eightieth birthday of its matriarch. Mom and Aunt Vicky sit at opposite ends of the table. Dad's arm is around Aunt Elaine, but not quite making physical contact. Grandma is sitting front and center, arms spread, smile wide. Only one corner of her mouth droops a little – almost impossible to notice. Almost.

"There we are," the photographer says with a smile.

Picture perfect. There's only one thing missing. Me. ♦

Confronting the truth can be excruciating

Yellow

With him, I am yellow.

Yellow-bellied scared,
too afraid to tell him
"I love you, but I'm not in love with you."

Yellow in the face,
because the things he says about the girls across
the street
make me sick.

I am yellow as the sun setting
quickly.

If I'm around too long
I'll burn him.
The sun, setting
to give him a rest
from me.

Yellow
like the bruises he left on me
even though I said
"Don't, it actually hurts."

I am the yellow of the dandelions
he mows over in his lawn
because they're weeds and not flowers somehow.

Yellow
like the bird stuck in the grill of his car.

I am the yellow of the 45-watt light bulbs
in the ceiling of his room
that he hates to have on.

Even when I'm there we're always sitting in the dark.
by "Janelle," Mound, MN

16 and Definitely Not Pregnant

by Gabriela Rodriguez, Bryn Mawr, PA

I watched him rise from his seat on the bus, which was teeming with sweaty, drunk student athletes. He was the stereotypical prep school teen, sporting a multicolored Vineyard Vines button-down, khaki shorts, tall socks, Vans, and dark flowing hair. I'd noticed him around the squash courts. I couldn't help it; I was attracted to stereotypical preppy boys.

With his coach at his side, he pushed by me wearing the grin of a five-year-old with a lollipop. I turned to the boy next to me, Owen, a senior at my brother's school.

"Where's he going?"

Owen shrugged. I sighed and glanced around, careful not to bump the group of people that entrapped me: Owen, Mia, the young teammate I was taking care of, and another girl, whom I immediately envied for her ability to casually chat with Owen. Though I tried to listen, their conversation was drowned out by the throng of kids shouting, laughing, singing loudly, or hanging from the railings along the ceiling of the bus.

Mia stood stiffly, glancing at the floor. She was only 12, but perhaps she was handling her surroundings better than I was. I'd never been in such a rowdy situation.

It was midnight, and the tournament party was just ending. The bus was preparing to take us back to the hotel. At the party, greedy tournament officials had been selling cocktails and shots of hard liquor to anyone 16 and older, then happily pocketing the profit. Glad to be leaving the party, I gazed to the back of the bus and spotted my 14-year-old brother laughing with some older kids. I was about to call his name when the Vineyard Vines boy got back on the bus with his coach.

"Guys! Guys! Guess what?" His speech was slurred. "I just peed in a bush, and I'm proud of it."

He stumbled back to his seat, and I tried not to roll my eyes. I'd pegged him as the most attractive and by far the most intoxicated. The boy took a seat and started to make out with his water bottle. I

nudged Mia and we both laughed. The bus started rolling.

The tournament was international, but it was mostly Americans on the bus, and it was mostly Americans having trouble counting to 10. There were only four on the bus who had any common sense: Mia, my brother, Owen, and me. I turned to Owen again. He'd finished the conversation with the pretty girl.

"This is crazy. Look how drunk that boy is. I've never seen anything like this," I said.

Owen doesn't smile much. "Yeah, I learned from experience it's better to just get a little buzz."

I nodded. I had no idea what he meant.

What would my friends say at that moment? My uptight, all-girls education produced a steady stream of moral teens. My classmates and I often dreamed of parties like this, but we looked down on them as well. Who has time to party when we're all so busy trying to outsmart each other and get into colleges like Stanford?

Fun was a rare luxury for me; my routine didn't allow for it. I went to school. I got home. I went to my squash lesson. I wrote the required pages

for my manuscript, then studied until one in the morning. Anything less than an A- was a failure, and I had deemed those who drank and partied as immature, pathetic morons.

Yet in the pit of my stomach, something lurked. Jealousy. True jealousy for the irresponsible teens on that bus. The girls who so effortlessly flirted with boys. The kids who didn't have a care in the world, who were simply enjoying life.

Last year we read Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, then watched the film "The Graduate." Never had I been so upset, so disgusted by a work of art. The idea is that life has no true meaning – that upon achieving your goals, your happiness is only momentary and you will long for your old routine. I realized why I abhorred the thought. My greatest fear was that after all my hard work and stressful

The males in the room had a word for me: prude

Procession

by "Samantha," Green Brook, NJ

Paper money and plastic houses crumpled in the embers, folding into gray wisps of their former selves. A flurry of ash flew across my vision, dancing its way to the heavens.

Before that, I ran my fingers across a cold stone engraved with the name of an ancestor I never knew.

Before that, we trudged through sludge toward the resting place of my great-grandfather, our shoes so encased in mud that they resembled Mickey Mouse's.

Before that, we bounced along in the rickety bus that carried my extended family and the ashes of my recently deceased grandfather.

Before that, my parents told me that my

A flurry of ash danced its way to heaven

grandpa needed to visit his father's grave one last time before his own descent into the ground.

Before that, I watched the lifeless body of the old man wheel into the cremation chamber, sprinkled with the tears of everyone he once knew.

Before that, I did not cry.

Before that, I listened – but not really – to the stranger whose speech sounded like he actually knew my grandfather.

Before that, we awoke at dawn for the funeral I did not yet believe was possible.

Before that, my relatives' empty faces confirmed what everybody had feared.

Before that, my grandfather weakly smiled at me through clouded eyes from his hospital bed. ♦

tears, my happiness would only be momentary.

The night after the party, Mia and I wandered to Owen's room in search of my brother. There we found him along with Owen and his roommate, Brendan, whom I'd seen the night before on the bus, almost as intoxicated at the Vineyard Vines boy. I don't know how it happened, but I'll remember that as one of the most fun-filled nights of my life and as one of the most eye-opening. Even Owen smiled that night.

We played a typical teenage game I'd never had the pleasure of experiencing before: "Never Have I Ever." We stretched our hands out flat and went around the room naming things we'd never done. If you'd done something someone hadn't, you put down a finger.



Photo by Michaela Beecher, Davie, FL

Never had I ever had fun. By the end, my 16-year-old self was holding up as many fingers as the 12-year-old next to me. I was mortified. What was wrong with me? Why didn't I like rowdy parties, drinking, smoking? Why had I never kissed a boy? The males in the room had a word for me: prude.

Brendan was the first to be eliminated from the game. He'd done it all. He said the most ridiculous things. Not once did he stop to think, *What I am about to say is not socially acceptable*. Instead he portrayed himself as a dull character. I judged him immediately: *He won't go to a good college. He's a mess. I'm so much better than this boy.*

Brendan parties. Brendan plays four instruments. Brendan scored higher than me on his SATs, and Brendan is taking Calculus BC as a junior next year – a class I will most likely never take.

After learning that, maybe I had some fun, maybe I didn't. Maybe I created my own version of a good time while staying true to my values. Who knows what the right thing to do is when society is so contradictory – when parents want you to be that goody-two-shoes with Ivy League potential, but every teenager in the world seems to be coaxing you to breaking your good-girl habits?

Somehow we need to find a balance. We all need to find happiness and laughter now, because the future is too far away and too ambiguous to wait for.

Me, I'm still working on finding that balance between my drunken Vineyard Vines crush and the overly apprehensive 16-year-old girl laughing at him from a distance. ♦

Gun Girl

by "Violet," Peterborough, NH

In elementary school you're taught what to do if someone brings a gun to school, but not every situation is the same. It might not seem like a big deal; a kid brings a gun, a student reports it, no shots fired, no big deal. But I was the student who reported it. I was *that* kid. People say I'm brave, but they don't understand the fear that ran through me. And the months that followed were almost as bad as that day itself. I struggled with depression, PTSD, and constant what-ifs.

October 23, 2013. I remember that day better than I remember my own cell phone number. That was the day that ruined my freshman year. My biggest fear had always been a school shooting. I always told myself, *Not this school. Not this town. Not these people.*

I had left the lunch room so excited to go to my Eastern World class. About halfway through the period we had free time to study for a test the next day. I was sitting at my desk when a friend walked up and said, "He has a gun. I saw it, and it was loaded."

My heart dropped, and numbness ran through my legs. I couldn't breathe. I left the room, ran to the bathroom, and just looked at myself in the mirror. It was probably only two minutes, but it felt like an eternity. I remember I wasn't looking at myself like I normally do, pointing out my flaws. I was staring into my soul. I left the bathroom, shaking so hard I felt cold, and then I saw him. He showed me the loaded gun and reality hit. *I'm going to die.*

But he didn't pull the trigger. As I walked away, I

felt like a hostage who just survived the negotiation.

Now for the hard part: telling someone. The life or death part – but it wasn't just my life, it was everyone else's. I walked up to my teacher and said, "Can I talk to you in the hall?" After I told him, he couldn't do anything except call for help. We had to wait.

Waiting was hell. It was slow-motion, teeth-chattering, goosebumps waiting. The whole time I wanted to scream and tell everyone, but I couldn't. The class slowly ticked by, and finally the police came.

Finally, I could breathe. Nobody died.

"You should feel proud of yourself. You're a hero." Those words spewed out of people's mouths like spitballs I was trying to avoid. I just wanted to be left alone. All I could think was, *I didn't mess up, but I could have. I could have easily gotten my entire class killed with one wrong word.* Maybe that's what

scares me the most.

For the rest of freshman year, all I heard was, "Yeah, *she's* the gun girl."

Gun girl.

I didn't know that being called "hero" could hurt, but it did. It was a constant reminder of what happened. I began having flashbacks, and then I spiraled out of control. I learned what it felt like to drown while everyone else around you is swimming. I was diagnosed with PTSD and depression a month after the incident.

Not a day passed that I didn't think about that day. Every day I reevaluated the situation and thought

about what I could have done differently. The what-ifs haunted me the most. *What if I see him? What about junior year, when he comes back to school? What if it happens again? What if he kills me next time?*

I cried myself to sleep every night. I remember fighting with my body to stay awake because the night terrors that woke me every night made me shake. I got to the point that I didn't want to leave my room because I was scared that I might be on his hit list. I was his victim without him even knowing it. It turns out that he had been planning to shoot himself that day. Not me, not my class, himself. I had spent months fearing a kid who feared himself the most.

As time progressed, I learned that sometimes living is the best form of revenge. And I wanted to live, not just survive. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't getting me anywhere. I got a therapist. I felt crazy. I had let this one event get to me, ruin me. When I think about freshman year, I think about wasted time.

Then one day I gained the courage to go on a run. About halfway through, I saw him. I could have walked right up to him and his friends and told him how much he had put me through – the night terrors, the flashbacks – but something held me back. It wasn't fear. It was that he looked at me like I was his hero. He was alive because I had told the teacher that day. Finally I thought, *Maybe I am a hero. After all, I rescued him, right?* And eventually I rescued myself too. ♦

He showed me the loaded gun and reality hit

A Potter Obsession

by Brooke Solich, Greenwood, CO

I had never even heard of my soon-to-be favorite hero until first grade, when my recess buddy, Joshua, told me he was almost done reading the second book. Because Joshua and I bonded over pretending that we were dragons and fairies, he was astonished that I had never heard of The Boy Who

Lived. He told me that we were in a fight until I started reading the series, and he was dead serious. So I asked for the four-book box set for Christmas.

From the moment my eyes drank in the opening line of *The Sorcerer's Stone* ("Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of Number Four, Privet Drive, were pleased to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.") I was hooked. I prided myself on finishing the "big chapter book" in two weeks. The rest is history.

After those sunny spring days on the playground 11 years ago, Joshua and I lost touch. But I became infatuated with reading anything I could get my hands on, and I've read the entire Harry Potter series 10 times. Throughout my elementary and early middle school years, my mom was convinced that my obsession was unhealthy, but I brushed her off. Just because I spent hours in the basement with an embarrassingly large collection of Harry Potter Legos, dressed up as Hermione for two Halloweens, and spent my little time outside searching for the perfect stick to use as a wand did not mean that I was abnormal, did

it? My mom eventually gave up.

But people who failed to see past the awkward, stick-waving maniac didn't know that Harry inspired me to write. I had always been a voracious reader, but something was triggered when I started reading the Harry Potter series. I wanted to meet Jo Rowling, live with her, even be her. I dressed up as her for my third-grade biography project. I began to write almost as much as I read, trying things over and over in an effort to craft a hero as perfect and inspiring as Harry.

Harry inspired me to write

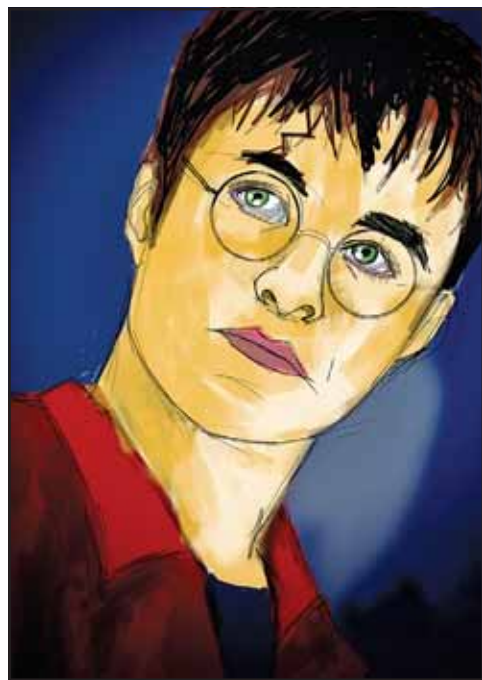
As I grew older, my hours with the Hogwarts-themed Legos ebbed, but my love for everything Potter did not. I reread the books, laughing at moments I had forgotten about, connecting plot points that I hadn't before, and unabashedly sobbing every time a character died, even though I knew their departing lines by heart. For me, Harry had come to represent so much more than just fantasy worlds and imagination; he was my escape.

Around the time I read *The Order of the Phoenix*, I was battling my first bout of depression. I found solace in Jo's intuitive words; I felt that I could

relate to the now-15-year-old boy fighting his inner demons. Although his were slightly more extreme (trust me, I've never been possessed), we learned to combat them together, side by side, on Firebolts flying high over the Scottish Highlands.

For my sixteenth birthday, I wanted what every teen girl wants – to go to the Harry Potter theme park at Universal Orlando. It was the most fun I'd had in a very long time. I blocked out the judging glances from vacationers as I reveled in drinking a Butterbeer, buying Hogwarts robes and a wand, and loudly blabbering ridiculous facts about the series to my mom and sister while we waited in the three-hour line to ride the interactive roller coaster.

Throughout my life, Harry Potter has come to epitomize all that I believe: that loyalty, pride, wit, and bravery are of equal value; that our choices make a far bigger impact on our lives than our abilities do; and that death is just the next great adventure. I may never go to Hogwarts, but I can work some literary magic of my own. I want to be the writer who leaves readers speechless, just as Jo did to me with the last line of *The Deathly Hallows*: "All was well." ♦



Art by Madhav Kohli, Delhi, India

My Other Mother

by Olivia West, McDonough, GA

For as long as I can remember I've known that I was adopted. My parents never wanted it to be a secret. They told me about my biological mother, Heather, who was 17 when I was born. Her mom kicked her out, and her boyfriend told her he didn't want to be a father.

My parents tried for 16 years to have a baby before they decided to adopt. My grandmother's best friend knew Heather's mom, so she put my parents in touch with her. They say that Heather gave me up because she loved me but was unable to be a good mother at the time. My parents explained that I didn't have a relationship with Heather because it was too painful for her. My biological father was a drug addict who was in and out of prison and not much of a father to my younger sister, Gabrielle.

Heather lived with my parents for the six months before I was born, so I have two pictures of her, stories my parents told me, and a few letters she wrote to me. One picture was of her opening gifts with my family on her birthday. The other was of her dressed up as a cowgirl – with a huge baby bump. My parents told me that Heather was like a daughter to them. My mom became her best friend, and my dad loved to tease her. They gave me the letters she wrote when I was old enough to read and understand them.

As I grew older, I thought about my biological family often. I wondered what my sister was like and whether she would have been my best friend if we had grown up together. I wondered why Heather got pregnant twice by the same man within three years, even though the first time had been a mistake, and I wondered why she gave me up but decided to keep my sister. I didn't know much about Heather, so I filled in the blanks with my imagination. In my mind, she was still as beautiful as she was at 17. She was incredibly smart, so after she gave me up for adoption she got an education and a great job. She was a kind and loving mother to my sister, and she was as close to perfect as anyone could get.

I had just started the ninth grade when my mom said to me, "Heather sent me a message on Facebook. She's been thinking of you a lot lately, and if it's all right with you, your dad, and me, she and Gabrielle would like to meet you."

"Of course," I said, so my mother told Heather that it was okay to contact me.

That night she sent me a message. It said, "I think about you all the time. Giving you up is my biggest regret, but I know I gave you a better life. Gabrielle and I are very excited to meet you."

Because we live in Georgia and they live in Maryland, we would meet halfway in North Carolina. My teachers were curious when I told them I would be absent, but since it would take forever to explain and answer the endless questions, I just told them I had a family obligation. I picked out my best outfit, fixed my hair, and did my makeup perfectly. I had no clue what expectations Heather had, but I didn't want to disappoint her.

When my parents and I arrived at the hotel, Heather and Gabrielle were already there. I was surprised to see how much they looked like me. It was like looking in a mirror. Heather hugged us – me first and then my parents – and my dad lined us up to take a picture. We made small talk, and later we all went out to dinner.

My parents seemed comfortable with Heather, even though it had been almost 10 years since they had last spoken. I, on the other hand, had no idea what to say to my birth mother and sister.

Back at the hotel, after everyone else headed to their rooms, Heather stayed to talk to me alone. She started telling me what I'd heard from my family all my life: "I gave you up so you would have a better life. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. I loved you more than anything in the world."

"I know," I said, and she started to cry. We talked for a few hours about school, work, and friends until we couldn't stay awake any longer.

The next morning, over breakfast, my parents joked about how Gabrielle and I put cream cheese on our bagel in the same way and took our coffee black. Clearly we were sisters. After breakfast, my mom and Gabi took a walk together, getting to know each other, while Heather and I did the same.

That night, Heather told us she needed to return to work the next day, so we parted ways in the morning. My mom cried on the way home, but I wasn't sad. It was nice to meet Heather and Gabrielle, but it wasn't what I expected.

A few days later, my dad tried to call Heather, but she didn't pick up. A week passed and she didn't call him back. My mom sent her messages on Facebook, and I texted her a few times, but she seemed to want nothing to do with us. It didn't bother me that much, but it broke my heart to see the effect her silence had on my dad. He had been so excited to reconnect. He loved Heather like a daughter, and now she wouldn't even return his phone calls.

I was angry at her. I knew it must have been difficult to welcome us back into her life, but it had been her choice. It was her choice to have unprotected sex with a man who couldn't provide for a family, her choice to give me up, and her choice to bring us back into her life. She was hurting my family because she'd made

"Giving you up is my biggest regret"



Photo by Stacey Hall, Fountain Valley, CA

bad choices.

Heather called my dad three months later to apologize. She told him that she had been busy. She stayed with us for a week that summer, and since then I've been to Maryland to stay with her twice, even though there's always a month with no communication after each visit. Conversation gets easier every time, and our relationship has improved, but I'm not sure that we will ever really know how to act around each other. Because our relationship is so unique, there's nothing to model it after.

Heather isn't especially beautiful like she was as a teenager. She's a dental assistant with only a high school education. Because Gabrielle is home alone most of the time, she has more freedom than most girls her age, so she gets into trouble a lot and is failing most of her classes. Heather isn't as kind as I imagined. She's immature and a little selfish. Gabrielle isn't like a sister or a best friend to me.

Even though we didn't live up to each other's expectations, we've learned to love each other. I believe I'm better off with Heather and Gabrielle in my life, because I already have an incredible family, and you can never surround yourself with too many people who love you. ♦

Finally a Princess

by Emily Spjut, Cypress, TX

From a very early age, I grew up on a diet of Disney. My big sister, MiMi, and I spent hours watching Disney movies on our VHS player at home, and later fought over who got to be the princess du jour. "I want to be the princess! You're always the princess!" I would wail. Sadly, big sister always won. Rank has its privileges, after all.

When I was about five, our mother brought home a Disney movie I'd never seen before. MiMi and I were quickly swept away by "Mulan." One of the most exciting scenes was the moment when Mulan decided to disguise herself as a boy and join the army. She cut her hair with her father's sword and tied it up in a bun so that the other soldiers wouldn't know she was a girl.

After the movie, my sister and I were, of course, eager to play Mulan. My hair was long like hers – almost down to my waist. With an odd gleam in her eye, my sister fetched the forbidden scissors from my mother's sewing basket and bestowed on me the great honor of finally getting to be the princess.

Swept away in the moment, I thought, *Yes! Yes! I will bring honor to us all!*

With a snip, snip, snip, my transformation into a noble Chinese soldier at the hands of my sister had

begun. A big pile of light brown hair encircled me. My ears and neck felt strangely cool and light. My sister said, "Uh-oh. We can't let Mom see this." Where's a lucky cricket when you need one?

Thinking like the brilliant five-year-old I was, I figured that if my mother couldn't see the hair on the ground, she would never know what we'd done. We quickly began hiding my hair throughout the house: under the sofa, behind the TV, even in our big Barbie dollhouse.

In the middle of our crime scene cover-up, our mother walked in, took one look at me, and screamed. I mustered up some quick tears, and MiMi vacated the premises like a Hun in retreat. My mother took me to Visible Changes for a damage control haircut. After all was said and done, I had, indeed, visibly changed. I sported an unfortunate bob with one-inch bangs and looked like a very nice little boy for a long time.

After the Mulan incident, my sister and I were grounded from Disney – and scissors – for life. To this day, I can't cut anything properly, having lacked essential practice in my youth ... and I'm still haunted by the moment every time I find a little piece of hair I hid so many years ago. ♦

"Uh-oh. We can't let Mom see this"

Drive

by Junru Bian, Dushanbe, Tajikistan

I was six when my grandfather took me for a ride in his truck for the first time. It was a red Chevrolet C10 1975 edition pickup with slightly inconsistent shock absorbers and a loud engine. The vehicle was 23 years older than me, but it was still good-looking – freshly washed and waxed. After I'd jumped around excitedly for a few minutes, he lifted me inside the truck; I was too short to reach the door handle and climb up by myself. I didn't mind that, though. I was engrossed in the childish delight of sitting in a pickup truck for the first time.

It was an August afternoon, sunny and bright. The truck felt almost new; over the years my grandfather had worked hard to maintain the Chevrolet in its best condition. On the old dirt roads there were always huge rocks that we couldn't avoid and had to drive over. The truck, of course, took them all with ease.

What fascinated me more was how my grandfather drove. He had faith in his truck. He didn't worry about rocks or flooded roads; he just kept going, and we were always safe. His eyes never left the road during the drive, while the afternoon sunlight highlighted his deep brown eyes and his pale hands on the steering wheel.

As we traveled through the countryside, I bounced on the passenger seat and loudly named the cows that I saw on the farms we passed. He didn't tell me to be quiet; in fact, he seemed to be enjoying my noise. He was wearing a contented smile – an expression I rarely saw on him. Grandpa loved his family, but he was always tense and rarely opened up. Having lived through World War II and witnessed the deaths of friends and fellow soldiers, he couldn't get over the war guilt. He would sit silently by the living room window and look at the mountains for hours.

We drove around the hills and farms, listening to old songs and the roaring of the engine, while a cool wind rushed in through the open windows. We cut through Grandpa's 40 acres toward the sunset, inhaling the sweet aroma of fresh grass. We knew we could never reach the horizon, but we kept going, wishing that we would eventually touch the orange sun. Sitting in the truck with him, I felt calm and careless, driving through the boundary of time and age, horror and sadness, uncertainty and fear. I felt free. I finally understood why Grandpa loved the truck so much.

A few months later my parents and I left the small town where Grandpa lived. I insisted on taking a picture with Grandpa next to his red pickup, since I didn't know when I would see him again. As I moved from place to place while my parents pursued their careers, I would show my friends the picture and try to tell them how my grandfather and I loved to drive in the truck, but they never understood. My friends were focused on Porsches and Lamborghinis; they weren't interested in a Chevy truck that was decades older than them. Of course, they didn't know the incredible feeling of driving it through the countryside.

It was eight years after we'd first moved that I flew back to see my grandfather. He had just been diagnosed with stomach cancer.

"Four months," the doctor said.

My parents, refusing to accept the prognosis, moved Grandpa into one of the best hospitals in the district. In a week, it seemed as though my parents had turned into pharmaceutical experts; they'd become familiar with the names of multiple medicines and were constantly

searching for better, more efficient treatments. They were afraid to lose him. So was I.

My grandfather, on the other hand, was calm. He followed the doctors' directions, attended his therapies, and took the enormous amount of prescribed medicines. His dining options were limited, and he lost 20 pounds in two weeks. He didn't speak much, but he asked for his hospital bed to be moved next to the window. After that he was silent, just looking at the mountains.

I stayed with Grandpa in the hospital, sat next to him in silence during the day and slept in a chair at night. Except for peeling fruit and changing the sheets, I could do little for him, but

being with him made me feel better. This went on for two quiet months, until one night Grandpa finally spoke.

"Let's take a drive in the Chevy, son," he said, looking me in the eyes.

"Grandpa ..." I started to protest. I was afraid that he wasn't well enough to drive.

He cut me off. "Do you want to, or not?"

"Y-yes."

"Let's go then."

I don't remember it clearly, but somehow Grandpa managed to get out of bed and put on street clothes, and I found a wheelchair for him. My parents were out of town at another hospital in search of better treatments, and our nurse was busy, so no one stopped us. We walked out of the hospital and took a 20-minute taxi ride into the countryside. We opened the barn, and there was the red truck.

Grandpa chose to drive on the highway. It was already midnight, and only a few cars were on the road. I sat in silence while he drove, reaching out the window to let the wind rush between my fingers. He drove around the town again and again, passing every exit to the city center, keeping his eyes on the road while saying nothing.

Eventually he parked on the side of the highway and covered his face with his huge hands. I reached over and gave him a hug. Tears filled my eyes, but I didn't let them drop.

"I am so tired," he sobbed weakly into my shoulder.

"Everything will be fine," I said. My voice shook. "Everything will

I finally understood why Grandpa loved the truck so much



Art by Casey Wang, McDonough, GA

end up where it is supposed to be."

Grandpa was gone a few days later. He didn't die from the stomach cancer, though. The doctor said he just kind of slipped away. He was content when he left.

My mother cried her eyes into mild myopia, while my father's hair seemed to go gray overnight. I sat in the red Chevrolet for days, feeling numb.

A lawyer read Grandpa's will after the funeral. At some point I heard my name and focused.

"I leave the Chevrolet C10 1975 edition pickup truck to my grandson," the lawyer read, "since he is the only one who understands what the truck meant to me, and of course, to him. I hope he will drive this truck for me and live his life, a life full of happiness and hope, a life that has everything I didn't, and approach the horizon that we both wished we could somehow reach."

I sat on my seat, and for the first time I allowed tears to drop from my eyes. ♦

How to Save a Life

by Kori Evans, Mesa, AZ

Step one: Acknowledge that you're losing him. When he comes to school with burns up and down his arms, know that it isn't "no big deal," as he claims. When he casually jokes about destructive behavior, notice the haunting look in his eyes that suggests there is nothing casual about it.

Step two: Be there for him. Argue with him when he says that no one would even notice he was gone. Ask to go to the bathroom during class so you can hold him in the hallway. Leave your phone at full volume all night in case he needs consoling. Cry with him in his car. Cry with him at the park.

Step three: Constant prevention. Text him under the table so he doesn't hang himself in the bathroom. Don't give him pain pills, no matter how big a headache he says he has. Take away his neckties. Kiss his wounds. Tell him how much you love him. Tell him you don't know what you would do without him.

Step four: Lose yourself in your pursuit. Put his life before everything. Fall apart when he tries again and again. Cry in the school parking lot when you realize that nothing you do will ever help. Your efforts are not enough.

Step five: Admit you have nothing left. Back off. Watch through the window as other students approach the principal. Call his mom. Retreat into yourself. Knit him a scarf as he spends Christmas in the hospital.

Step six: Let him try one last time.

Step seven: Enjoy the sun. When he smiles again, feel its warmth against your skin. Carve out a permanent place in your heart. Learn that happiness feels like loving yourself. Hold him and his new boyfriend. Tear up when you tell him how happy you are that he is alive. Forgive him. Embark on your own dreams, knowing that he is now safe. ♦

*Step one:
Acknowledge
that you're
losing him*

The Mistakes of My Father

by "Amber," New London, CT

I will admit it – my parents are racist, homophobic, and classist. It's ironic, isn't it, that my family – being Asian – are racist, even though we ourselves are a minority? That's not to say that I don't love my parents. I do. But I am so very grateful that their views were not passed down to me.

My sister has been the adult figure in my life, though only four years separate us. She introduced new ideas to me at the dinner table when I was young. If not for her, I might still discriminate against the LGBT community or people of other races out of sheer ignorance. But my parents' opinions go beyond ignorance.

In 2012, Jeremy Lin was breaking into the NBA. He was a sensation, and the media frenzy and adoration he inspired was known as "Linsanity." My father heard about this Taiwanese basketball phenom from his friends; being Asian, we obviously were

proud of Lin.

One Sunday afternoon, there was a Knicks game on ABC, and my father told me to put it on so he could admire Lin's athletic talents.

According to Richard Lapchick, in 2011, the National Basketball Association was composed of 78 percent black, 17 percent white, 4 percent Latino, and 1 percent Asian players. Carmelo Anthony, arguably the star of the Knicks, is black. And it was watching Anthony – one of my favorite players – that spurred an onslaught of racist comments from my father.

I won't repeat what he said, but you can imagine how distressed and livid I became. I turned off the TV with trembling hands and slammed the remote down. Tears leapt to my eyes. I wanted to tell my father how much

I loathed his racism. Unfortunately, I was not able to communicate this in Mandarin, the language we speak at home. So I stormed downstairs and began hurling a ball at a target to relieve my anger.

He came downstairs and demanded I turn the TV back on. When I refused, he started beating me. Being 10 years old, I screamed and cried, both from the pain and this new hatred I had toward my father. After a few minutes, he went upstairs wearing a look of disgust. Mean-

while, I may not have had antipathy on my face, but I had it in my heart.

The beating didn't do anything but galvanize my newfound hatred for prejudice. Physical pain would never make me succumb to his wishes and turn on that television so he could make more unsolicited, offensive comments about the players. And even

though that incident is history, I will never forget it. I will never forget the day that I realized how prejudiced people can be – including my own family, even though we too are a minority.

I know now that my parents' racism stems from years of living in a rough neighborhood where they were often threatened by – yes – black and Latino people. However, they never realized, or never wanted to realize, that a few individuals do not define an entire race.

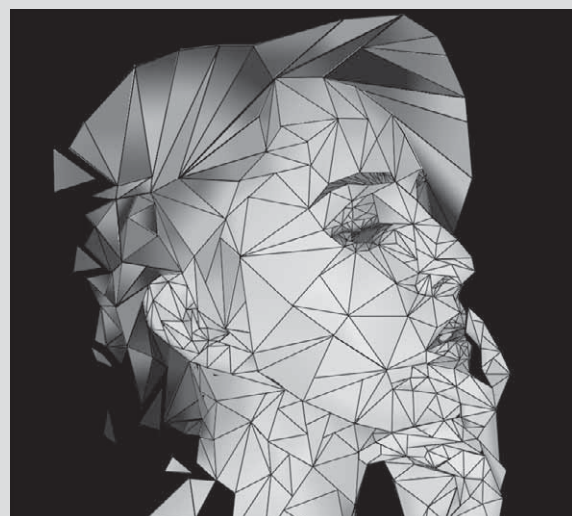
Racism repulses me and always will. I will never understand how an immediate judgment of a person can be formed based solely on his race or appearance. I have dealt with racism firsthand, and I spent many nights wondering what I had done to inspire such hatred. Inside, we are all humans, and skin color does not make you any more or less. There is nothing separating us but our beliefs and our actions. ♦

A few individuals don't define an entire race

Forgotten Feeling

Her pain, almost unbearable,
Rips and pierces her abdomen. All over nothing,
All because she wore what was her favorite blouse –
The one her grandmother knit, the one
She cherished with all her heart.
The fine lace trickling down
From the neckline and bordering the cuffs.
All because she was trying to be
Herself. The thought that constantly
Surfaced in her mind like a buoy rolling up and
Under the surf, pelted by
The rushing of a never-ending current that
Spoke in volumes. Hour by hour,
Not only her peers, but her best friends,
Her mom, her dad – all pushing her
Away. Blaming her for not being who they
Want her to be, blaming her for being herself –
The true her. Scared to speak out, determined to not let
Them win. No matter the cause, she'll find herself.
One day she'll find herself.

by Cameron Dean, Dudley, NC



Art by Jamie Tarrago, Edgewater, NJ

Agender Angst

by Phoenix Quinn,
W. Bloomfield, MI

My name is Phoenix, and I am not a girl or a boy. I am a part of that gray area, that vast void between male and female that most people assume is empty.

It's not.

I'm there, and I'm not alone. There's an entire community of people who aren't girls or boys, women or men – who identify as both, who identify as both and more, who switch every so often, who slide between, and everything else you can think of. We're called non-binary people because we don't fit the traditional male/female gender binary. We don't want to conform to society's rules. We can't. We don't want to be lumped in with one of two types of people we aren't.

My parents, my teachers, strangers, they all assume I'm a girl.

I know I'm not.

I started trying to figure out my identity even before I learned the words for it. I remember saying in ninth grade, "I don't want to be a boy or a girl. I don't care. You can call me 'she,' you can use my birth name, but I don't care." Well, it turns out I do care. I wish I didn't, but I hate the way I'm perceived as a girl. I hate being called by my birth name. I knew I didn't really want a gender, but I'd never known there was a name for that: agender.

When I first heard about the operations some transgender people go through, I didn't think it'd be odd to be in a different body, because I saw it like plastic surgery: purely cosmetic. I didn't understand the social implications. I didn't yet understand the idea of wanting certain physical traits and not wanting others.

But when I hit puberty, I wasn't prepared

for how I'd feel, even though I knew the basics of the changes I'd undergo. I was eager to "grow up," but I didn't know what becoming a woman would mean for me in society. I didn't know that others would see me differently and start expecting me to be feminine. I never thought I'd grow up to hate my breasts, to bind them, to want them gone – and all this without my parents' knowledge.

No amount of school-sanctioned health classes could have prepared me. How could they? Most people don't know what "agender" means. The instant I realized I am not a girl or a boy, the world made sense. I chose a new name and a new set of pronouns. My new name sounds so much better to me – it flows well, it makes sense. *I* make sense.

I'm lucky to have friends who believe in my identity as I believe in theirs, but to most of the world, I and other non-binary people are invisible. I am suspended in that space between genders, locked in a position defined by ambiguity and androgyny and confusion, by gender roles and stereotypes, by society's expectations for me, and by my expectations for society.

I get lost in the cascade of pronouns thrown at me, as if being called "he" or "she" will make me agree, make me say, "Yes! Those words are mine! Please use them for me!" Really, what's helped is for me to choose my own terms – to throw them out into the world, out of the closet. "Yes! These are mine! Use them for me!"

But in the end, pronouns are not what's important. I am not my gender. I am a person, and all I ask is to be treated like one. ♦

I'm suspended in that space between genders

Economics • St. Paul Central High School

Ethan Cherin by Linnea Peterson, Saint Paul, MN

Of all my classes, I always liked social sciences least – until I took Mr. Cherin’s economics class. Economics is fascinating, but Mr. Cherin is even better. He shook my world like a snow globe, unexpectedly but gently shifting my world view until I learned to do so for myself.

Mr. Cherin is an unusually effective educator. When he taught us about the production possibilities curve, the lesson stuck largely because he plotted his curve as the production of pizza versus condoms. Our introduction to the different macroeconomic theories of Keynes and von Hayek came in the form of an Epic Rap Battle on YouTube, and we began our unit on the Federal Reserve with some comic books about it.

The humor was just enough to pique our interest. Then the serious work began, and there was plenty of it. A friend once speculated that Mr. Cherin casts a spell on his students so that, no matter how hard he works us, we still love him and his class. For me, I don’t suspect dark magic; educational savvy and a winning personality seem like a potent enough combination to explain this phenomenon.

My experiences with Mr. Cherin outside the classroom gave me even more to appreciate. Last spring, after winning the state round of Academic

WorldQuest – a competition focusing on world affairs – three friends and I traveled to Washington, D.C., to compete in Nationals. As our coach, Mr. Cherin accompanied us. In D.C., Mr. Cherin discovered and worked to undo some of my nonsensical personal rigidities. When I nearly panicked at a restaurant because I was too full to obey one of my father’s rules (*Clean your plate!*) Mr. Cherin finished my dinner for me. The next night, once again faced with an oversized portion, I managed to stop eating when I was full, and Mr. Cherin’s approval helped me silence the voice inside me screaming that I had committed a hideous sin.

While perfectionism has long defined me, Mr. Cherin is helping me crawl out of the box of dos and don’ts I’ve constructed. He lets me lean on him as I learn to make my own decisions, yet encourages me to take steps on my own and even occasionally ignore him.

Meanwhile, I am continuing to study economics, and economies of scale are just as revelatory now as the determinants of demand were last year. I intend to study economics in college, and hope I don’t forget what Mr. Cherin taught me about it. I hope even more that I don’t forget the life lessons I learned from him. I intend to maintain the power to make my own decisions. ♦

Educational savvy and a winning personality

The assignment was pure genius

Visual Arts • Cab Calloway School of the Arts

Toniann DeGregory by Matthew Gamble, Hockessin, DE

I have chosen to nominate Mrs. DeGregory, the Cab Calloway visual arts teacher and one of the most helpful educators I have ever known. She is my highlight of middle school and makes Cab Calloway School worth every minute.

When you attend a class that Mrs. DeGregory teaches, whether it’s a 3D-design elective or a class for your major in art, you always learn something new. I learned all about color theory and how to correctly portray perspective. Mrs. DeGregory makes these concepts easy to understand. She has her specialties, of course, but even in subjects that she doesn’t have as much experience in, she still teaches with ease.

Mrs. DeGregory also shows students what they can do with the material. When you take a math course, you rarely find out how to use the idea in the real world. Mrs. DeGregory dedicates an entire unit to learning about careers that require an art degree and how art pairs up with academics. Over the three years that I attended her class, she brought in many guests with art-related jobs. Twice, she had a forensic anthropologist in to teach us about his work: he re-creates faces by adding “flesh” (clay) to skulls to portray what a

person would look like. I never would have known this, or about other interesting careers, without taking Mrs. DeGregory’s class.

Mrs. DeGregory is one of the most inspirational people I have ever had the privilege to be taught by. She helped me reach inside and pull out some amazing artwork from places I never knew I had. At the end of eighth grade she assigned a project to interview a family member about an event – either happy or traumatic – and create artwork depicting the emotions we felt. The assignment was pure genius, and she taught it in a way that really allowed us to take what we felt and put it on paper; I never could have achieved what I did without Mrs. DeGregory.

I hope Mrs. DeGregory receives this award, because she truly deserves it. I can’t think of a person who has influenced my life more. She is easily the best teacher I’ve ever had and will probably top any instructor I have in the future. She has given me so many opportunities – from entering the Scholastic Art and Writing Competition to organizing amazing art exhibits in our school’s gallery space. She needs to receive credit for the work she has put into changing so many students’ lives. ♦

Language Arts • Oakland Middle School

Carol Warren by Rosemarie Kuenn, Murfreesboro, TN

She is a teacher who is placed last by the county but first by her students. She has taught in closets, the back stages of auditoriums, and outside in portable classrooms. Her students are so highly intelligent they are considered “handicapped” and a minority by the state, therefore making the educator herself a minority too.

She is a teacher who stands by when I cry over my grades, reminding me that it is my own grade that I earned. She broke down crying in class when a former student took their life, promising us that as soon as she was no longer our teacher we would all have

She stood by my side for three days

when I refused. She accompanied me into a small room where I spoke to five ruthless judges, and was more ecstatic than me when I came in first place. Her grin was a greater gift than the honor itself when I thanked her in front of an audience of 6,000. She’s a teacher whose veneration I yearn for.

She is a teacher who has taught far beyond the criteria and exceeds the expectations of what a language arts teacher should be. She is the least prioritized instructor who deserves recognition the most. She is a teacher I order to never grow old and retire because no teacher of any experience could ever mimic her skill in educating.

She is a spectrum language arts teacher at Oakland Middle School by the name of Carol Warren. ♦

The 24th Annual

Teen Ink Educator of the Year Contest

Do you have an outstanding teacher, coach, guidance counselor, librarian, or principal?

- 1) Tell us why your nominee is special. What has your educator done for your class, you, another student, or the community? Be specific.
- 2) Essays should be about 250 words.
- 3) **Only middle school/junior high and high school educators are eligible.**
- 4) Include your nominee’s first and last name, position or subject taught, and the school where he/she teaches.
- 5) Submit it online at www.TeenInk.com/Submit

Winners will be announced in the Summer 2015 issue.

Deadline: May 1, 2015

L.A. Noire

It's Los Angeles, 1947 – a city filled with crime where everyone has secrets. And it's up to you to put an end to it. In “L.A. Noire,” unlike in most games published by Rockstar Games (“Grand Theft Auto,” “Max Payne,” “Red Dead”), you are the police officer rather than the criminal. Players are put in the shoes of Cole Phelps, an ex-Marine. As Phelps is promoted through the ranks of the LAPD – Patrol, Traffic, Homicide, Vice, and Arson – his cases get more and more difficult. This single-player crime thriller game is addictively fun.

“L.A. Noire” is not just a point-and-click game like most murder mysteries; however, the controls are fairly easy. You have to find evidence and use it to solve the case, but there is a lot of action as well. Players find themselves engaging in car chases and shootouts in order to apprehend suspects, and can take part in street crimes side plots, where Phelps halts his main investigation to simply take a criminal into custody.



An addictively fun crime thriller

The game also uses a very realistic interrogation system. You must use a combination of evidence, intuition, and common sense to decide whether to doubt suspects, accuse them of lying, or believe them.

The graphics are unbelievable. Presented in film noir style, the name of each case is shown as it begins, like the title of an old movie, and players have the option of playing the game in black-and-white. The sound and the music are great. When Phelps is driving,

you can even change his car radio station.

“L.A. Noire” may turn off players who are more sensitive, due to the inclusion of profanity, violence, gore, and some nudity. It's not for younger players. However, this game is very well acclaimed, and is listed as one of the best Xbox 360 games of all time on multiple highly respected gaming sites.

The city of Los Angeles in 1947 is excellently portrayed. Everything in the game relates to that time period – Phelps is always wearing a brown suit, and carries a pistol in a visible holster. A few other elements make the game less realistic. Phelps has a new partner for each desk he works, but he operates mostly on his own. He is also forced to examine bodies by himself, without any help from the coroner.

I would recommend “L.A. Noire” to anyone who enjoys action, adventure, and crime games. Its creativity and uniqueness make it extremely enjoyable. Solving crimes will never be more exciting, and it is fun to be the “good guy” for a change. ♦

by Matthew Fine, Staten Island, NY

Mad Father

“Mad Father” is a free downloadable game by Japanese developer Sen, of “Miscreant's Room.” You play as an 11-year-old girl in northern Germany named Aya Drevis. You know a terrible secret about your father, Alfred – a secret that threatens to end his life and leave you an orphan. How far will you go to save him?

The game style is pixelated and simplistic, though not in a bad way. Most of the horror comes from the game's ambiance – it has a Nazi-esque medical theme

– unlike many games developed in the U.S., which rely more on jump-scare tactics and dimly lit maps. Like most games of its kind, “Mad Father” players use arrow keys to move, enter to pick up objects, and shift to equip.

Unlike the style, however, the storyline is

extremely complex. On the anniversary of her mother's death, Aya wakes at midnight. After roaming around a few moments, she decides to go back to sleep. Just as she



Unlike the style, the storyline is complex

does, however, her father's screams pierce the silent house. Aya goes to look for him – and is attacked.

The game style and controls are simple, but the plot and puzzles are complicated – though not complicated enough that you have to be a genius to solve them. There are four different endings; one can only be unlocked by

collecting gems throughout the game.

The balance of jump-scares to storyline tension is not perfect but almost as good as I've ever seen. The stereotype that Japanese developers know horror best is not far from the truth. ♦

by Lorena Hoggard, Paragould, AR

Titanfall

If you're looking for an expansive game that pushes the boundaries of next-gen gaming, “Titanfall” is not necessarily for you. While ex-“Call of Duty” developer Respawn Entertainment delivers a pure fun multiplayer game, “Titanfall” does not live up to the hype of being a “Call of Duty” killer. However, as a fresh take on the typical first-person shooter experience, the game succeeds.

“Titanfall” drops you into a future where humans are colonizing planets far from Earth. You are a “pilot” – an intergalactic super-soldier who can control giant mechs called Titans. Titans are devastating, but also vulnerable; the game offers lone pilots effective yet balanced fighting techniques against them. Unlike the human combatants, mechs don't regenerate health, and can be easily destroyed when tag-teamed by opponent Titans or if a player is particularly reckless and doesn't play defense.

I commend “Titanfall” for giving less frequent players a fair chance as long as they have the skills. While higher levels definitely have the advantage, with extra abilities and attachments, under-level players are not grossly mismatched. The scenarios created are expansive, fast-paced, and

thrilling, with several different levels of action happening at any given time. There's always something going on, and it makes the battles exhilarating.

“Titanfall” remains flawed, however. The game does not have the level of customization that “Battlefield,” “Halo,” and “Call of Duty” do. Instead of earning new camouflage and armor

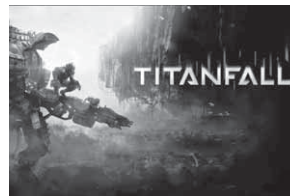
types after completing challenges, the player is simply rewarded with extra experience. And “Titanfall” has only five basic game modes, considerably fewer than other first-person shooter games.

I was most disappointed by the lack of a single-player campaign. “Call of Duty”

and “Halo” provide both single and multiplayer modes for the same price; it doesn't seem right that “Titanfall” can't.

“Titanfall” was supposed to embody the next generation of games, and if this is a trend – developers feeding us only half-games for the same price – it could be a major issue. While “Titanfall” is certainly a good game with a great multiplayer option, it lacks the single-player campaign that could have potentially launched the title in front of its competitors. ♦

by Christian Westphal, Madison, CT



The game succeeds, but doesn't live up to the hype

Clash of Clans

The cries of soldiers fill the air as they charge toward the enemy. Cannons fire at insanely fast speeds, and soldiers disappear into the ground, leaving nothing but a tombstone behind. “Commander!

We need you! Deploy your troops and help us win this war!”

“Clash of Clans” is a multiplayer online mobile strategy game developed and published by Supercell.

Players build and protect their own villages, as well as train troops to attack other players for their gold and elixir (a magical purple liquid used as currency). The graphics aren't great but do fit the cartoonish theme.

When you start, the available troops are the lowest level: barbarians. However, as you progress, upgrading your barracks in which your troops

are trained will unlock more powerful units, such as the mighty wizards or the powerful dragons. When you're not playing, improving and adding new defenses can help knock down

enemy raiders. When the time is right, you can choose to rebuild the clan castle, and help others by donating troops or fighting other clans in “clan wars.”

“Clash of Clans” gives you short but sweet gameplay, then keeps you away from the game by making

you train your troops again, just long enough that you almost can't stand it but still want to play more.

The next time you turn off your phone, remember, your army awaits you. ♦

by Christopher Ng, Brooklyn, NY



Short but sweet gameplay

In the Lonely Hour • Sam Smith

Flawlessly executed vocals and lyrics drenched with soul and passion make up Sam Smith's new album, "In the Lonely Hour." Recognized for his powerful voice that pours meaning into every syllable, Smith has turned from singing catchy, fun pop to heart-wrenching ballads and redefined his place in the music industry.

Smith's voice sets him apart from similar artists. It flows like honey and oozes emotion. Whenever he sings, it is just so honest. His vocals are best showcased in "Stay With Me," the hit single that peaked at number two on the Billboard Hot 100. The gospel chorus proves that Smith has a wide vocal range and can pull off any musical style.

One of his less popular songs, "Lay Me Down," is angelic. The unique ensemble is something one would expect to hear in a Broadway musical, further proving his versatility. Smith hits each note effortlessly; the control and power he has over his voice is amazing, considering how many other artists of the same genre cannot perform live without vocal difficulties.

Most of today's pop music relies heavily on Auto-Tune and a catchy beat, and the lyrics are rarely

given much thought. However, Smith's songs are beautiful not only because of his sweet voice and stunning accompaniments, but also due to the thoughtful lyrics that capture the essence of love and heartbreak. Smith sings so convincingly about these topics; he



Smith's voice sets him apart

has admitted that this album is about a man he loved who didn't return his feelings. In the hit song "I'm Not the Only One," Smith sings: "For months on end I've had my doubts/Denying every tear/I wish this would be over now/But I know that I still need you here." The song, from the perspective of a woman being cheated on by her husband, honestly portrays how the woman is unable to let go of the relationship even though he broke her heart. One of my favorites is "Leave Your Lover," a relatable ballad about pining for someone who's taken.

The music that accompanies Smith's voice is just as stunning. My absolute favorite track on the album is "Good Thing." After classical violins kickstart the ballad, an acoustic guitar is revealed. This startling contrast brings more depth to the song, and when the violins return halfway through, it shocks the listeners and draws them in. Additionally, the lyrics, which address releasing feelings associated

with unrequited love, fit in perfectly with the tone of the music.

Of course, the album has its downsides. The out-of-place "Restart," a failed attempt at an upbeat dance track, just didn't provide the emotion and depth I was looking for. Smith's Naughty Boy collaboration on a similar song titled "La La La" is also included on this album. I do not understand the need to include a song that has already been released and does not resemble most of the album.

"In the Lonely Hour" makes up for these disappointments, however, by including pieces that are perfect in every way. I adored the acoustic version of "Latch" because I could sense purpose and feeling in Smith's voice that was nonexistent in the original single. Also, "Money on My Mind" is an ingenious addition, because although it is also a catchy, upbeat pop song, it works in ways that "La La La" and "Restart" do not. The sincerity that seeps through this single makes me fall in love with Sam Smith all over again.

Smith does not receive the recognition he deserves. Hopefully, this wonderful artist will one day be acknowledged as an equal to pop legends like Madonna and Lady Gaga. Sam Smith will continue to captivate his audience with soulful singing and heartfelt lyrics for ages. ♦

by Aima Anwar, Brooklyn, NY

PUNK ROCK

Rented World • The Menzingers

From the first driving chords of "I Don't Wanna Be an A**hole Anymore" until the last tear-jerking notes of "When You Died," the Menzingers have created a phenomenally emotional and relatable album. "Rented World" is a release like no other. Among the flamboyant pop stars and the over-produced radio garbage, it's not so easy to find genuine, emotion-provoking, goosebump-radiating music today. "Rented World" is as real as it gets.



Phenomenally emotional and relatable

The Menzingers produce hard-hitting lyrics throughout, but the song "Rodent" stands out to me lyrically. Delivering lines like "I've tried running/I've tried hiding/I've tried everything but dying/damn the days we took for granted" with such emotion and feeling creates an inseparable connection between you and the music.

The main connection I have with the album is that it encompasses problems we all face. Self-conflict is expressed in "I Don't Wanna Be an A**hole Anymore," "Rodent," "Bad Things," and "In Remission." Loss is portrayed in "My Friend Kyle" and "When You Died." And love is seen in "Transient Love," "Nothing Feels Good Anymore," and "Where Your Heartache Exists." Although not everyone may feel every song the way Tom May and Greg Barnett do, we've all

been through these types of situations, making the songs very relatable.

Musically, this record showcases the passion and skill the Menzingers have to offer. May and Barnett's guitars complement each other extraordinarily well on songs like "Transient Love" and "Hearts Unknown." The Menzingers also stay consistent with their previous records' upbeat punk style with "The Talk" and "Sentimental Physics." The experimental ballad "When You Died" shows Bob Dylan's influence and strays from the Menzingers' roots, but the track adds to the depth of the record.

"Rented World" delivers a variety of fast- and slow-paced, emotion-driven punk songs that'll be sure to give you goosebumps and have you singing along the whole way. ♦

by Avery Springer, Macomb, MI

INDIE ROCK

Don't Forget Who You Are Miles Kane

Miles Kane's sophomore album, "Don't Forget Who You Are," is a mixed bag. On one hand, the CD sounds quite good. The songs are catchy, Kane's vocals are exceptional, and the production is a step up from his debut album.

The nostalgic '60s sound that he constructed his career upon is still present, especially in the hit single "Don't Forget Who You Are." "Bombshells," while short, is also a track worth singling out as impressive.

However, instrumentals seem to be a huge problem for the Liverpool star. More often than not, he becomes entangled in the styles of other bands. "Give Up," for example, sounds far too much like a dark, guitar-bursting tune that is the signature of Kasabian. "Darkness in Our Hearts" copies the sizzling guitars of the Strokes, and "Out of Control" sounds as if it were swiped from a long-lost Oasis album. While it is often beneficial to look to other bands for inspiration, there's a fine line between what is and isn't acceptable. I feel Kane has crossed it.

Kane also struggles with his lyrics at times. In this category, "Better Than That"

is especially cringe-worthy. The lyrics, laced with '60s references decipherable only through a Google search, are out of touch with Kane's audience. The inclusion of the lyric "maybe it's your stupid face that's turning me on" is questionable and

degrades the song. Even more painful is the song's ending, during which Kane feels a need to slowly spell out L-O-V-E.

It's no secret that Miles Kane prefers to focus his career on his live performances, and for that purpose this album fits the bill. For those partying at gigs, the loud, chant-worthy tunes Kane has provided are considered hits. The fans at home, however, are left scratching their heads. For them, it's clear that this album is a step back

from its predecessor in nearly all areas.

Make no mistake: Miles Kane certainly has talent, and this album has its strong points. However, it's obvious that more thought needs to go into Kane's work if he expects to move his career in the right direction. ♦

by Alan Brown, Manhattan, KS



The fans at home are left scratching their heads

MUSICAL

Into the Woods

The translation from stage to screen has always been a delicate one. But director Rob Marshall has hit gold before (with “Chicago,” for example). And “Into the Woods” is an enjoyable movie-musical experience for the most part. However, Marshall’s latest does not join the ranks of brilliant play-to-movie adaptations.

The writers’ and director’s strict adherence to the original source material seems less reverent, more like an act of religious fanaticism. The script, penned by stage director James Lapine, unsurprisingly suffers in its translation to the silver screen. It opens with the forgettable voice of an uncredited narrator who never speaks again.

Second, while a stage audience doesn’t expect much environmental exposition, a movie audience expects a little understanding of the world where the story is taking place. Instead, we are thrust directly into the opening number, “Into the Woods.” We learn the plight of several Brothers Grimm characters who resolve that the only way to solve their dilemma is to go into the woods. The film also lacks a traditional orchestral score, which can convey a lot of emotion. Instead we get stage music that just doesn’t match up with the elaborate production design and costumes.

The story has a handful of clear antagonists from the start – the Wolf (a mustachioed Johnny Depp in a zoot suit) and the Witch (Meryl Streep). While threatening to the characters, these villains create very little fear and tension in the audience. Streep gives her usual winning performance, but the script she’s working with is clearly written for the intimacy of the stage. The Witch’s dramatic door-blowing entrance into the home of hapless baker (James Corden) and his wife (Emily Blunt) holds cinematic promise but dies like a bad joke when the Baker interrupts with the anticlimactic one-liner “We don’t have any more bread!”

The Witch informs the Baker and his wife of a curse she placed on the Baker’s father, which renders his family tree infertile. She demands that the couple find a few magic items in three days’ time to lift the spell. We follow the Baker and his wife as their quest intertwines with the stories of Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack (of Beanstalk

lore), and Rapunzel.

We identify with the Baker and his wife immediately because their quest is the one that seems most clear to the audience. All other pursuits are unrelatable and thrust into our face without any back story or exposition to speak of. Cinderella (Anna Kendrick) seems intent on attending the Prince’s festival, even though we are given no real reason behind this. Little Red Riding Hood needs to bring bread for her sick “Granny,” and yet she seems to feel no pang of conscience when she stuffs herself with the Baker’s sweets. Jack and his mother are probably the best of the bunch; at least their motives are clear and well-explained.

The play recognizes these protagonists as emotionally implausible storybook characters with cartoonish,

unrealistic feelings, and the movie attempts to re-create this on screen – but with live actors, in a 124-minute movie, it’s disturbing. Viewers are left to wander through a real “forest” of ambiguous characters with strange idiosyncratic motives, dramatic story arcs, and unnecessary plot manipulation.

The Witch seems to appear at random throughout the Baker’s journey, urging him onward, yet her real

motives remain a mystery. She is attempting to be a good, protective parent to Rapunzel, yet, after a “Mommy Knows Best”-esque musical number (in which the daughter seems to agree), the Witch decides to banish her to an island in the middle of the swamp.

The timely reinforcement of the musical number “Almost Midnight” dredges the film from its cesspool of thematic incoherence, redeeming it as something of a glitzy light show. But after that, the film continues to sink lower: familial deaths are met with disturbing indifference, and once-relatable protagonists are turned into fickle and unpleasant plot devices. This seems like an understandable philosophical metaphor on stage but leaves us bewildered on screen.

The stage musical is a powerful allegory about fantasy and finding true happiness, but these same themes are discreetly polished away by Marshall’s flashy direction and Lapine’s tonally awkward screenplay. ♦

by Owen Mortner, Cambridge, MA



Suffers in its translation to the screen

ROMANCE

Safe Haven

My favorite type of movie is romance, and “Safe Haven” is one of the best I have seen in theaters in years. If you are looking for a charming romance with an exciting surprise at the end, then you will fall in love with this movie.

Julianne Hough plays Erin, whose abusive husband also happens to be a police officer. One night she fights back, injuring him with a knife. Erin then flees to Southport, North Carolina, where she meets Alex (Josh Duhamel), his kids, Lexi and Josh, and her new neighbor, Jo. Erin changes her name to Katie and alters her appearance to lessen the chance of her husband finding her. “Katie” and Alex fall in love.

Lexi adores her, but Josh is old enough to remember his mom – who died of cancer – and he’s more hesitant.

Although this is one of her first movies, Hough is very believable in her role as a young woman who is falling in love yet has previously been hurt. Du-

hamel does a good job of representing a dad who wants new love and fun but is still heartbroken about his dead wife. My absolute favorite performance was Mimi Kirkland as Lexi; she is the most adorable little girl.



Cute, witty romance with a twist ending

The reason I loved “Safe Haven” so much is because of the last few minutes; there’s a big twist at the end, and that’s what made this movie so spectacular. I also think that “Safe Haven” displays real-life, current issues. The character Erin, as a young woman who overcomes spousal abuse and is strong in sticking up for herself, shows that girls can and do have better futures waiting for them with people

who want to treat them right. I highly recommend this heartwarming story to other lovers of cute and witty romance movies. ♦

by Jenna Richeson, Scottsdale, AZ

SCI-FI

The Giver

Based on the acclaimed novel by Lois Lowry and directed by Phillip Noyce, “The Giver” made its debut in theaters last summer. The poignant story takes place in a supposedly utopian city created after “the ruin,” a horrific war. The community’s creators tried to erase history, emotions, most differences between people, and even colors; a new set of rules takes their place.

The story begins with a group of 17-year-olds – including the protagonist, Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) – about to be assigned their roles in society by the Elders. Jonas is chosen to be the community’s Receiver of Memory; the former Receiver, now the Giver, will share memories with Jonas. After Jonas learns about the past and realizes what is lacking from his world, he daringly attempts to bring the memories back to the community, while the Chief Elder (Meryl Streep) tries to stop him.

Compared to the novel, I found the film disappointing. The producers filled the plot with multiple clichés, developing the story into a standard teen dystopian romance. The setting initially resembled that of “Fahrenheit 451,” a ’60s view of the future, which was exactly what I was expecting. However, further into the film, I realized that the setting is a lot more technologically advanced. Teenagers take pills each morning to hinder “stirrings” (sexual desires), retina scans are used to open doors, and drones are also used.

I noticed that the film contains various details that are present not in the book *The Giver* but in “The Hunger Games” films! It seems as if the producers were trying to measure up to those movies. For example, in “The Hunger Games,” Haymitch, whose job it is to train Peeta and Katniss in preparation for the games, is known to be an alcoholic. Similarly, the Giver (Jeff



The producers filled the plot with clichés

Bridges), Jonas’ teacher, appears to be drunk in the film (this is not the case in the novel). Furthermore, Jonas and his childhood friend Fiona (Odeya Rush) fall in love after they stop taking the drugs that quash their “stirrings,” and ultimately kiss during a time of risk as the characters are stuck in a moment between life and death. Does that sound familiar? Even the idea of “the ruin,” which is not mentioned in the book, is extremely similar to the massive war in *The Hunger Games*.

However clichéd and contemporary the film seemed to be, Phillip Noyce did capture beautiful shots that made it marvelous visually. He successfully conveyed the story’s message – that utopia is impossible, and that in life there should be a balance between pain and joy. Yet, disappointingly, this film did not do so as powerfully and as sensibly as the novel. ♦

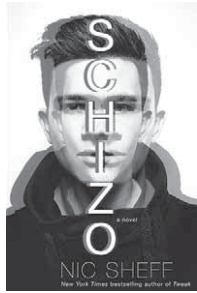
by Gabrielle Amar, New York, NY

NOVEL

Schizo • by Nic Sheff

What separates revenge from redemption, hope from hopelessness, or even madness from reality? These questions are what blur the line in *Schizo* by Nic Sheff.

Miles Cole is a teenager in San Francisco struggling with intense schizophrenia as well as high school life. He feels guilty because two years prior – the day of his first schizophrenic episode – Teddy, his younger brother, went missing. He was believed to have drowned at the beach, but a witness claims to have seen him being taken by a shady man. Still wracked with guilt, Miles tries to find a way to get his brother back and reunite his family again. Miles is both an optimistic and pessimistic character; he can have a mean-spirited moment here and there, but he deeply cares for his friends and family, which makes the reader want him to succeed and save Teddy.



The reader wants Miles to succeed

The writing in this book is a pristine example of how complex and tortured a mind with mental illness can be. I could sometimes barely tell if what Miles saw was real or if it was a schizophrenic hallucination. The crows Miles sees throughout the novel, and many more of his delusions and dreams, all lead the way to a hopeful yet uncertain climax that made my fingers tremble at each turn of the page.

Written with likable and unlikeable characters, well paced, and effectively crafted with unique diction and syntax, *Schizo* will show the reader what it is like not to be able to tell delusion from reality. ♦

by Nathan Hopp, Green Bay, WI

MANGA

The Flowers of Evil • by Shuzo Oshimi

The Flowers of Evil redefines the Japanese genre of comics called *shonen*, which might be more familiar from titles like *Naruto* and *Attack on Titan*. Its story goes far beyond the average comic into something that even adults could find themselves deeply analyzing.

Takao, a lone bookworm in middle school, lets his hormones get the best of him one day and steals the gym clothes of Saeki, the girl he has a crush on. It just so happens that another girl, Nakamura, a troublemaker famously known for misbehavior such as calling a teacher names, catches him in the act and uses it as an opportunity to blackmail him into a contract of sorts.

Once Takao becomes involved with Nakamura, something blossoms. Personality-wise, they're polar opposites: Takao wants to mind his own business, while Nakamura isn't afraid to challenge any reality she hates. But as he

spends more and more time with her, he finds himself analyzing her, agreeing with her, and perhaps even becoming friends with her.

Middle school is a critical time, and the author of this manga so realistically explores the way middle schoolers act, from vocabulary to relationships, that it truly has to be seen to be believed.

After that, the story skips ahead, letting you grow up with the characters and showing the effects of their actions years later.

You'll laugh. You'll cringe. You'll gasp in shock. You'll spend sleepless nights turning page after page. And most

importantly, you'll wonder if this is a simply a comic or an important piece of literature that deserves to be examined for its characterization and unique storytelling. Don't miss it. ♦

by Britan Dietsch, Leavenworth, KS



Simply a comic or literature?

NOVEL

Coraline • by Neil Gaiman

A recent rearrangement of my bookshelf revealed 10 books I wasn't aware I owned. One from Sidney Sheldon, John Grisham, and an apparently thrilling Jeffrey Archer twinkled at me from the painstakingly arranged rows, begging to be read. But start a Sidney Sheldon, and I knew my textbooks would gather dust, exams forgotten. So I picked up a small, unassuming book I'd bought years ago and forgotten about. Its childish, cartoony cover promised a refreshing, light read.

Inquisitive, forthright, and characterized by the uncomplicated voice that children lose as they become bungling adults, *Coraline* held me spellbound from the start.

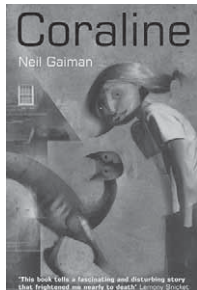
The book starts off with Coraline being bored with the world around her, irritated by her loving but busy parents' disinterest in entertaining her, and altogether longing for adventure. The first time she finds the mysterious door, it opens only to a brick wall. However, when she tries it again, she walks into a house just like hers. A mother and father, just like hers, except with black button

eyes, want her to stay with them and be their little girl.

The book goes from mildly creepy to fantastically terrifying in a span of about 20 pages, and will leave you lost to the world around you, rooting for the spunky little girl who, despite her normally childlike outlook, occasionally makes intelligent observations like "I don't want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted just like that, and it didn't mean anything? What then?"

Coraline's direct language is refreshing. There are no attempts to use fancy metaphors to describe beauty, no mincing words, and no attempts to impress by using innumerable similes and whatnot. But it is real, rendered in simplistic, honest language that has an impact that a hundred literary devices couldn't have managed. This gem of a book is sweet, simple, and utterly horrifying. ♦

by Kaavya Muralidhar, Hyderabad, India



Sweet, simple, and utterly horrifying

NOVEL

Americanah • by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

When I read a book, I want to get a thrill, satisfaction, or knowledge. *Americanah* is the definition of an excellent book. As a dedicated fan of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, after a couple of pages of this book, I began to admire her even more. Adichie is attracting a new generation of readers to African literature. She recently won the National Book Critics Circle Award for this book, and some may recognize her work from the excerpt about feminism in the song "Flawless" by Beyoncé. I admire the feminist themes she incorporates into most of her books. She discusses realities that always feel true.

Americanah has relatable ideologies and is set around themes of culture, race, and gender. High school sweethearts Ifemelu and Obinize have to go separate ways in order to create a better future. The two face challenges surviving in different cultures, and Ifemelu begins to blog about her experiences as a new American. Her blog is filled with humor and realities that Adichie does an exceptional job incorporating throughout this book.

Ifemelu shares how she does not understand the need to pay an extra 15 or 20 percent of your bill to the waitress, or why "participation" is part of your final grade in the United States. She is also intrigued by the American obsession with carrying water bottles; these are examples of how a change in culture can affect

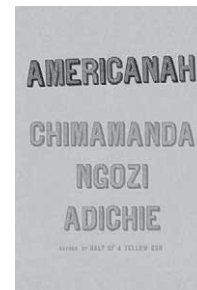
one's perspective. It is evident that this book is aimed at women of color and Africans, but it is a book that can broaden anyone's cultural exposure.

Adichie reflects on real-life situations throughout the book, and with these reflections, the reader is capable of feeling and thinking like the characters. She mentions various day-to-day situations, such as the struggle of having nappy hair and adjusting to a new environment.

I found this book extremely relatable, since I am a Nigerian who immigrated to the United States for educational purposes, like the character Ifemelu. When I arrived, I had the same thoughts on how social inequality, culture, and race in the U.S. differs from Nigeria. After reading this book, I was provided with an understanding of coping with life when everything is suddenly different.

Americanah is a remarkable book filled with realities about our society today. It is a book that portrays the loss of cultural identity and self-acceptance when placed in a world different from our own. I recommend it to anyone who has had to adjust to a new society, as it advises the reader on dealing with new situations. ♦

by Amaju Omatseye, Scottsdale, AZ



Filled with realities about society today

Paper Plates and Talking Plants

by Freda Sciarappa, New Orleans, LA

I tried telling my aunt that instead of paper plates, she should buy real plates, like the ones other families had.

"Paper plates are eco-friendly," she'd always say in response.

Nothing about paper plates seemed friendly to me. Once I asked the maple tree outside my house its thoughts on the subject. Its branches overshadowed my house and kept it from sun even on the brightest day of summer, which was fine by me. I grew up that way, in the shadow of trees, and my aunt loved the dark. Before the maple tree grew so big, she put heavy, dark curtains on the windows and extinguished the living room lights. But she wouldn't just turn off the lights; she'd take the bulbs right out of their sockets.

"It's better that way," she'd tell me.

Anyway, our maple tree told me that day – with a heavy sigh that shook her branches – that paper plates were the opposite of eco-friendly and we should just buy real plates like the ones other families had.

I loved that tree. I remember the day my aunt cut it down; she hated people to the extent that she refused to call professional tree-cutters. I ended up

calling them anyway, after she tried to cut straight through the trunk when she should have cut the branches off first. She always did things that way: straight to the trunk.

After the tree was gone I remember telling her what it had told me. I remember so well because she shook her head in disappointment. She cut it down for that reason, she said, and I should stop talking to trees.

My aunt loved the dark

I was so bitter after she told me that. It didn't seem like her right to tell me who my friends should be, or her right to chop them down into paper plates. I refused to eat off paper plates after that. I'd eat right off the table instead. That drove my aunt insane. I really knew how to push her over the edge. She was one of those neat freaks, you know? The ones who never lick their fingers after eating popcorn and never shake hands with people. And she loved rules. She loved them so much I bet if rules were a physical child, she'd kick me out in the blink of an eye. So my new food habits really got to her.

"Goddamnit, just get a paper plate!" she yelled when she finally broke.

My aunt never yelled, even when she got real mad. For example, when salesmen knocked on her door, she told them politely to leave – and she really hated those guys. I think they leave the house alone now because it's so dark they think no one's home.

I like light and I like plants. My aunt hated plants, though. One time she asked who I wanted to invite to my birthday party and I said the sunflower next door. I love sunflowers and their weird fascination with the sun, just like mine. She smiled at me forcefully, that type of smile where her lips were so pushed together they turned almost white and formed a thin line.

The next day, when I went to the neighbor's garden to have my usual 3 p.m. chat with my favorite sunflower, I found it gone. I asked our neighbor, and he told me it disappeared overnight, which was strange.

Our neighbor was real nice. He was the polar opposite of my aunt, since his windows were always open and his yard was one big flower garden. Strangely, he had a crush on her, but she told him the day she met him that she didn't want a boyfriend. She always went straight to the trunk.

You could've called my aunt pretty in a mysterious kind of way. She had dark hair and dark eyebrows with high cheekbones. She was skinny too, almost too skinny but not quite, right at the line of sickly. I was almost the opposite, with light freckles, blonde hair, and rosy cheeks. My aunt used to tell me I was the daughter of the sun, but I never knew if that was a compliment or not, since she hid from it.

Our neighbor felt so bad about my friend's disappearance, he invited me over the next day to plant new sunflowers. I



Photo by Kay Love, High Point, NC

nodded so hard my head felt dizzy and ran to ask my aunt. She said no, telling me there were chores to do, but by the time I finished them all it was dark, time for dinner. Dinner that night was normal. I ate on the table, my aunt on a paper plate. She tapped her foot angrily on the floor.

"For my birthday I'd like a lamp for my room," I said quietly. I expected a lecture, but my aunt just sighed. She looked so tired.

After dinner, while I lay on my bed, I heard her car pull out of the driveway. I tangled myself in the heavy blankets and waited.

In the morning I awoke disappointed in myself for falling asleep and walked to my aunt's threshold. Her room was empty. The light of my windowed room faded into hers like a flashlight. Mirrorless and windowless, her room reminded me of a well-decorated cage, and I left quickly, uncomfortable.

The day passed while I sat by the door, watching the light change brightness and hue. That night I ate cold pasta on a paper plate, my number one most lousy meal. I called the cops the next morning, and they took me away. They told me they found my aunt dead in her car.

I wanted to die at that moment, but I reminded myself to step away from the trunk and cut the branches off first, so I cried instead. The officer told me she was in Heaven now and would live happily, but I knew my aunt would hate Heaven and would prefer Hell if it wasn't so hot.

The neighbor adopted me, which was nice, but the flowers stopped talking to me. I sat and cried to them, but they just swayed in the wind. No one could make me feel better than the plants. People told me "everything is going to be all right" so many times that their faces started to blur together and their voices formed a single note of pity.

It's weird living with my neighbor. He told me he's my new guardian, but when I look out the window I can see where my old one used to live. I can see the stump of a lonely tree and the ominous shade that the empty house casts. ♦

Her room reminded me of a well-decorated cage

The Onion

You cut the onion, skins of color buckling as your knife impaled the nematocysts' prisons.

Free at last!

they scream as they float toward your eyes and rip out the tears just as you ripped their roots from Mother Earth.

I feel your waxy hands tapping the small of my back as I cough from the spice burrowing into my tongue.

I have finally accepted your sesame onion dressing, the dressing I know like the back of your head the head that I watched as you stuck onion chunks into my sandwiches and crisped my sawdust bread.

But now the winds have swept you away through the icicle hallways, leaving the counters to shiver and empty skins to fall into the sink with a crumple and a sigh.

I grab another onion from the long queue of others cowering in the corner of the cutting board, and I lose myself in peeling you away until I am left with the little white heart, and it is silent.

I buried the little white heart in your wild garden and after countless sunrises and the robins singing to ear-popping yawns I spot a green head wiggling out of the snow, and that is all I need to know that you are still here.

by Lydia Wang, Novi, MI

Dreams and Lies

by Namrata Verghese, Missouri City, TX

Sometimes he dreams as babies do – or at least, how he imagines they do. In curls and twists and whirls, in fading colors and soft musical hums. That’s what it must be, right? What keeps a baby so content when it’s dreaming?

This is what Sapan thinks about now as he leans over the glass edge of the hospital’s newborn cot. His sister is one of the many babies in this room. He’d been startled when he walked in, never having seen so many babies in one place before; it is a sea of pink and blue blankets and hats with fuzzy bobbles. But he would have recognized her even if his father hadn’t pointed her out. Not because she has his grandfather’s nose, as his mother murmured happily, or his Ada Aunty’s cheeks, as his father muttered less happily, but because hers is the only brown face, besides his own and his father’s, in this room of pink babies.

His sister is new, brand new, just born, fragile like his brand-new train set, but she already looks old. Older than him by far, and he has a good six years on her. Her cheeks are wrinkly, deep lines running down from

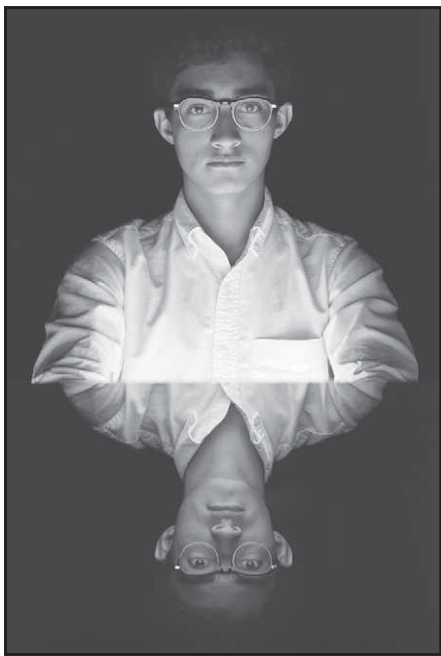


Photo by Jack Graham, Orlando, FL

her nose to her mouth, frozen bird formations just above her barely there eyebrows.

When he saw her before, swaddled in his mother’s sagging arms, she was crying – not the sort of bawling that gets him a time out, but the petulant, whiny cry of the stray cat sitting on their fence in India, the one his mother always warned him to be wary of because it could be sick. Now, in slumber, she looks happy for the first time in her short life. She sighs deeply and serenely, like an old man,

and paws at her face with a tiny pink-wrapped hand. He even thinks he sees her smile, although his father is quick to tell him that it’s not a true smile yet, just reflex. She’s a person called Sanjana, and they share dreams.

He knows that she is smiling, even if his father doesn’t think so.

• • •

Other times he dreams in film noir, like the movies he’s recently come to love. Guys in suspenders and undone ties, surrounded by coils of cigar smoke. Girls with coiffed hair and bright red lipstick – you can tell it’s red, even in black-and-white.

He likes to pretend he’s in one of those movies, and in his apartment, it’s not hard to do. There’s not much color around.

The carpet is beige – used to be white, his mother frequently scolds – and the walls are cream to match. Even the window faces the peeling gray walls of the neighboring apartment complex, nothing else.

His mother hates it. When his father isn’t around, she tells Sapan how much she hates the dreary wallpaper, the broken-not-broken television. How she wishes the place belonged to them and not the grumpy landlord downstairs, so she could paint it the shade of mint green she found in *Home and Design*.

Then again, his mother hates almost everything. Sometimes he thinks this includes his father. She serves him dinner in silence, usually much later than when she and Sapan eat, because his father comes home around eight. She brings him tea before brewing her own – every morning at 6:30, just when Sapan is brushing his teeth in his Mario Kart pajamas – but he doesn’t ever say thank you, and she looks away. They don’t ever hug or kiss like his friends’ parents do. One time, after second-grade graduation, he saw Timothy’s parents kiss and then smile at each other like the actors in his movies. It made him feel odd, knowing that people, that parents, do that in real life. Once, when he was in the back seat of their car on the way to a function at Aditya Uncle’s house, he thought he saw his father putting his arm around his mother’s shoulders. But it turned out that he was just getting ready to reverse.

• • •

His mother met Vijay Uncle at the Indian grocer’s two blocks down from their apartment. At least that’s what she tells Sapan when he comes home from school on Tuesday after Robotics Club and there is a man he’s never seen before sitting on the sofa, smoking a cigarette.

“Sapan, this is Vijay Uncle. He just moved here from India and lives very

close to us, a few houses down,” his mother says. Her face is flushed, her lips are coated in red, and she’s wearing the expensive perfume his father bought her for their fifteenth wedding anniversary a few months before, the one she wears for special occasions.

He smiles, says hello, then goes to his room to do his homework and play video games. By now he is used to the parade of Indians his parents befriend. The potbellied uncles who start the evening with their mouths settled in tight lines but end up singing old Hindi love songs in drunken bliss. The gossiping aunts who sit around the kitchen in saris that don’t move as they do, talking about Cousin Nina, who eloped with an American, and her poor family who must be so upset. And of course, the continuing annoyance of their limitless children, who they lug around to every event and whose well-being inevitably becomes Sapan’s responsibility.

But Vijay Uncle is different. He carries with him no wife, no children, no potbelly; he seems relaxed, at ease with himself when he talks to Sapan’s mother, and doesn’t recognize that he’s unwanted when Sapan’s father merely nods to acknowledge his presence. He smokes cigarettes and keeps his mustache trimmed, his cuffs rolled up, and his tie loosened, although he never takes it off.

Sapan notes Vijay Uncle’s difference, but doesn’t think much of it. Doesn’t care much about it. He has a ten-page report on Russia’s tsars due next Monday and was never a procrastinator.

So he stores Vijay Uncle’s uncomfortable visits in the back of his head, saying a curt hello and disappearing to his room when he sees him again on Wednesday and again on Thursday. He ignores the disconcerting scent of his mother’s Safrant Troublant perfume mingled with the stale odor of cigarettes lingering in the living room one Saturday morning when his father is on call at the hospital and doesn’t come home at all.

He asks no questions, just as his father, who sits in his armchair and notices an unfamiliar dent in its cushions, who goes to the bathroom and finds cigarette butts in the trash can, who can smell samosas frying in his sleep but acts oblivious to the smoke-stench that clouds their living room, asks no questions.

Later Sapan will think back on this time in his life and realize that he would have known it was an affair had it been anyone but his mother.

• • •

After Vijay Uncle’s visits stop, his

mother grows quiet. Her lipstick lies unused on his parents’ sink, eventually growing old enough to throw out. The infamous perfume sits forgotten in her vanity cupboard. She stops going out to their many Indian functions, claiming to have a stomach-ache, a headache, a fever. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when he’s getting a glass of water or using the bathroom, he sees her sitting at the kitchen table, staring at cupped hands that hold nothing but air.

Some weeks later, she suddenly announces to them that she’s booked a trip to India. It’s during dinner, and they collectively tip their heads up and out of the silence, staring at her with their hands suspended halfway between their mouths and their plates.

Sanjana is the first to snap out of the shock. She begins wailing, says, “Mommy, I can’t miss school, plus I have Jessica’s birthday party on Saturday, and she’s turning nine, it’s important!”

Sapan soon joins her: “Mom, are you serious? You know I have exams coming up . . .”

Their father is alone in his stillness, staring hard at Sapan’s mother as if he’s willing the next words out of her mouth.

She complies, waving a hand as if to brush away their complaints. “No,” she clarifies, “the trip is for me.”

She goes on to explain her father is sick and it is important for her to spend some time with him, caring for him in his old age. Sapan finds it odd that she chooses now to go, considering his grandfather had a mild heart attack a year ago and has since

recovered completely, according to the doctors. She’s leaving in a month, and will be gone for four. “At least,” she adds.

He doesn’t say anything. Nobody does. His father looks down intently at his meal. Sanjana is still crying. Sapan carefully rolls a ball of rice in his fingers and puts it in his mouth. The chicken, he notes, is especially spicy today.

• • •

Since his father works late, it is decided that it will be best if the children move in with Ada Aunty and Aditya Uncle for a while. After all, Sanjana is just eight and can’t be expected to take care of herself when Sapan goes to a friend’s house or an overnight competition. Their home is only a few miles away; there is no need to transfer schools. It seems like the perfect setup.

Ada Aunty has a round, pleasant face and an inviting smile. Her house is much nicer than their cramped apartment; it is often the designated meeting-place for their

➤➤

The Net

by Sophie Panzer, So. Orange, NJ

There are some things in life that cannot be burned, and these are the things you must drown.

Mara considered this as she walked over the coarse, dampening sand, feeling an increasingly agitated sea curl around her ankles as the sky grew overcast. She had burned all there was to burn: photographs, ticket stubs, notes written on Post-Its and gum wrappers.

Now the only thing that couldn't be burned was lying cold in her hand, its edges biting into the skin of her palm.

She wondered if she had done the right thing coming here; she could only throw so far, and if it didn't go deep enough it might be washed ashore again. Perhaps the lake would have been a better choice – she might have swum to the deepest part and let it sink to the bottom where the still waters would never move it.

But she was here, and she wanted it gone now, so it couldn't be helped. The sky rumbled above her. The sea boiled up around her legs, soaking the cuffs of her jeans. A drop of rain fell against her face, and she let it stay there until it dried.

Mara didn't know what she was waiting for. One patch of sand was as good as another, and it would be best to go before the storm broke.

She walked along, head down, deep in thoughts that swirled and ebbed like the water sloshing around her. She didn't notice the thing until she almost stepped on it. When Mara saw where she had been about to place her foot, she shrieked and stumbled back, falling onto the sand.

There was a creature entangled in a tarred fishing net. It was about the size of a human child, its skin a mottled greenish gray. Its features were a blend of humanoid and something vaguely other, wide and

flat and scaly. It had a face and a torso and arms, with webbing between its bony fingers and slits in the sides of its neck, which were too perfect and symmetrical to be injuries. The lower half of its body was a long, muscular tail, covered with tiny iridescent scales and ending in a fin that had probably once fanned out magnificently but was now limp and tattered. Long, slimy green filaments protruded like hair from its scalp.

Mara stared at it, so shocked that she could feel her heartbeat pound in her stomach and her throat.

The creature's eyes were closed, and she would have thought it was dead except for the faint, labored gurgling emitting from the slits in its neck. Almost its entire body was entangled in the net, and Mara could see where the tarred rope had cut into skin. The neck, arms, and torso were covered in lacerations oozing thick, dark blood.

She didn't know what compelled her. Later she realized she should have backed away to observe it from a safer distance, or at the very least rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't experiencing a hallucination brought on by the new pills her psychiatrist had prescribed. But she began pulling at the net with her hands.

She never stopped to wonder at the strangeness of the circumstance – her mind had become clear and singularly focused on the task at hand. She tried to avoid touching the creature, but every so often its skin brushed against her own, damp and smooth and cool, reminiscent of the sting rays she had stroked at an aquarium as a little girl. The skin had a variety of other damage in addition to those caused by the net – bits of stone and wood were embedded in it, along with a few small, serrated teeth.

Her own skin was collecting injuries of its own: the net burned and cut at her fingers, her palms,

her wrists. The sky grew darker, and the sea grew angrier, until at last the clouds broke open and rain started pouring down. Mara pulled the last of the net away just as a wave crashed over her arms and the creature's body. She stood up quickly, her trance broken.

For a moment she stood there and stared, getting soaked as the sea roared closer.

A glitter in the sand caught her eye – it was the necklace he had given her for their anniversary, the present she had resolved to cast away. The green stone on a gold chain had fallen from her hand when she began tearing at the net. She picked it up.

She let it fall from her grasp onto the creature's chest, turned, and ran away into the rain. She looked back only once, and when she did, both the creature and the necklace were gone, washed away into the sea as if they had never been there at all. ♦

*She shrieked
and stumbled
back, falling
onto the sand*



Photo by Kae Vergara, Lake Forest, CA

parents' friends. Unlike his mother, who long ago shed her traditional clothes in favor of casual Western outfits, Ada Aunty still wears ironed saris in the daytime and ragged cotton ones at night. Their tight sleeves create a permanent angry red bangle on her upper arm, leaving the loose skin to swing around her armpits like wings.

Aditya Uncle is friendly as well, with a wide mouth and amiable eyebrows that fade into his receding hairline. He is an accountant and is always home at exactly five. Sapan sometimes wishes his father had a job like that, instead of one where he rushes out of the house at two in the morning trying to save some stranger's life.

After school, there are always snacks on the coffee table. Crackers and cheese, usually, but since Sanjana mentioned that they love Nutella, there's often a chocolate-spread sandwich as well. Ada Aunty never hogs the television like their mother; she cooks elaborate dinners and, if she has time left, she cleans. She cleans even the places nobody but she knows about: the crevice behind the mantle, the cracked floorboard underneath the Persian rug. She cleans until

everything sparkles, until her hands are blistered.

Sapan has heard the women gossiping about Ada Aunty; how she insisted on finishing college before searching for a husband, how her father had to pay a lot of money for Aditya Uncle to marry her because she was dark and homely. Now, watching her furiously scrub dried curry from a dinner plate, he wonders what her college major was and whether she wishes that her life were different.

Then, one day, he knows that she does. That day, Aditya Uncle doesn't come home until nine at night, and he is drunk. His face is shiny red, and he is angrier than Sapan has ever seen him. Ada Aunty tells Sapan and Sanjana to go to bed early, but he lies awake, listening to their voices rise and fall. The next morning there is a bruise high on Ada Aunty's cheekbone.

It happens again a few weeks later, and again a few months later – the four months that his mother speculated earlier have turned into five, six. It's usually on Saturdays, and it's always when he's

*He lies awake,
listening to
their voices
rise and fall*

drunk. Sapan has never seen him hit her, but he sees things that are not in the spots they normally are the next day, the spots that Ada Aunty has designated for them.

Boots, books, belts. Anything.

• • •

He becomes a doctor, of course. There was never really any other choice. At his graduation, his mother cheers

the loudest, his father beams the proudest. The picture they take on that day shows the three of them, Sanjana behind the lens, squinting at the sunlight and smiling the same crooked smile.

• • •

Gayatri is the first and last girl he meets. His parents are so glad he hasn't married an American, like Sanjana, that they don't pressure him to meet anyone else.

Over tea, he learns that she is an art history major, an accomplished *kathak* dancer, and a decent singer. She doesn't offer up this information, of course; her mother, a birdlike, hyperactive woman with a shrill voice and arms that remind him of a Velociraptor's curved claws,

is all too eager to feed it to him, along with the plate of orange *laddoos* she claims Gayatri made herself.

Still, there's something he likes about her. Maybe it's the way she juts out her chin, even while looking down demurely. Maybe it's that she's an art history major, not a doctor or an engineer.

So he marries her; what else is he supposed to do?

• • •

They met at a bar, the place all good love stories start. She ordered vodka; he asked for scotch. She pulled her seat closer and didn't need to do anything more.

They walked to the car.

(Irrational, irrelevant, improper)

He tugged off her jacket.

(Indecent, irreverent, illegitimate)

He noticed her wedding ring and became vaguely aware of the dull gold band around his own finger. What was proper in such situations? Should he take it off or attempt to hide it? For a brief stutter in time, the thought crossed his mind that such deception was wrong, that what he was doing was wrong. But, as is the case with many such silly thoughts, it dreamt itself away. ♦

Fifteen Claps for Lenna

by Abigail LeCates, Cooperstown, NY

“Everybody give a round of applause for our jazz band!” The principal’s wheezy voice crackles through the microphone. Even from the back of the auditorium I can sense the heat of his breath. Sweat glistens on his forehead. I dutifully join in applauding with the other two hundred and fifty students who crowd Dover High School’s small auditorium.

I count my claps. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.* The applause dies down when I reach fifteen. Fifteen is an unlucky number. By now, the auditorium has fallen into a bored silence. When the chorus’s voices begin to float through the audience, I’m sure no one is listening. All I can think about is fifteen. January 15th was the last time I saw her.

I look down at my hands in my lap. Slowly, I lift them and clap one more time. *Sixteen.* Lisa McClay whips around her head of stiff brown curls to give me an accusing glare. I hide beneath an expressionless face and look down at my lap.

I have known Lisa McClay since first grade when she moved to Dover with her mom. They came all the way from New York to escape Lisa’s dad. Despite coming from the North, Lisa and her mother possessed a truly Southern attitude that allowed them to fit perfectly into our well-oiled community. On January 15th, Mrs. McClay baked me a green bean casserole.

I self-consciously glance at Lisa. Her attention has already left me as she gossips about a more pressing matter.

The chorus finally finishes their last song. This time I don’t clap. I want to escape the auditorium’s worn green walls. I want to escape Dover. I want to escape myself.

“We’re leaving now.” Lisa’s voice drags me back to reality. I nod. Before I stand, I tap my foot twice. *One, two.* I tap once for each of them. I tap my foot to forget. “Hurry up,” she says.

I quickly join the line of students leaving the auditorium. Everyone is talking as we file into the hallway. They seem to talk more now to make up for the time lost during the assembly. I don’t. I feel disconnected. When they left me, I began to lose myself.

I break away from the crowd to go find my backpack in history class. The blue carpet of the hallway is worn. My mom grew up in Dover. I picture my mom walking on the same blue carpet, wearing her

favorite cowboy boots.

I have to tap my fingers against my thigh five times when I visualize my mom. *One, two, three, four, five.*

Each tap comforts me. Even in this hallway, I can almost smell her vanilla perfume. I can picture her blonde curls and the way her smile always lit up a room. It’s no wonder my dad was so in love with her. On January 15th, my mom was driving.

I reach the history room and snap my fingers twice before I walk through the doorway. *One, two.* I walk in and swing my backpack over one shoulder with a confidence that surprises me. Before I can sneak out of the room, Mrs. Garris catches me.

“How are you, Lenna?” Her voice is so friendly I can’t help but feel comforted. The history room feels like an oasis in the middle of a blue rug maze.

“I’m doing well, ma’am. How are you?”

“I am wonderful, thank you.”

As I smile at her, I try to embody my mom’s happiness. When Mrs. Garris’s gaze returns to her desk, I turn and walk away. Two snaps as I leave the classroom. *One, two.*

The rest of the school day passes in a blur of snaps, taps, and memories. At 2:17, I am finally free to leave.

Every day I forget how long it takes to walk home. By now, my back aches from the weight of my backpack, and the sunshine soon makes me feel uncomfortably warm. Cars fly past. I wonder about each one. Who’s inside? Where are they going? I pray they get there safely.

Five snaps when I cross the road. *One, two, three, four, five.* Then I have exactly eleven steps until I reach the house. I count out loud under my breath. *One, two, three, four, five, six*

At six steps I start to think about school. I remember Mrs. Garris and her nice smile. Her friendliness reminds me of my mom. Once I start thinking about my mom, I can’t stop. It overwhelms me from my head to my toes. I lose count of my steps. Even though I am in front of the driveway, its black pavement calling out to me, telling me I can fight this, I turn around. I have to. I walk back to the corner. This time, when I count my steps, I force myself to forget. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven.* Eleven is complete. Eleven is finished.

Counting as I go, I walk up the four wooden porch steps of my Aunt Birdie and Uncle Scott’s house. Aunt Birdie loves to describe how that house was a surprise wedding gift. Back then, the young couple felt like they were moving into a mansion. Now the old white cottage has more of a homey feel. When I reach the forest green door, I snap two times – *one, two* – before entering.

As soon as I enter the kitchen, I am struck with the overwhelming smell of something burning. My Aunt Birdie loves to bake, but despite all her hours in the kitchen, she never seems to produce anything edible. I prepare myself for her overwhelming cheerfulness, her face-splitting grin, her overbearing hug and torrent of questions. I prepare to meet Aunt Birdie as one would prepare for battle: I make sure all the gates are closed.

I am surprised to see Uncle Scott baking. He is up to his elbows in flour and I swear I see chunks of butter stuck in his thick red beard. Uncle Scott looks up from the recipe. “Why, hullo, Ms. Lenna.”

He looks out of place in the kitchen. I can only imagine him building houses with a hammer in hand. The spatula clashes with his rugged appearance.

“Hello, Uncle Scott. What are you up to?”

“Oh, I’m just baking.”

“Well, I see that!” I gesture to the mess in the kitchen. Uncle Scott smiles sheepishly before glancing at the recipe card in his hand.

“It’s your Aunt Birdie’s forty-third birthday, so I figured I might as well do the baking today. Except I’m not turning out to be any better of a baker than your Aunt Birdie herself!”

I give a knowing smile to Uncle Scott as I excuse myself and head for the rickety staircase. I forgot it was my Aunt Birdie’s birthday. Forty-three is an unlucky year. In my head, I pray for Aunt Birdie. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.* I count the stairs as I head to my bedroom.

When I open the door, I feel like a stranger. The blue walls seem to glare. I notice the glow-in-the-dark stars from seventh grade still stuck to the ceiling and the unopened boxes piled in the corner. I sit down at the desk and fumble around for a pen and a piece of paper.

My mom died when she was forty-three. It was January 15th. She was driving with my dad in our old Chevrolet pickup truck. They were coming to pick me up from a track meet. She died because of me.

I start to cry. No amount of tapping or counting can stop me.

After my mom died, my dad and I came to live with Aunt Birdie and Uncle Scott. Their noise filled the emptiness inside our hearts. As the light streams in through the bedroom window, I notice the paper has become soaked with tears. It doesn’t matter. I start to write anyway. *Dear Aunt Birdie and Uncle Scott*

When I finish, I fold the letter and leave it on the bed. Then I walk over and open the rusty window overlooking the backyard. As I swing my legs over the edge, I look through my tear-filled eyes at the flowers, the sun, and the trees. It really is beautiful. Life is beautiful. But I can’t fight this guilt, sadness, and emptiness that consume me. One jump.

My legs still swinging in the air, I imagine my mom’s smile. People always say that I look like her. I don’t think so. She was more beautiful.

I can hear Uncle Scott fumbling around in the kitchen and Aunt Birdie singing in her bedroom down the hall. My tears keep falling. *One, two, three.* I count my breaths. *One, two, three.* I have to be strong. I have to be stronger than my dad.

Slowly, I pull myself away from the window. I see her smile. Stumbling and disoriented by my tears, I go back to the bed and pick up my letter. I walk over to the closet and open its sunny yellow doors. I fumble around beneath piles of shoes and sweatshirts until I find my mom’s old cowboy boots. Before I put them on, I smell their worn leather and hold them tightly against my chest. The boots securely on my feet, I reach into the depths of the closet. Underneath all the junk is an old Nike shoebox.

I open its lid. The sun catches its contents in the light. I open my hand to look at my crumpled letter. Then, tears still in my eyes, I add it to the fifteen others. ♦

The school day passes in a blur of snaps and taps



Photo by Shalyce Bodily, Columbia Falls, MT

Wings in Ink

by Quynh Anh Nguyen, Bakersfield, CA

When the rumor came out that I had wings, no one believed it. Black ink outlining feathers down the skin of my back, so much more complex than Josh Mosler's girls. *Absurd*. Several times I'd notice people glancing at me, whispering to their friends in confidential tones – then they'd laugh, as if at a great joke, and move on. *Ridiculous*. No one could wrap their head around the idea that the quiet boy, the one who sat in the back of the class and drew all day, had tattoos like Mosler and his lackeys. *Ludicrous*.

Obviously Mosler didn't believe it either. A few days after the rumor started, he caught me in the hallway and, by way of greeting, shoved me into the lockers, hard. My sketchbook dropped from my hands and he laughed. The scantily clad girl inked on his bicep seemed to laugh with him.

"Hear the stuff going around, Thill?" He kicked my sketchbook and it skidded across the floor; I watched it, refusing to look at him. "I wonder who's spreading it. You wouldn't know, would you?"

I didn't say anything. He wasn't worth the breath. He seized my collar and slammed me back against the lockers, forcing my attention. Our faces were inches apart. His breath stank of gum and weekend parties.

"You think you're suddenly all that, Thill? Stupid rumors aren't going to change the fact that you're a spineless, little queer." That got a few snickers from the crowd gathering around us, which only made his grin wider.

A teacher coming down the hall made the crowd disperse, like frightened birds, but Mosler lingered. His fists relaxed, and he unhooked his fingers from my sweater, flashing me a smile before leaving.

I sighed and went to get my sketchbook. The sleeves of my sweater slid up a bit, baring the backs of my hands. Quickly, I tugged them back down.

I wasn't worried about Mosler. That was his usual behavior toward me on a Tuesday, and honestly, I had long since reached the opinion that he wasn't worth it. Words are precious. Words are valuable. Words shouldn't be spent on anyone who likes to slam people into lockers. So that week, something else was on my mind, and it was something I'd been thinking about for a while.

I wanted to draw Eliza Fisk.

She had AP English with me. She was one of those almost-popular people, not as worshiped as Mosler but still possessing a social life to talk

about. She wasn't cheerleader-pretty but was prettier than average, with long brown hair that fell in a way that I could never capture in my sketchbook.

One: I'd learned a technique for drawing hair that I thought would work for her.

Two: our English teacher, Mr. Clyne, decided that it was time for us to change seats. And I ended up next to Eliza.

We looked like Mr. Clyne's definition of "juxtaposition" sitting side-by-side, her in a graphic tee and leggings, me in my usual oversized sweater. I glanced sideways at her. When she noticed, she smiled, just a little smile.

"Hi. You're Aidan, right?"

I fidgeted in my seat, tugging on my overlong sleeves, and after an uncomfortable moment, nodded. "Aidan Thill," I mumbled. Teachers had called me out on how I never spoke louder than a murmur. Eliza didn't seem to mind.

"I've never heard you talk before.

You have a nice voice."

"Um ... thanks." I

shrugged and looked down at my fingers. We didn't really talk the rest of that day.

I didn't mind, though. Words are precious.

About two days later, I left my sketchbook in the library. Our English class was checking out books for a project; since Eliza and I were desk buddies, that also meant we were partners. Which might've explained why she was the one thumbing through my sketchbook when I came back.

"Oh! Sorry. I shouldn't have looked!" She quickly handed the worn, leather-bound book back to me. I took it without saying anything, of course prompting her to continue, "I saw that you accidentally left it, and I figured I'd give it back, but since you're always working on it, I got curious and ..."

Her voice trailed off as she focused on my face with a startlingly intense gaze. I blinked and suddenly remembered I had a black eye.

"Did Josh do that to you?"

I shrugged. It was actually Josh's friends trying to impress him. Eliza reached out toward me, as if to touch my bruises, but I flinched away. I heard her sigh and her hand dropped.

"So, do I really look like that?"

I knew right away what she was talking about. It was just a sketch, a split-second decision done during a Shakespearean lecture months ago; she'd been bent over her notes, totally focused. It was the first of many attempts to draw her. Her face was painstakingly detailed: the way

her nose scrunched just a bit as she concentrated, the way her hair draped over her face, the way she held her hands. It was my best one yet.

But I had never wanted her to see it.

"Sorry," I mumbled, tucking the sketchbook under my elbow before turning to escape. But then something brushed my back, and I froze. My brain shut down. My breath hitched, and slowly, I looked to find her gripping my sweater, right between the shoulder blades. My collar was tugged low; I could feel her eyes on the skin it bared.

Nothing at first. Then, softly, "I think wings would be beautiful on you, Aidan."

To see my sketch of her, she would have had to first go through dozens of other drawings, meaningless doodles, and unfinished pictures.

Almost all were of wings.

I swallowed and pulled away. "I have to go."

Mosler was standing in the nonfiction section watching us.

• • •

His fist bashed against my cheekbones and I sprawled across the wall, blood filling my mouth. I heard him laugh, and his voice was distorted by the ringing in my ears. All I could think of was how stupid it was to walk home alone.

His fingers twisted in my hair painfully. "I'm going to remind you exactly where you belong so you never forget again."

I didn't answer, just spat blood and saliva onto his shoes. Furious, he yanked me, tearing at my hair. My head throbbed in time with my pulse. Blood gushed down my chin from my nose. When I lifted my hands to stop him, my sleeves slipped up my arms.

Mosler grabbed my wrist. My bones creaked in protest, but he just stared at my hands. His unreadable expression was frightening. My heart stopped.

Black lines outlined feathers down my skin.

Then he was ripping my sweater away, ignoring my screams for him to stop. It was too late the moment sunlight kissed my bare skin. Powerful muscles and feathers expanded from my spine, secondaries sweeping up to my shoulders, primaries curling down to my elbows and ending at my fingers.

Mosler laughed loudly, unbelieving. "Well, what do you know," he said. "It's true." And then his knuckles slammed into my wings, intent on breaking them.

I was screaming words I couldn't remember afterwards. But it didn't matter: it was already too late, and I choked as the markings on my back



Art by Savannah Pal, St. Paul, MN

and arms began to twitch. They were unfurling, sunlight searing along the black lines until they threatened to unfold from my body. Everything hurt and burned and bruised until I couldn't tell whether it was Mosler or my wings' battle for liberation causing me agony. My fingers scrabbled at nothing, tears hot on my face as pale skin tore open and bloodied wings ripped out, free.

For just a moment there was silence. Mosler's fists had stopped in his shock; in that moment, I could have flown. I could have escaped. But everything held me back. The fear – of Mosler, of being seen, of being ostracized and then hurt again and again and *again* – held me back and crippled me and all I could think was

Don't look.

Don't look.

Don't look at me. ♦

Gravity

Wearing the universe like a cocktail dress, she zipped the old rips that skewed linear time, mended its weary seams, and turned off the lights.

She swallowed weakness, an insatiable black hole, and when stars dimmed in final dizzy moments, she captured their essence to put into firefly jugs.

She would drift alone past smoke and mirrors, without Polaris to guide, away from infinite planes, a drifting fiery corona and Saturn's rings on her finger.

And without earthly promises linked to her Orion's belt like a mortal umbilical cord, no force could pull her down, no sunlight could kiss her, and Newton failed to bring her home.

by Katie Tsui, Darien, CT



Photo by Grace Foster, Union City, CA

Renewal

You fled at dawn with
the fear of drowning nipping at your heels.
Searching through the tumbleweeds
and sand, like a martyr, you led.

Slipping away from commanding voices,
orientation, lists, and stringent rules.
Now the stars align perfectly above
your head.

The ocean froths and rumbles.

I followed not your footsteps,
but the lingering ash and cries of thirst.
Reaching you, trying to remind you that
water means renewal.

by Ellen Zhang, Troy, MI

Killing Me

courage, noun:
mental or moral strength
to face danger without fear;
often needed in high school
particularly by the socially anxious
when they're forced to talk to people,
as a child, I never thought I could be a

coward, noun:
someone who shrinks from pain or danger
even when you feel the situation
choking you
you don't back down because
everyone faces challenges and
like dad always said, "well it's your face
that's killing me" and clearly
if he's able to deal with something killing
him I can handle when something makes me

choke, verb:
to stop breath by blocking the windpipe
and something as a child I never thought
could be done by a situation as
situations lack hands and
as they also lack a mouth and eyes
they are not faces either,
so they cannot kill me.
but perhaps choosing not
to face them can.

by Kaily McGurk, Chapel Hill, NC

Words

Seriously? my mom asks
I've written all over the walls again
I try to blame my brother but
my marker-stained hands reveal
the real culprit and even if they didn't
there are words all over the walls
large words small words wonderfully
strange and exciting words –
stray words that I decided to keep after
they followed me home from kindergarten
and she knows
that it's me and I sigh
as she hands me a wet rag to clean up
the mess

the sunlight spills over the mountains like
hot red soup and my math teacher says
stop thinking
about differential equations on fractals
in metaphors
but why not, I think
and the sunlight melts into the fog

I wonder how many places I've already
visited for the last time, she says as we
sit on the grass under the tree with leaves
rustling like scuttling mice and
he says they say there might be entire
universes tucked away in black holes
and not just deformed space-time and I say

holy crap you guys look
and the stars look like ocean spray
on black sand and he says they kind of look
like speckled
blood and she says like blood melting
into the sky and I say
like snow
and suddenly the stars are specks of blood
melting into the sky like snow and
he says that we're strange but we already
know and
we're glad we're in the same creative
writing class

it's four a.m. on the plane back from
Oakland and I'm looking
out the window into the stars, remembering
the moon is cold and burning and white and
I'm remembering and it's
surrounded by ash as it rises through
turbulent skies and she says stop
thinking about differential equations on
fractals in metaphors and I
say all right but I'm thinking that
the moon looks like a cigarette burn in
the night sky.

by Allie Pitchon,
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Locked Cells

Swimming through plasma,
gates closing, gates closing,
closing, shutting me out.
How will I convince
the mastermind
of this system
that I can help,
*Let me in,
I'll help?*

by Eleni Aneziris,
E. Setauket, NY

are we

a generation
who wish they were born under
a different sky,
a different life
name
face

how and where,
the glass and the shard
the song and the piece
the steel and the sky
the light and the sand

no matter –
the buildings and the people
demand love
hope
purpose

an old cd player spinning
in a musty wired alleyway
playing a faint aria for no one,
no,
not even us.

by Andrew Chen, Cerritos, CA

Grandma

At birth she was pushed out of her mother
by the town drunk
in an alleyway between Joe's Pizzeria
and the tattoo parlor.
They say the first taste she got of this
bitter world
was sweet.

A cherry lollipop shoved hastily into
her mouth,
halting feral cries so as not to wake Father.
At least she got a taste of sweetness
before everything went sour.
At 2 she learned to stay quiet:
no more sugary spheres of red for her
to wrap chafed lips around,
only lukewarm milk in Budweiser bottles
with an aftertaste of something
indescribable.

On her seventh birthday she ate half-melted
ice cream cake
taken from someone's birthday party
at the park.
Nobody can really tell the difference
between one
screaming little kid and another.
At least that's what Mama said.
After Mama left,
when she was 14,
she learned to handle a knife.
And slept with it clenched in her left hand.

17 was the age she met him
and started sleeping with her left hand open,
right hand on his heart.
At 18 Dad was born
a spark of light in her black tunnel existence.
He went to college at 16.
"Skipped four grades"
She told all her friends with a proud
31-tooth smile.
All the ones who weren't dead or in jail,
anyway.
She died at 64.
Just long enough to see her second
grandchild.
A daughter.

by Caitlin Chan, Closter, NJ

Savagery

You have not witnessed hubris
In its purest form
Until you've heard twenty-five spirited
Geniuses rip apart a poem,
Clawing at its stanzas like vultures
On roadkill until all that's left is
A pathetic, mutilated carcass
On the yellow lines of a midnight freeway.

It starts innocently:
Genius One suggests
The author composed the prose in a
tragic state,
Alone (presumably) in a dark corner
In a snow-laden studio in
Bushwick.

Genius Two disagrees;
This was obviously a childhood
Poem of raw and indecent descent,
Some ode to mother never known,
A father never understood.

Then Genius Three and Four
Chime in –
And here's the trouble.

A poem can withstand the brute force
Of two preying eyes, or a
Feeble devil's advocate.
But Genius Three and Four swear
They know that story
Lived that lie
Sailed that sinking ship
And everyone listens with purpose and
Bated breath as the metaphors
That don't exist
Are savaged as the poem before it

The beauty of the written word
Is not enough
It must be shouted crassly across
Tiled floors and cinder blocks,
Dragged around for weeks
Crumpled up
Thrown away,
Offhandedly remembered at some
Five-year reunion

The stark energy of
Silent imagery becomes lost in the craving
For elaboration,
Digitalized and painted
In Technicolor hue so all may gawk
And coo at one man's portrayal of
Another genius' idea
Of what the author must have meant
As they rocked
In the corner
In Bushwick

Genius One, Two, Three and Four
Hash it out until they tire
Of their own voices,
Their disciples exhausted from
Swiveling their heads back and
Forth, so the class sighs,
Stares,
Checks their watches and
Scramble on with their day
Poem of brick and mortar in
Shambles
Poem of glass
In
Shards.

by Jessica Abel,
Huntersville, NC

I'd rather

I'd rather burn black an' walk in the sun
than stand in the shade all my life.

Ah, frown from under your flowery
umbrella –
I'll walk in the sun if I like.

I'd rather see sunlight speckling my skin,
feel afternoon warmth seeping in to me,
lean my chin

on the wall between our classes
and look out to sea.

You'll say it's not good, you'll say come in,
I'll dream in the sun if I like.

I'd rather be blinded by blue skies and
unclouded light
than never look up at all.

Freedom comes through many things –
I get mine through my eyes
and sailboat skies.

Tell me it'll ruin my sight;
I'll stare at the sun if I like.

And I think I'd rather have this,
Sweat-beaded skin and awkwardness,
Wings of a dragonfly flashing flame
And the sea, the sea in the distance.
I'd rather burn black than stand in the shade
I'll dance in the sun if I like.

by Timaandra Wijesuriya,
Pitakotte, Sri Lanka

Opponent

Maybe I write to feel something

but how can a person
tell you that you are wrong
when they wander and shout
shaking hands – bruised minds
let us be known
hear this yell – forget my reply
I shouldn't be scared of you
or what you'll say next
taboo and shocking is not what
I strive for
thoughts form – attack my potential –
free thought (unfair) I say
[will fight back]
create the image of trustworthy –
fly into a seam of hurt
I waver in languished lust
dripping like a sardine taken out of its can
the filtration exudes from your mouth

by Selena Flores, Davenport, IA

Cacophony

I wish to chop into pieces
all those who have said "no"
in the past week.
Divide it by sideways glances,
good morning messages
and your chemistry homework.
Take our remaining bits and pieces
and string them together
like those beaded curtains I made for Mom
but we will not step on these pearls.
And our shards will form a mirror someday
for a ghost generation
to finally see their wings in flight.

by Sabrina Koss, New City, NY

I Came, I Saw, I Conquered

Yesterday my name was Larysa

Today, my name is Veni
I will walk upon the golden steps
and make my presence known.

Today, my name is Vidi.

I will see the sun rise and the sun fall
I will see the moons kiss goodnight
and the stars rumble and call.

Today, my name is Vici.

I will conquer the high-top mountains
to hear the wind murmur and whisper
I will conquer the oceans hiss and pull
as it bubbles and churns toward the
winter's shore

I will conquer the quiet towns glistening
with each a candle's glow.

And I will conquer the Earth's rotation
and bring it to a slow.

by Larysa Wozniak, Warrington, PA

Reconcile (HA)

HA HA HA

This is my victory, and my rectification
I get to smile and I get to laugh
in the face of the old me

The old me with the grooves of her spine,
which she welcomed

and the joints jutting, which she craved
and the shameful stuffing and crying
which came with smudgy skies at dusk
too secret even for whispers and

pinky promises
this is my rejuvenation
and my twirling happiness
and this is my opportunity to feel again
skin against skin

and not cry
and this is my chance to clap my hand
on her shoulder

not to give her the delicate sympathy
she wants

but to say, in a throaty and utterly
human voice

and
because she let it happen
and every time she discovered a new ailment
she worshiped it

but illness should not be worshiped
chest pains should not be played up

as a shoddy salvation
they are mistakes and problems

to be rectified
so this is my rectification
and my chance to laugh
and ask her why?

I get to ask her, because I lived
Some squirming, breathing hope inside
of me wouldn't go along with it when I
pushed myself out to sea, tied an anchor
around my waist and jumped

Something in me fought for life again
That part that giggled at sensible portions
two loong years ago

is the part that thrives, and is slowly
crawling back to the surface again
Stronger than any weakling who cowers
in the face of a calorie

by "Shayna," Hemet, CA

straightening up

inside:

the ac coughs up watermelon pulp &
the boys laugh hard enough for me to see
the blood diamonds lodged in their throats
ssss

up in their rooms i'm a secret combination
of poses, melting, melting, melted only
to hiss as i evaporate, black ink tattling to
the universe, widely known as
the worst of the prison guards

by Andrea Wade, Indianapolis, IN

13 Ways of Looking at Fingernails

1.
Quarter moon was too
long cut off
like us

2.
There wasn't enough dirt
underneath
to grow flowers

3.
"Can you get my seat belt for me?"

4.
Spring-cleaning
is papers' edge.
These are the pages I went outside.

5.
purple,
red, tan, moss
more mature makes mom mad.

6.
Push back.
Liquid on impact.

7.
6th grade reading tells
pliers pulling
hands hurting
secrets secreting
billions bleeding
War.

8.
Claws.

9.
I once saw a Japanese movie on the airplane
that said if your nails are brittle
it means you're constipated.

10.
Pain can come
broken
picked up the remote too quickly.

11.
Skin
underneath
tears like
teeth.

12.
Words on arm
to raise like red.

13.
I bit on the blue
when I saw you
it is lacking oxygen.

by Gabriela Mancuso, Rivervale, NJ

Veil of Shade

She curled inside herself
And from there
her lips were stitched together but her eyes
pierced the semblance
and they saw from afar
and her eyes held worlds

Below there
was fire
and teeth
but she did not even dangle before it
but shifted away
as it pushed her away
and above it

She moved over like clouds
inching
swelling, distending layers
curling inside itself
slowly and
They did not look up
For clouds are silent
For they had consumed themselves
It was soft, quiet rain
draping over like silk sheets
And it was cold
And They with the fire and the teeth fled
but when They had vanished
They did not see
The dark green life, breathing
where it had been
fixed
and mended
A veil of shade
cloaked the
face of the ground
They walked upon
But the darkness had cleansed it



Art by Dua Anjum, Jhelum, Pakistan

Between the rain
there was silence
but it was deafening
And brimmed with the
spectrum within it
And the dark green swayed
And though They shied from it
in the end They
may or may not have
seen it all
blossoming
into
brilliant
light

by Christina Voss, Marietta, GA

Jigsaw

it's morning:

it's that burning sun again,
clawing through your curtains
as if it's his right to strip you of
those last six seconds of slumber
(those last six seconds to pretend that
everything is all right, that she is here,
and you are here,
and that puzzle you've been trying to finish
for years
has finally pressed together as one).

next to you the bed is cold,
and the sun casts his spotlight onto those
matted sheets
to illuminate the loneliness that clogs
your throat – has clogged your throat
(has choked you, and hanged you,
and left you broken, because it
couldn't quite
finish the job, and you wish it had;
you wish you
could have the luxury of that excuse).

it's 7 a.m., and it's hilarious
how your head hammers this way,
loud enough to suffocate the screams
of the alarm at your ear
(but whiskey is your freedom, your
salvation, and that bottle is only one
hand away,
so tempting in a world of heartache
and empty beds and
unfinished puzzles) –
you're missing the final piece,
misplaced it somewhere between
your mattress and reality, so
you raise that bottle high against
the sunlight,
the amber a familiar glow against your eye,
and you look again.

by Shannon Maag,
Temperance, MI

The Runner

I sense a runner in the garden,
the snakes all coiled 'round the stems;
The sun has hid from wand'rin clouds
and I am wounded by the tongue.
There is a humming in the meadow,
a voice too crisp and cool for me.
The stars are crying up above us,
the Moon, she laughs so carefully.
The stardust lingers in the light beams;
can you see it next to me?
The runner's gone so quietly now,
the wind wails, oh, so solemnly.
I'm left with snake skins in the meadow
and orange disks to end the day.

by Olivia Ferreira, Arlington, MA

Happy Birthday

I still have your unsent birthday card,
and contained within those
factory-made lines
are all the words
I can never say

by Sarah Clark, Nashville, TN

Now in Darkness

Hope can't grow legs and
walk away. But he did, and
left a trail of ash.

by Tara Troiano, Frisco, TX

The Beginning

The scent of salt
overtakes me.
The water washes
around my ankles.
A wave breaks the surface
in the distance.
As it crashes on the rocks,
the water rises around my ankles,
then recedes back into the ocean.

I remember the way
I splashed in the waves
and built sandcastles.
Now I stand here
and wonder, when I am here
again, will I see it
the same way?

by Alicia Barnett, Rolla, MO

Shampooed Rugs

The smell of shampooed rugs floats
in my mind
I feel like falling asleep to the heavenly
aroma that makes me blind
But I fall asleep and the chemicals go
to my brain
My brain explodes and then it is the end
And all I can smell is reality again.

by "Danielle," Jonesport, ME

Tortellini Soup

My grandmother makes tortellini soup on
rainy days when it's just us four.
The wind rocks our house, stiffens my neck,
and makes a good case for not getting
out of bed.
She used to make it with chicken broth,
when family came together and tipped back
bottles of red wine and used my bed
while I slept on the couch, eyes glistening
from the light of our Christmas tree, the air
bright with the smell of sweet
chocolate cookies
and warm mashed potatoes.

Now I am vegetarian, so she cooks the
store-bought, cheese-stuffed pastas in
vegetable
broth, fussing in a kitchen hung with
steam, sweat greasing her forehead, playing
in the wrinkles of her skin. The house
becomes too bitter with the aroma of parsley,
an herb she's begun to use frequently,
and it clings
to my sweater. I ache for a draft of
cool air to bring the tightness from my body.

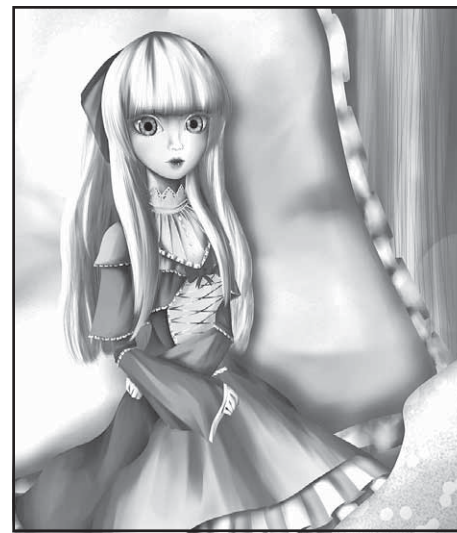
She pours the soup evenly across
four large yellow bowls and blankets them
with grated Parmesan cheese. I tell her
I want to go vegan.

by Alex Durham, Vineland, NJ

Joke Barista

A good joke can take multiple forms.
It can be light and creamy (for sensitive
or corporate audiences):
A pinch of spontaneity
A tablespoon of wit
Filtered vulgarity in the form of euphemism
It can be dark (for veterans):
One pinch of sarcasm
Two tablespoons of politically incorrect
thinking
Three cubes of curse words
It can be black, nothing filtered and
nothing held back
(For those with a strong tolerance for
the previous two):
Two tablespoons of sarcasm
One cup of "too soon"
Three cubes of criminal psychology
Nineteen packets of vulgarity
It may be difficult to succeed at first,
but with the right time commitment
and apprenticeship, brewing the best
joke will become morning routine.

by Philip Chwistek, Warrington, PA



Art by Ayden Williams, Solon, OH

effigy

I am nothing but a stuffed doll
pull out my seams and sand will spill
like ten thousand tears
of ten thousand years
upon the absence of my shadow
limp and numb like a child's toy
I am nothing more than a shell
a likeness of a person
and that's all I'll ever be

by Alicia Marzolf, Cupertino, CA

Short Live the King

Those who build their thrones
on the shoulders of those
they use
will fall
when their wounded subjects
bow to worship
in an extravagant tumble
of gold and diamonds
which will string themselves
through the servant's
cowl.

by Presley Hargis, Hebron, KY

Pyramid of Life

These
These words
These words that
These words that describe
These words that describe what's
These words that describe what's going
These words that describe what's going to
These words that describe what's going
to soon
These words that describe what's going
to soon describe
These words that describe what's going
to soon describe you
But what you didn't realize
As reading these lines
Is the pyramid
The pyramid is the way you must live life
You start with the little things
Then you gather and gather
What you need for the base
For the rest of your long-winded life

by Andrea Rhoads, Grand Island, NE

Monster

Monsters are not the
giant
fuzzy
smelly
slimy
creatures that appear when you hear me say
monsters
we can't see them
because they're so visible
they do not live around us
they live within us
their white eye-pits
surround our colored ones and
hide beneath our bones
they are
your broken fingernails
your split ends
your foggy glasses
your infected throat
your crackling voice
that lonesome glare
sitting in your face
as you're off in space
you can't recognize
but that's not your fault

i see my monster
and i can tell
through his
dripping beating
emotions
what he wants
shhh i tell him
but he does not *shhh*

i feed him
as do you
no one blames you
for monsters win
monsters do not go to war
they are war
tell me what you see when i say
monster
a cartoon
a movie
a person
a mirror?

by Shayley Timm, Thiensville, WI

in the bathroom

the bathtub is where we are most exposed
it's the place where we walk naked and
leave our clothes
on the floor
it's the white room where we test our
singing voices against wet doors
where we draw in the foggy paint of steam
revealing pieces of ourselves rarely seen
lying vulnerable on our backs as the water
massages us
we glean over our bodies, pretending
there exists sexiness

removing imperfections
releasing our flaws
against the hours down the drain
we fight these white walls
in which we contain
our secrets.

by Selena Vargas, San Diego, CA

App On App Off

What if there was an app
That could read your mind, be your mind
Enter – flash, the lights have turned on,
but how?
It's the development of the smartbulb,
Synced to your brain
Wake up, on
Snooze button, you wish
Romance, dim
Sleep, off
Let's watch TV, click, your favorite show.
It's too cold, click, thermostat on.
Here comes the heat.
Let's chill, lava lamp roils
Come home, the app knows
Perfect app? Yes and no
Worth a shot? Maybe
Maybe brains and apps should stay separate
Or one day there will be no difference

by Mark McDermott, Seattle, WA

I Just Want to Sleep

I lie awake with skeletons hanging in the
closet of my lungs;
bones shaking, breaking,
exposed with no hope of a future.
I lie next to childhood memories in forms of
scruffy teddy bears and
light pink paint-chipped walls.
By grade 12, you realize
you only have friends
because you see them five times a week.
They're not my friends.
But these are my feelings.
I lie in last night's oversized sweater,
drowning in mindless thoughts,
pain not made for the already broken.
People are layers and
layers of secrets.
I lie in an unmade bed with unmade
thoughts
in this little unmade world.
I don't sleep anymore.
God,
I just want to sleep.

by Carissa Cicchini,
Sarnia, ON, Canada

Celestial Passing

Up high, ascending even above the sun rays
That bounce off cumulus clouds on
A crisp, Spanish blue paper
Lies a domain in which you would never see
Shards of broken beer bottles
Or burnt-out cigarettes
Just a golden avenue made complete
with symmetry
Those are the tales from my
grandmother's mouth
About this empyrean place where no fangs
Could ever bite into the flesh of a lamb
again.

I stopped believing in heaven when
You ended up tossing me into the dumpster
As if I were your compost heap.
Actually, I was the trash bag,
Tearing up and overfilled with
The street litter inside.
The silence you gave me
Bit harder than any words you could utter
The teeth dug deep into skin that
Lacked real empathy, as if you were
Splashing the stark colors of blue and black
On a pale canvas.

Continuously, after the feeling had
melted away,
I just wanted to turn the accursed ticks
Counter-clockwise
Now I'm staring at a clear night sky
Stars even turning their backs
To the slow, cold fingers
Climbing up a smudged window
in deep thought

I watch the last remnants
Of heaven blink out like
A dying star.

by Vivien Sundes, Oshkosh, WI

A Fallacy

The truth is precious
Something to always treasure
Blame the short supply

by Simone Stevens, San Francisco, CA

Pushing Down Daisy

After she died
We ordered airline tickets
Cursed security lines,
How short, how swiftly they moved this time
Of course,
It wasn't a vacation,
Luggage full of black
Entire lives rearranged within a matter
of days
9 people showed up for the service
Haughty with the pride that no one could
remark on their absence
Their attendance being the full extent of
their duties
There was nothing to gain for grand
behavior
No Last Will & Testament, no percentages
to ponder
You don't need a calculator to add insult
to injury,

And words, words did not come easily
What was to be said, of her, or to each
other, even
Back at the house
Sitting slumped on quiet couches, we stared
at the living room floor.
Infuriating clock, ticking loudly,
Maddening
The droning hum of the refrigerator in
the nearby kitchen
The shadow of chirping birds flying
through dusty rays of sunlight
Glinting off the cold marble
Someone said "At least we had good
weather; it usually rains"
Relieved, we grunted quick clichés
Pastor did a good job, coffin was nice,
Song was ... sung,
The flowers ... were ... uhm ...

No traffic either
Hurriedly, to end the ritual of closure
Obligatory stock phrases for earnest sorrow:
She's in a better place
Out of her misery
No more pain
God's will is done ...
Sustained in our suffering, we struggled
to dredge up tears
Trying for old memories to incite them
Only left to upend the salt shaker into
our eyes
No one mentioned
Happy it's over
The bills for the nursing home
Were deadlier than f***ing cancer
Watching her forget who we were
Forgetting who she once was
The manic-depressive tyrant who made
us dream for years of this very day,
with pleasure
No. She was too pathetic by the end for
anyone to wish agonizing death upon her
Dementia made her soft in the head,

Childish and sweet as a cherub
Wearing a diaper, for god's sake
Puts your heart in two places at once, it did
But why should all sorts be taken to church
after they die? Weird, isn't it?
Isn't there some optional location to host the
dead of a certain caliber? Where
do atheists have funerals, anyway?

Well, we could not celebrate her life
The money for the funeral was worth
every penny to have it over with, but now
We could not break bread with each other
The tension of present company
The fact that her passing had brought
us together might have been worse
than her passing
This was the real grief
Not the dead, but those who still waked
among us.
Not the dead, but those things we refuse
to bury
In secret, we pined for a few more holes
in the ground
The reality of this matter dawned swiftly
upon us.
This sentiment we all shared.

Alas, tears ...

by Tara Chung,
Garden City, NY



Photo by Olivia Johnson, Dover, MA

I'll Regret

I'll regret in the morning
The words I uttered late at night
And the sleep I missed
Because there's too much
On my burnt-out mind.

Clouded with the intent
Of pleasing those around us
And following the path
Trampled to death.

Told to be ourselves
In a world that won't accept
Anything but "normal."

Told to be who we are
In a world that restricts my freedoms
To the point of violence
Against those who are different.

Who's to say what's best for me
When I know myself
More than any of you
Know the real me?

I'll regret in the morning
What I say with tired eyes
And blurred thoughts.

by Amanda Preble, Chester, CT

Blue Ink in a Red Pen

The ink in my pen
clings to her cartridge,
refusing to come out
and play

I try to coax her down
with promises of ideas to paint
and characters to construct
but she does not budge

Ink is cursed
She knows that once her feet
glide across the page
she cannot turn back

Maybe she is afraid
of what she will become
Or maybe
I just need a new pen

by Sarah Bridgeport, Columbus, OH

Damage

"You've changed ..." they all say.
"Where's the girl I know?" everyone
demands.
She's gone. I'm not her anymore.
Being beat down over and over does that.
I am tired of rebuilding a city while
there's an arsonist on the loose.

by Kayla Markwell, Fort Wayne, IN

Sea

I often think about
How deep the ocean is.
What lurks at the very bottom
We may never know.
There is sanctity in not knowing.
Like what ingredients Grandma used
When making that blueberry pie
That made it taste
so rich.
There is room left for imagination.
One can speculate for centuries
What may be at the bottom
But what is the point in that?
I find it more exclusive
That I am the one
Who knows what is at the most
Buried section of the sea.
You also know
But I will never tell.

by Sara King, Marshfield, MA

Pond Scum

You're the scum on the pond surface,
behind my house,
that absorbs the sun's radiance
without allowing
the water to glitter
also

and you're the concealer I dab under
my eyes
that covers up the puffy ridges
made by tear
tracks,
dried and salty
like the promises you meant to keep
the taste of them
pinches my lips together in disgust,
yet shuts my eyes to
leave me
wanting.

by Callie Zimmerman, Fishers, IN

My Cluttered Mess

The barren walls of my mind
Leave me less inclined
To let the outside world in,
To open my eyes and begin.
Please help me;
My demons beg me to sin
I delve beyond the surface to a place
That makes me nervous.
Where I'm scared to find
The cluttered mess I've tried to leave behind.

by Jenevieve White, Stony Brook, NY

circles

Draw a circle. Write a circle. There.
Stay in circle. Hold it there; a step
outside the circle is fine but don't go too far,
but don't take corners, cross, cut in, go over
or out,
in a continuous line of no returns,
but a circle of vision is rarely closed,
an open circle is no party: however,
find your opening.

by "Jillian," Natick, MA



Photo by Grace Brindle, Westfield, NJ

Guilt

The guilt gulps me up like last night's
leftovers.
I feel it in my body, spinning a non-stop
motion.
The guilt is now a part of me,
a part that will never go away until I confess.
I need to confess the terrible things I
have done.
Until reaching that point,
the guilt will live in me forever.

by Taylor Wunderlich, Monticello, IL

irreplaceable

I found myself distracted tonight
trying to trace back to the
beginning of us but it seems
my memory does not serve me well
because one minute we
relied on small talk and English
homework to bring us together and the
next you were
dragging me into the library
where I began crying when you
told me that you loved me
and wanted to take care of me.
There were days when you were
sitting right next to me but
felt 300 miles away, and others
where, had we been any
closer, we would have become one person.
Your protective arms got me
through the worst of days and your
guarded heart caused my delicate
one to break over and over
and I guess what I can't make
sense of is how you could
love someone like me.

by Katie Witte, Pilot Point, TX

A Mountain of Lies

When I was seven years old,
I dropped a pebble on a polished floor.

At age eight,
I dropped two more.

By eleven,
they had formed an anthill.

Harmless enough,
almost blown over by the wind.

By thirteen,
I was knee-deep in a pebble tower.

At age fourteen,
these pebbles could no longer
be deconstructed sweetly;
removing one would crumble the
whole structure.

By fifteen years old,
I had a mountain.
The floor I had started on
was only visible in perfect sunlight.

When I was fifteen,
I spent all my energy structuring,
maintaining,
and worrying for this mountain
of mine.

When I was fifteen,
it started to rain.

And when I was fifteen,
a raindrop fell on a pebble.
A pebble that was part of my mountain.
My volcano.

When I was fifteen,
this raindrop knocked my pebble
out of place.
I watched it fall.
Almost in slow motion.

It bumped another pebble
which hit another
another
another

A domino of pebbles clattered
against this polished floor.
I spread my arms
and tried to hold up this mountain
on my own.

There were too many pebbles
and they each felt like boulders.

So when I was fifteen,
my mountain tumbled down.
Years of intricate planning and design
cascading to nothing
before my eyes.

And when I was fifteen, I thought this fall
would kill me.

by Zoe Webb,
Auckland, New Zealand

Curious

Why is everybody
so square
on such a round planet

by Drew Welborn, Easley, SC

Word Art

I find that looking through library books
Is like playing a piano
Fingers going up and down
On top of the spines
As if somehow
Moving my hand
Through the top of books
Will make their words stain my fingers

by Patience Opaola, Linden, NJ

Lost Again

The darkest evening of the year
When light will not dare shine
And lost again
We stand right here
With hollow thoughts in mind

by Victoria Bowers, Phoenix, AZ

I want to say you're enough

want to say dark woods are enough
I want to say words slurred by drinks
are enough
I want to say your arms
and these constellations are enough for me
but they just aren't
because hands won't hold themselves
and words won't write themselves
and I'm tired of you as a theory
I'm tired of analyzing you like poetry
I want you in more than just song verses
I want you in more than burning throats
and stinging eyes
but do you even exist beyond there
do you exist beyond this realm of pain
and back and forth
of consuming intoxication
do you even exist beyond
scorched skin
and bloodshot eyes
do you exist beyond
drowning
beyond being saved
and dragged back to the depths
by your own hand

I tried too hard to find you somewhere else
the proper place
the right time
but you're just a concept i developed in
my mind
you're this fire i thought could be contained
but you ripped through me like the forests
ashes was all that you left
yet I'm here
well in the reach
of your choking grasp
and tomorrow
the infernos will be lit
with a forgiving smile
and i'll be blazing with the hate of
loving you

I thought maybe these cage bars would melt
with your heat
and set me free
but it turns out
fire can't burn itself.

by Paola de Varona, Miami, FL

Struggling Artist

This isn't what you want.

You force yourself deeper
into this hole
of painted bloody carmines
and deep, commercial,
conventional,
bruising purples and
the black and whites of what love is.

You force yourself into the dead gray
and the chilled ivory of emptiness,
the blackened blue of
idon't care
please
letmehave
nothoughts
nothingtodistractme
fromthisnewsong
iwanttohear,
the bitter cranberry of
the inside of casket linings
and the soft, dark brown
of the polished wood outside
of dirt and flowers and grieving air.

You force yourself,
but please,
if you let yourself see
the psychedelic golden colors
of the sunrise blooming on
the mountains,



Photo by Morgan Reynolds, Orlando, FL

smiled as tree leaves kissed the wind,
inhaled when autumn breeze blew
burnt orange leaves against your sweater,
exhaled with the energy of conversation
on your tongue, and
laughed at memories of
wild, obnoxious old friends

perhaps you could dig yourself out
and realize you're painting yourself
an ugly color.

You want this robust,
peaceful flood of calm
lavenders and electric teals.

Create what you deserve.

by Haley Boyer, Windsor, CT

Flightless

You spent so much time
sculpting delicate wings
that you forgot to remember to fly.

by Anna Kressbach, Yarmouth, ME

Little Daisies

Conscious meeting caution down the line
and up again,
Zippers on a blue polyester plaid
pattern dress
These are the ties that we tie and forget
Cold steel handles on orange day, daisies.

Hot soup of a sisterhood melting in the sun
Toes on the tracks taking off one by one
Living like lizards in the lagoon of love
Mayans getting it wrong in December, cage.

Silver satire of that gifted gunpoint
Mecca to the motherland of childhood
choice
Getting gold in hand worth round two
with the boys
Looking for life in dead eyes, spring.

by Brea McConal, Cincinnati, OH

Math Problems

The first thing they teach you
In elementary math
Is the concept of zero, of nothing,
Of an empty space in a crumbling carcass,
Of a something that would not be,
In a world where "anything
is possible."

The first thing they teach you
In middle school math
Is how to divide
Yourself by your own weaknesses,
How to take all that you are
And give it away,
How you can never be whole,
And that some problems are
Too complicated
To solve.

The first thing they teach you
In high school math
Is that learning algebra
Means taking your own problems
And solving them with what you have,
That your values are subject to change,
And that you always, always
Have to account for all of the
Variables.

The last thing they teach you
In a lifelong education,
Is the concept of zero,
The way that every breath you take
Holds no promise of the next one,
The way that you know your heart is beating
But you don't know what flows in
your veins,
How your hollow eyes see hollow people,
And how apathy cuts
Like a knife.

And that is why the last thing
You will ever wonder is
How the world could take something so vast
And so empty, how the order of operations
Is written in gray ink, how it takes years
Of sorting through the irrational numbers to
Condense them into a watered-down
lesson and

Learn the audacity to teach it to those
Who are far too young

To understand it.

by Kim Ravold, Hainesport, NJ

Husky

Grain silo ready, pointed toward you
Ready to do the things grain silos were
made to do
You don't want no grain silo, which really
isn't fun
Standing like an obelisk in the prairie sun

You prefer the city types,
You burn and rave like coals
You got towns to choose from
And miles of telephone poles

So you can eat your asphalt, I will eat
my dust
Towns fade away, but grain silos never rust
The fact will always get to you, through
countless suits of armor
That you gave up and left behind this poor
kindly farmer

by Eli Gravitt, Summerfield, NC

Earth

I feel stupid
Bumblin' about
In this body of mine
Jutting out
In all the wrong places
At all the wrong angles
Curves too curvy
Hands too shaky
Mouth too wide
And chest too small

I feel like my body has betrayed me.

But then again,
Do the mountains
Betray the Earth
By being too tall?
And do the valleys
Betray the sky
By being too low?

I guess I don't know.

by Meredith Avera, Auburn, AL

Thursday Afternoon

Two tiny mason jars sit on the tabletop,
centers of attention, gray waters swirling.
Some brushes hit the water and turn
invisible.

Others sit in the jar poking through
every which way.

Tubes of paint are cluttered
around the small table.
Some colors as bright as the afternoon sun,
others as dark as a basement with no light.
Color swatches act as a guide.
They sit warped and opaque.

Brushes glide across paper,
led by unskilled hands.
The speakers are spitting out lyrics.
We all shout along,
out of tune,
as shapes are filled and shaded.

The room is filled
with the distinct scent
of paint and the sound
of four best friends' laughter.

by Samantha Collins, Bay City, MI

Haunting

I feel like a ghost,
a wrinkled white bedsheet.
Cut-out eyes,
that's all they see.
The white exterior
masking the stains.
They see me
haunting the hallway,
sitting alone,
but they are too afraid to admit
that ghosts are real.
So they walk
right through me.

by Grace Sowyrda,
Medfield, MA

Focus (ADHD)

I watch the clock
Half past ten
Up and down the room
My eyes race the floor
My foot taps the ground
Like a metronome
My heart beats so fast
I feel it will burst
I look back at the clock
His words are jumbled
His face is blurred
I stare at the faces
Around the room
White tiles, blank walls
I can't sit still anymore

by Alexandria Ness, Palatine, IL

life.

He lets out a whine for his rusting life –
it is deep, cold, and full of strife.
His gray hairs are bristly,
snaggly with crunch.

No angel dressed in white to invite him
to brunch.

There are no gold locks that fall to her waist,
no one begs on their knees, "Don't go with
such haste."

Your spine gives a shiver,
slicing a nerve.

What does he do? His thoughts are unheard.
He smells like old timber, crocheting warm
sweaters,
a rich, frosty snow, and old, unspent letters.
He beckons her over, whispers to me "Mira,"
sighs with resolve, and murmurs "la vida."

by Daphne Moraga,
Jackson Heights, NY

Reassurance

Stars wink at the mesmerized little girl,
begging to be seen.

Through a telescope, she gazes,

stunned by the exquisite rings.
Then she tugs on her dad's pants, begging
for reassurance.

by Gracie Plath, Pewaukee, WI

Pressure

A blossoming spring
Surrounded by choking frost
Blooms gold spirea

by Ben Strobel, Sandy, UT

Child Song

Proudly, the sun explodes and breaks
the dew

That now rests upon your rosy lips.
The winter has turned the Earth to stone:
The fragile sycamore all black now, the
autumn leaves lost in translation,
And the spiral stair that stood so tall
Has now descended into dust.
The clocks hold time,
But not for the birth house, where you lay
The floral whispering against your pink skin,
Eyes not yet open to the cruelty of the
world. Your mouth made a cavity,
And your blue cry
Took its place among the elements.

Stillness is a story I told you on the first day;
Your tiny fingers danced my own,
the incubator a ballroom
For new lovers to lock hearts. Your nails
stayed blue,
And your head stayed empty. I watched the
moon's gallant swing,
From the window, where dusk seemed to fall
Every time you took a breath.

It seemed peculiar that you did not stir to
the vicar nor nurse,
Though both came laden with words for
you. They said *coo*
And *ahh*, but only I knew it was nonsense.
No one could love you like I do.

Days passed. I made maps, my stomach
dropped. The scar was invisible
Beneath the bedsheet, that first time they
lay you on my breast.
Now the sky had opened up, and in it
your eyes expelled all manner of silence.
Once you said *mother*, too, and my soul
implored you. Such small bones,
What hollow lungs that spewed birdsong,
a whimpering of newness,
And I was old. The nurse came back then.
The vicar didn't.

A final hour, and she brought a needle.
Your seal was broken
And your cry was, too. She took you,
Christ knows where. I paced linoleum,
I played God. In my head, reel-to-reel,
your voice stirred,
And the moon had fallen out of the window.
Only now did stillness rest on the room,
and you were not there to see it.

At midnight she returned, but somehow
the rustling had fallen from your hair,
The sterile tinge of your newness. Her face
was stuck,
A symphony of certainty, a glimmering
of guilt.

In my gurney, she laid you on me.
Your finger would not grip mine,
And below me the ballroom doors were
all shut up,
For the lovers had found someone else.

Sorry, her tongue said. The moon had died.
The perilous, glorious moon.
I could hear it from here, while
Back at home, your new cot wailed,
Dainty gloves, a fading tear. The walls
were lined with your name,
The paint that called out for you over
and over again.
Quietly, the papers came, and the crooked
arch of my hand found them.
On the same day, I handed you back to God.
Love is forever, but stillness is not.

by Charlotte McMackin,
Oxford, England

Birthday Wishes

At the end of my lighter –
a flame.
Hover over the candles,
share my little flame
with each one.
Soon a myriad
of small blazing beacons
warm my nose and rosy cheeks.
Thin tendrils
of acrid smoke
drifting upwards, ever closer.
Take a deep breath,
hold it in.
Then make your wish.
Hush –
Don't tell me,
but keep it in.
Never ever let it go.
Like the rush of air
you've just released –
gone forever.
And as it left,
it took the light.
One by one they lost their life.
And now we're left in darkness.

by Emily Freeman, San Pedro, CA

So This Is Anger

So this is anger.
I never really knew it before.
I had been upset
and mad.
But this is so much more.
I'm angry at you –
and for good reason.
You've left me with nothing
but myself.
I thought you cared enough
to send me at least one
kind remark.
However, instead you left my side,
and when I whispered
a question mark,
?
You replied with empty silence.
So then I cried and shook
myself into screaming
into silence.
And still I'm waiting impatiently
for you to fill the space.
But I'm afraid I've filled it up
too full
with my angry, red disgrace.

by Meena Nutbeam, Franklin, WI

blood clots

Naturally, I pick out the stains on the ceiling,
And the metaphysical uncertainty in a room.
Violence, a simple word, is so easily
misunderstood.

Usually, things like this are like blood clots,
Ready to take over the body, to confuse,
to control.

I'm not sure exactly what to think.

When writing, I will sometimes make
a mistake,
I need a physical eraser to wipe away
inability.
Incompletion is the cause for imminent
illness.

Please believe me.

by "Margaret," Olathe, KS



Photo by Georgia Walters, Beckenham, England

Books

The cover shines in the light,
the pages soft and smooth,
the indescribable smell of an
untouched book,
the pleasure of turning that first page.
Then the cover is scratched,
the pages wrinkled;
it no longer smells of a new book,
but your backpack;
turning that last page is not the same,
but, in a way,
better.

by Abby Rudy-Froese, Goshen, IN

makeup

she bows to
the ruler,
lips feverish,
eclipsing her eyes,
encrusting lashes to
avoid lashes from
the whips of
society

conformity is
a form of worship –
and still she kneels.

by Cassandra Mosley, Ocala, FL

Better Life

Thank you for choosing *Better Life*. * You
have several options to choose from:

Hair
Gender
Makeup
Eye
Face
Body type
Skin color
Noses
Lips
Hands and feet
Hips
Stomach

And many others

Because you are using our top-of-the-line
software, you can choose up to 1,000
combinations that will make you perfect,
just like everyone else.

*Disclaimer: this program has the ability
to take away any and all things socially
deemed as "weird."

If you do not wish to continue, please exit
this program now.

If you agree to the terms and conditions of
this program, we can give you a better life:
friends, jobs, family

There will be a small fee of \$210.00 that
will go toward funding and advertising
We thank you for choosing to have a
better life

To be perfect is a perfect thing.

by Jazzmen Hamilton,
Pensacola, FL

Number 18

I used piano keys as dentures
and my breasts were rubber balloons.
My lips were red from the blood of men
And I kept secrets like
Cleopatra.

I crunched bones with my toes
My father was gasping.
I never learned to love
until I learned to loathe.

I know, darling,
that you fear my fire
you dread my descent into madness
just as a pedestrian
will shield himself
from a head-on vehicle –
inescapable
and yet he
raises his fumbling, bony
hands over his eyes,
his nose,
his teeth ...
as if her force will
hush itself at the flesh of his weakness.

I was inferno-eyed
I never felt a thing
I demolished princess towers
with a gust of breath
I voiced my aria into the sky.

by Kira Hanger
Depauw, IN

The Gravel Road

The little rocks continue to crunch and
crack beneath my feet.
At least I have my low tops on.
The Pentecostal church on my left is
very loud.
Are they singing or just screaming?
The elderly won't mind me stalking on
the side of their yard.
They have the most gracious walnut trees.
I like to look up in the leaves and see the
sun shine through.
It's the closest I'll ever get to seeing
the ocean.
This is my personal moment with Him
and no one can take this away from me.
Not even my cat Midnight.

by Natia Compton, Monett, MO

Accidental

There are days when even the seas
are bruised.
When their voices too only howl, and
their energy pools the wrong way.
Sometimes the seas are rough.
Sometimes they shake unsuspecting sailors
accidentally
with salty words and flooded mouths.
The seas have never run from angry winds
or ink-spilled skies
because the sun never seems warm enough
to people who have never frozen.

by Caroline Holloway,
Boulder Creek, CA

Depression Is an Alchemist

It is impossible to forget
Pacific sunset,
To forget orange warmth
That spreads across
A template sky
It is impossible to forget
Artist hands,
To forget ink-stained
Oil-stained molehills
Turned into mountains
It is impossible to forget
Cheddar Bay biscuits,
To forget taste buds bursting into each other
Like an atomic chain reaction
It is impossible to forget
The New York Philharmonic,
To forget Carnegie Hall
And "Serenade in B-flat major"
It is impossible to forget depression
To forget
Warmth turned to chills
Mountains reduced to molehills
Paradise to sulfur,
Major scores turned minor

by Patience Opaola, Linden, NJ



Art by Laura Chapman, Pleasantville, NY

Split My Ends and Fake Details

Bathroom stalls
Midnight crawls
Through the dirt and on the wall
Perfume lingering
Esophagus tingling
Uh oh, there it is
Secrets, secrets tie your hair
Burn your eyes and stain the air
With the sin you tried to heave
Out your body and onto me
Take the words so often said
Turn them back on you instead
Take one shot or two or five
Down the drain and kill my vibe
You hypocrites I see right through
Transparent it seems
The bottle teems
Your fingers full of life
But your eyes, they yearn for sleep
Cancel worship
Stain your shirt
Hands cling to others because you cannot
support yourself
Nothing to hide and nothing to fear
'Cause your head's now in the fire
But mine is steering clear

by Jenna Grossbarth, New City, NY

Arms Encircled

Arms encircled, weave a nest
a stoop, a stand, two trees abreast
He lies upon his pedestal
His search for danger a vigil still
Keen eyes search out, never blinking
for any malice that may be slinking
out 'tween the bones of silent woods
the barren branches, the dying buds
reminiscent of thickened mud
tufts of auburn upon his stump
the fox observes the nature's slump
the biting cold shall break this mold
of veridian leaves and grass, behold
Leafless, lifeless skeletons appear
Fall has ended, great sleep is near
the fox's head scans the lines
of fallen snow, sparkles and shines

by Tanner Woods, Lewisville, TX

A Fire in a Heart Chamber

Your heart strings were the wires of a bomb
and, for the life of me, I could not
remember if it was the red wire or the
blue wire and God, I miss your smile.
The fire in your eyes lit the fuse in
your heart.
Your explosion radiated for miles,
turning everyone who touched your
flames' lives into barren wastelands.

Debris cluttered in our eyes, leaking out
at the mere mention of you.

Mouths gagging on the smoke you caused,
clogging our lungs and turning us blue.

How can we breathe when you took
our breath with you?

by Shelby Willis, Ashland, KY

Nostalgic

I am hit with the smell of manure instantly
as I walk into the barn.
The smell most people despise
makes me feel calm and at home.

I stride down the aisle,
the sounds of neighs and whinnies filling
my ears.
Sixth stall on the left belongs to Nostalgia.
Her ears perk forward when she catches
my eye.

I push open the heavy stall door
and sit on the border of the maple wood.
She lays her muzzle in my lap.
I give her a gentle rub.

Nostalgia – a sentimental longing or
wistful affection for the past.
How ironic that this is her name.
I feel a tinge of heartbreak in my chest.

Nostalgia is what I feel thinking about her.
The best part of my life has been away
from me.
I long for the past, the days I had Nostalgia.
But I do have Nostalgia.

Just not the right one.

by Bella Stechschulte,
Mequon, WI

a dark wood

my heart, a dark wood, leaves tapering
to the windshield as the breath is milked
out of me. the trees are planted in their
mothering earth, ears to the floor and
wide awake. my body, a planet, such a
small thing in such a great, big machine –
the sky is warm and sleeping today,
eyelids bowing coyly as the sun
romances the dust. i asked the space
to fill me but it kept quiet. sailing beneath
the boughs i suddenly knew why –
i was startled into being today by the
swaddling flame.

by Sydney Shavaliar, Byron Center, MI

An Ocean Day

As his laughter touches the waves,
His smile touches the warm sun.
There is sand between his cold toes,
Water slipping between his fingers.

Soon
That warm sun,
Salty water,
Shortly fades away.

So does the day.

by Haley Monton, Richmondville, NY

And Then

Our earth is cracked and bruised,
Scorched by a history of rivalry,
Beaten beneath millions of failed journeys,
Crumbling under a present that lives only
for itself.

Our world is exhausted and grieving,
Weary under the weight of so many burdens,
Struggling to hold on to the last gasps
of fresh air,

Mourning the death of so many –
Loved but lost, living but not alive.
Our home is home

To the heartbroken and the weary,
To the fallen and the furious,
Screaming out for change – through every
whisper, tear, and song.

Outcries trickle through the parched earth
and dampen hardened souls,
Yet a world humming with outcries
Is still not enough to awaken – to revive! –

Our bruised and bloodied earth,
This cracked and broken ground,
This lost and mourning world.

When and where will those outcries
Carve canyons through every layer of
scorched earth

And overcome and overwhelm every
hardened heart of rock?

When will we reach a time and place of
change?

When we learn that the ends of all oceans
can be reached

Through the movement of one ripple.
When we learn one mountain must be built
With a million irreplaceable pebbles.
When we learn all trees must put down roots
To sway with the wind, yet always stand
steadfast.

When the value of art is determined
By how many colors dance through the
mind of a viewer.

When the quality of music is measured
By how deeply it resonates within the heart
of a listener.

When the worth of a child can be found
In each smile, each habit, each mistake.

When we, as a people, become
Ripples, pebbles, and trees,
When we, each of us, become
An art, a song, a child,
When we are moved
To not move at all,

When we are silenced
In awe of our ability to listen,
Then, at last, we will see change.
Then, at last, we shall know Peace.

by Soomin Cho, Gainesville, FL



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