Preterite, Cedar Crest College’s literary club, hosts an annual writing contest each year. This contest is one way to inspire and recognize the creativity and talent that thrives in the students of Cedar Crest College. The contest is open to the entire student body, and it is judged by a combination of faculty members and students from a range of disciplines. Onyx is a compilation of the winning pieces from three categories: poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. The cover photo was also chosen through a contest this year.

2014-2015 Preterite Officers
President: Tina O’Toole
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. LuAnn Fletcher

Editor-in-Chief: Tina O’Toole
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Printed by: Unlimited Graphics, Inc.
Cover photography by: Emily Orischak
# Table of Contents

## Poetry

1st Place:
Tara McCurry - *I Think I Made You Up Inside My Head*  
2nd Place:
Gabrielle Johnson - *Icarus*  
3rd Place:
Amy Webster - *Tired*  
Honorable Mention:
Paula Wesson - *Listen*

## Fiction

1st Place:
Tina O'Toole - *The Braided Rug*  
2nd Place:
Lauren Marie Nocheck - *The Game*  
3rd Place:
Chelsea Rauch - *Heartbreak Telephone*  
Honorable Mention:
Chelsea Rauch - *Roadmap*

## Nonfiction

1st Place:
Emily Orischak - *REFLEX Testing*  
2nd Place:
Tina O'Toole - *Exquisitely Unique*  
3rd Place:
Stephanie Karpeuk - *Wash Away*  
Honorable Mention:
Lauren Marie Nocheck - *Depression and Dragons*
A Letter From the Editor

My senior year has wrapped up neatly with graduation as the prize at the end. However, the experiences I have had as President of Preterite for the past two years has also been a surprising gift with many layers.

I have found companionship with those who enjoy the written word as much as I do. I have seen the talented submissions from students each year as the writing contest was underway, and I put countless hours into the design of Onyx.

It has been a multifaceted learning experience which I will treasure. I pass the responsibilities on as this chapter closes, but like any treasured story, it will live on in my heart.

Thank you to all of the Preterite officers and members who have been there to help along the way. Thank you to the students and faculty who gave their time to the judging process. And I thank Dr. LuAnn Fletcher for her patience and guidance through each bump on the road. I am eternally grateful. I leave you with the following: Everything you do leaves a mark, make yours a lasting impression!

-Tina O’Toole

“I would always rather be happy than dignified.”
(Provided by Dr. LuAnn Fletcher, from Charlotte Bronte’s, Jane Eyre)
I Think I Made You Up Inside My Head
Tara McCurry

Capillaries behind my eyes light up like
airplane runways,
like fractures on x-rays
Today is Tuesday
and I’m watching the sun rise.
I’m reading The Bell Jar and I have to stop before
my toes start tracing icy railings
and my lips start tasting like blood.
My heart beats slowly and it’s less
“I am,”
and more, “I know, I know, I know.”
I recline on the scratchy loveseat that licks me
like a cat’s tongue
and I practice laying my wrists up flat,
giving up my body quietly as though
I don’t have experience biting down.
I wonder how different it is to have
electrodes strapped haphazardly to my forehead,
to make tree branches of my nerves,
and to have fingers touch you bluntly
and arms hold you unrelentingly
down.
There is blood underneath your fingernails
and you’re pretending not to see,
and I’m pretending when I see your hands
I don’t see the misshapen, twisted ends of
paper clips and bobby pins.
I’d paint a thousand scenes of us and they’d all end up deleted,
Playing on repeat at the end of a bad movie
And nobody would ever get the goddamn point;
I’m wading out and waiting for a riptide
to make the decision
but I have to swim back to finish the story.
And when I close the book, Esther is alive
But Sylvia is dead,
And you are glowing behind my eyes like neon.
2nd Place Poetry

Icarus
Gabrielle Johnson

It happens too quickly to hurt.
I barely even feel the heat,
only notice exaltation
and a breeze.
The wax hardens armor against my back,
sheds feathers to cushion my fall.
It happens too quickly.
But I think there is a moment
when my own arms uplift me.
Daedalus. Father. Don’t feel guilty.
Your wings were nothing—
All my life I have been hurtling towards the sun.
3rd Place Poetry

Tired
Amy Webster

She tells me she’s tired of being tired
and I say I’m the same.
Her hair across my bed like dark waves
and her eyes drip molten gold onto the floor.
What does one say to a defeated idol?
How would one tell the sun to be brighter?

I fumble for the unraveling yarn of thoughts in my head
and give her the frayed ends of my conclusions.
She knits my words into a blanket big enough to keep us both warm.
If we stay close to each other, this winter won’t be so bad.

She tells me she’s tired of being tired
and I say I’m the same.
I stare ahead at the horizon knowing day must come
but I get anxious when she believes and waits with me.
What if our lives were meant to be lived under stars?
Poetry Honorable Mention

Listen
Paula Wesson

Listen.
There are words,
And there are meanings,
One and another.

Listen
To my tone,
To my word choice,
To my change in speech.

Listen
As I pause
And pick my words,
Carefully choosing.

Listen.
Take your time.
Ask me questions.
Really understand.

Then I’ll be heard.
The braided rug was a blend of blues, lighter hues on the outer rings, and darker in the center. It was just a small rug in the middle of the living room floor with frayed ends. It used to be stiff and coarse, until it became my sister’s perch. She would sit there for hours, rocking back and forth, so my mother moved the rug to the corner, out of the way. She was only five when this happened, and I was just a couple of years older.

Her golden hair was as unruly as her behavior. Jenna was diagnosed as autistic before much was known about it. My father with his beer gut and harsh ways wanted nothing to do with her. My mother had little patience, and screamed back at Jenna when she had a fit. That is what we called them, her “fits.” She could spend hours on the braided rug with her skinny legs wrapped Indian style. She would rock as though the world around her did not exist. Sometimes, I would rock there too, and I would listen to the tiny sound she would make in the back of her throat. I would imagine she was a Zen master teaching me ancient secrets.

“Jeff, get away from your sister, she’s gonna throw a fit!”, my mother would yell across the room.

“Mom, she likes it. She won’t throw a fit, I promise.”

“She better not, or you will be the one to clean up the mess she makes!”

I realized how afraid my parents were of her. It was like they could not just sit with her like I did. I could see a person in there, and I knew she could see me.

She did not like to be touched and would cringe when my father came near. While my mom was usually angry with her, I knew she wanted to have a different relationship. She
would cry when Jenna pulled away from her hugs. I think she did not cry for Jenna, but for the loss of the daughter she thought she should have had.

Jenna would hold my hand though. I remember the first time she placed her hand on mine. We had been rocking, she on the now soft, braided rug, and I on the polished wood floor beside her. Her eyes did not connect with mine, but I could feel a connection. Her tiny fingers seemed happy in their light touch, and I smiled.

“Jenna, I know you hear me. Don’t worry ‘bout mom and dad. They may not see you, but I do.”

She squeezed my hand in response for the first time, and I realized she just needed someone to love her, and to be patient with her. It was like fishing: sometimes I would spend hours waiting for a fish and never catch one, but when I finally felt the tug on my line, it was worth the wait. I knew Jenna was worth the wait. So, I started to spend more time with her. Sometimes she would stay silent and wouldn’t even grasp my hand, but once in a while, I would be rewarded with a touch or what I thought might be a smile.

This was when I knew I was a good big brother. I was the only person who could calm Jenna after that moment. She began to copy me as I had copied her. I taught her to do little things this way, like brushing her teeth and combing her hair. She made so much progress that year, and I was so proud. When she was six, I came home from school one day to find her gone. I searched my mother’s face for an answer.

“She’s at a home now, Jeff, for kids like her. She only listens to you, and you go to school. What was I supposed to do with a kid like that all day?”

She said the words and they hit me like a slap across the face. Maybe if I wouldn’t have made her rely on me, she would be here, beside me. How could my mom just send her away--she was ours, she was mine.

“How could you!” I screamed as I ran to her room.
I looked everywhere, hoping this was a dream, but she was gone. Almost every trace of her was swept away. Her bed was stripped, her closet empty, and all that was left was the braided rug which was now by the window in her room.

I took the braided rug to my room and dropped onto it with the weight of grief. I rocked back and forth, playing with the soft frayed ends that had wrapped around her fingers countless times, and I imagined I was holding her hand. The Jenna I knew was no longer the same when we visited her. The progress we made was lost, and she never held my hand again. I still have the rug in my room, and I sit with my own children on it, telling them stories of the Zen master who taught me patience. It is the threads of our life from that moment of time; it is all I have left.
“Well that sucked.” The words coming from my lips almost caught me off guard as they echoed around my dark bedroom, following the sound of me slamming shut my laptop. I was left in almost blackness then, no lights left on in the room except for the red light coming from the clock beside my bed. Without thinking, I looked to it and immediately groaned at the red numbers that read 3:33 on the face of it. “Well I’m not going to wake up for class tomorrow.” Despite this muttered complaint, I re-opened my computer to check my email and saw an email already waiting for me from The Guild about my latest failure. I knew that I should take their warning about a punishment seriously, but I could only bring myself to roll my eyes.

The Guild was just a part of a game that I had been playing for well over a year called The Last Saga. I had been a little late getting on the boat with it, dragged into playing it by Kelly Richardson, only to have her quit a year ago after she moved to Nevada or someplace like that. I hadn’t known her for long before she convinced me to play, only knowing her because we had been paired up to work together on a project about the Holocaust. She wasn’t the type of girl that I usually hung out with, the reclusive and shy kind that was easily picked out as the kind to play these types of games. We ended up close enough to be best friends until her father got transferred to a different sector in the business he worked for. She was around long enough for me to get addicted to the game, though, and I had no desire to break that addiction.

It gave a good release after classes and as long as my grades stayed up, my parents had no problem paying the monthly subscription fee for it. If they ever did, it was
easy enough for me to pitch a fit and threaten to stop doing homework until they decided to concede and continue with their monetary support of my addiction. They knew how important it was for me to get good grades during my senior year at Caldinsbury High, after all. They wanted me to go to college and become some sort of doctor or astronaut or the next Albert Einstein or some other highly valued job that parents pushed on their kids.

I didn’t really mind going along with their dreams for my future. I had no idea what I wanted to do, and it was easy enough to follow the plan that they laid out for me. I’d been following it since I was born, really, and I had no need to question it now. Actually, the first time I’d done something that hadn’t been guided with them was when I had first signed up for the trial of the game.

My parents had their concerns at first, but I convinced them to at least let me give it a try to show them that I could play and still get the straight A’s that they so badly craved. Besides, within those first two weeks of play I had already joined The Guild. The Guild needed me, happy to have such a blank slate newbie to train in the ways of the game. They took what I wanted my character to be and made her into that perfectly for me. With their help, I formed an identity for myself in the Coasts of Alerdergan where the game took place. I was no longer the awkward-looking teenager that I was in real life, but instead I was a beautiful and graceful Elven rogue.

With thoughts of my character dancing through my head, I sighed heavily and reluctantly closed the computer again and set it back down on beside table so that it rested beside the clock. I huddled under my covers and fell into dreams of my character and what we might do together tomorrow when I was finally able to play again after school.

My alarm went off at 6AM, barely 2 hours after I had fallen asleep. I groaned as I hit the off button and sat up in bed to stretch and look around my room as sunlight filtered in to
illuminate it through the bay windows that took up an entire wall.

I was reluctant to actually stand up, but finally the cinnamon hinted scent of my mom’s French toast made me shake off the last bit of sleepiness and get up. I slipped off the tank top and shorts that I wore for pajamas before I changed into my school uniform. It wasn’t too bad of a uniform, and I was glad for the fact that I could wear the pleated black pants instead of the skirt that would have just accented how scrawny my legs were. I had never filled out after my growth spurt in middle school, leaving me to be the giraffe of my class.

I pulled on the dark blue polo top next, completing my uniform before I went to the bathroom to brush out the mousy brown hair that I had inherited from my mother. Looking into the mirror only reminded how unlike my character I was. My mousy brown hair was the exact opposite of her silky blond hair. My murky brown eyes paled in comparison to her bright blue ones. Her ivory skin was unmarked, unlike mine which was marked with freckles and the acne that came with being a teenager. She didn’t stand a foot above her peers like I did. I had at least 8 hours before I could be her again, so I tried to force thoughts of her into the back of my head as I headed downstairs.

The table was set before I got down there, my mother eager to feed me so that I could get to school early. She was a beautiful woman and I could really only wonder how I had come from her, since she was so different from me. She had a nice hourglass figure that was accented well by the skirts and button-up shirts that she always wore. Her hair was a lovely chestnut color, soft to the touch with a nice wave in it before it stopped right above her shoulder blades. She always smelled of lavender because of the shampoo that she used, the scent coming off of her in gentle waves as she guided me to my seat in the kitchen.

This was our morning ritual. She always had breakfast made before I came down. She was a proper home maker, depending upon my father to provide for her as she did the
cooking and cleaning that had to be done around the house. She made sure that I was fed every morning before I left and that both of our lunches were made, although he left before I was even awake. It was a happy marriage for both of them, a little on the typical side, but it worked for them.

I poured syrup and powdered sugar liberally over my French toast before I started to eat it. I daydreamed through the typical morning conversation with my mom. That had been happening a lot lately but it wasn’t an odd thing. I was just happier to be away in the Coasts of Alerdergan as my character there. Barana, my elven persona, could do anything there, and it was far more interesting than the usual questions about when I’d be home from school or what classes I had for the day. The answers were the same every weekday, after all; I didn’t have to be there mentally to answer them.

I was at school soon enough, having daydreamed entirely through being dropped off. I was actually replaying the battle from last night in my head, the one where my entire guild had been killed and trying to notice where we had messed up. It was hard to pinpoint, but by the end of the school day, I had decided that it was the fault of our healer, Syzane. She must have lost focus at some point during the battle and her ability to heal had declined greatly.

It wasn’t until on the way home that I wondered about where the day had gone, looking out the window of my mother’s red Hyundai. The new car scent that still lingered completely overpowered her own scent of vanilla. I had never thought of this as a bad thing before now, but today, the smell made me feel a little sick. It seemed to be overpowering, causing me to roll down my window to clear my nose of the smell as I thought back on the day while my mother said something about her and my father going out for dinner tonight. It was Thursday, their usual date night, so I was used to the routine. They would probably leave money behind for me to order pizza or Chinese food. It would probably be Chinese food tonight; I had ordered
pizza last week and something greasy sounded amazing right now. The idea of the greasy Chinese food and maybe a comedic movie while I did my homework was enough for me to put the thoughts of my day out of my head.

I sat at the table in the living room to work on my homework as my mom got ready for my dad to pick her up. This was how it always worked, and they probably wouldn’t be back until late tonight, which meant that I could finish my homework and then play with the Guild until late without anyone complaining about me not spending more time on double checking my homework. I got up to hug her good bye when she left, enjoying the enhanced scent of lavender that her perfume brought to her. She was dressed in a beautiful blue gown today, happy to inform me that they were going to a Fireman’s ball tonight and that they’d be out late. She left while I tried to remember if she had talked about that earlier in the car or this morning.

I just went back to my homework, the numbers from my algebra homework dancing before my eyes as I finish the five problems that had been assigned in class for the next day. I always started with algebra since math always took the longest. The latest formulas had just been lost on me entirely but I wasn’t about to call Abigail for help. She had been really needy lately, wondering why I didn’t hang out with her every day after school anymore. I didn’t really feel like putting up with the extra three hours of movie watching that her help would entail.

I ordered my Chinese food and found a movie to watch before I started on my English homework. Tonight, it was making vocabulary cards to study for the test happening tomorrow. It wasn’t work that required my entire focus, so I watched the movie more than I worked on the cards until the doorbell went off to tell me that my food was there. I got up quickly, grabbing a twenty to pay for the food as I went to go get it.

I just gave the delivery guy the full twenty, taking the
brown bag of food inside with me so that I could sit on the couch and eat it. My stomach growled hungrily as the scents of the sweet and sour chicken, fried rice, and sesame chicken hit my nose. I had probably ordered too much, but with the sweet and tantalizing scents assaulting me, I wasn’t going to complain about it. I started eating hungrily, homework forgotten for the time being as I just devoured the food that I had ordered. It always amazed me that chicken could taste so sweet but I put it away in the fridge after eating about half of it. My parents had always taught me to be clean, so I cleaned up after myself automatically now, not realizing that I was doing it until I was sitting back down and working on my homework again.

I had it finished just as the movie was finishing up its final scene. I sat back for a minute to just enjoy the fact that my work for the day was now finished, glad to be done as I checked the time and saw that it was only nine. I silently cheered as I went to get my laptop and bring it down to the couch with me. I had an entire four hours to play The Last Saga. Four hours as Barana, doing whatever quests the Guild had for me that day.

I logged in happily and just let myself get lost in the game as I worked my way through quest after quest before I was finally sent out on a storyline quest. It followed the plotline of reclaiming the Dwarven Empire of Thaolin from an evil king and queen duo. It was an awesome quest, although it was hard to do on my own since the other members of the Guild that were online had refused to come with me. I didn’t dwell on this fact, though, as I instead worked my way through mobs of dark sorcerers and knights. It was exhilarating, controlling Barana as she fought through the crowds of evil people. The final battle was the best part though.

The king and queen were strong and they had set up their stronghold at the center of Thaolin well. Barana had to move quickly to keep them from killing her but I was used to such battles, controlling her well and battling through all of the hordes that they threw at us. It took a long while to work
through the mobs until it was just me and the queen after the king had fled. She seemed to be a much easier target than he was anyway, and he probably had just run off to prepare for a second battle after I had finished with her.

Barana’s daggers made quick work of the queen, though it seemed almost too easy to corner her. I guess the main fight must have been the minions that they had sent after us before now. I gave my eyes a roll at how anticlimactic that would be if the queen really wasn’t going to put up much of a fight. I wasn’t to be disappointed though. I landed a blow on her ribs and stained her blue dress with the bright crimson of red before a mob of knights came in to protect their queen.

These put up a greater fight then earlier mobs, actually wounding me as I struggled to defeat them. Blood splattered everywhere in the throne room, the stone tiles getting marked heavily with the deep crimson color. I finally worked my way through them, though, breathing heavily as I finally turned back to the queen to finish her as well. It only took a few more blows before her head fell from her shoulders, bouncing and rolling as her brunette hair trailed through the blood soaking into the tiles.

I was looking for the king, intending to finish the quest quickly since I was breathing far too heavily to think straight any longer. The chiming alert sound of in game mail brought me out of my reverie as I opened it to look and stared with puzzlement at the eight words that greeted me there. “We told you that you would be punished,” I read aloud with some confusion, my voice somewhat breathless as I felt a sharp pain digging into my brain.

I looked to the clock above the television and noted the time with more confusion. “How can it be 4? They should have come home by now and sent me to bed.” I murmured to myself as I quickly became aware of my hands feeling wet and sticky. I felt my keyboard without thinking, only to feel more of the sticky liquid that covered my hands. I struggled to get up and turn on the lights, feeling my body ache and struggle as I went to
hit the light switch.

The first thing that I saw was the bright red handprint smeared on the wall where my hand had been, causing me to yelp and stumble back away from it. I tripped over something on my way back, the fall jarring my head and sending more pain spiraling through my body. My head swam and my mouth filled with a thick, coppery flavor. The flavor only matched the scent that assaulted my nose and forced me to open my eyes.

Everything blurred for a long moment, my eyes unable to see straight with everything swimming in front of them. When things finally grew clear, I found myself staring into my mothers’ green eyes. I stared into them for a long moment, their horror mirroring my own as I took in the features of her face. Her brown hair was no longer sleek and shiny but was instead tangled, looking black and wet.

I slowly became aware of the thick liquid that my head was resting in and I mustered the strength to sit up, only to throw up all of the food that I had just eaten a few hours earlier. I felt weak and sick, my vision quickly blurring again as I looked at the scene all around me. The living room was filled with bodies, people stabbed and decapitated, much like the knights that I had just killed in the game.

I tried to pull myself up to call for help but my legs collapsed again and I went falling to the ground. I could feel the pain slowly fading, though, no longer feeling the warm syrup that I was laying in as everything faded to black.
You are a young girl.

You are proud of yourself, for the most part. After all, you earn all sorts of rewards in school. You’re smart, you’re pretty, and you have tons of friends. Everyone looks at you and can’t help but think you’re perfect. How could you not be? You’re a shoe-in to graduate top of your class, and probably be able to do whatever you want with your life afterwards.

But then you come home. At home, you’re not smart or pretty. You’re the mistake, the kid that should have never been born. The girl whose fault it is that your mother has to work overtime and your dad’s working a job he hates. They have to put food on the table and buy you stuff, all while keeping the house running.

So you’ve always done your best to impress them. You study hard, so that you never have to worry about summer school, and so that they won’t have to worry so much about getting money to send you to college. You enter every contest you can and do your best to win them, so that you can save up money to pay for what the colleges themselves won’t. And people flock to you, hoping a little bit of that success will rub off on them.

But when you try to tell your parents, they just push you away. Can’t you see they’re busy? They have to buy you all kinds of school supplies and clothes, and pay to take care of you, all while trying to keep the light on and the water running. They don’t have time for your worthless chatter.

Slowly, your heart begins to die. Tons of people may talk to you, but you still feel alone. You ruin everything. Maybe, if you hadn’t been born, your parents would have more money
to do what they want. Maybe they would be happier together. Maybe they would have had a child later on, a planned one, who wasn't such a nuisance, and who was happy just being good at things without shoving it in their faces all the time. Maybe, without you, their lives would be perfect.

Then, you begin to notice that your best friend, a girl you’ve talked to since kindergarten, always seems to be smiling. What right does she have to be happy when you are so much better than she, but still miserable? She doesn’t get perfect grades. Sure, they’re enough that she’s passing, and teachers are always saying she “has potential,” but she’ll be no valedictorian. If she gets scholarships, they probably won’t be too good. She’s earned no rewards, and she’s always wasting her time on dumb hobbies that will never get her anywhere. She’s stupid, and she doesn’t even realize it.

Not to mention, she’s so plain looking! I mean, jeez, would it kill her to get some better clothes, or stop acting like a little kid, or worse, a puppy that needs constant attention from anyone who will give it to her? And, as her friend, you feel like it’s your job to tell her. Give her a little wake-up call about how the world isn’t all sunshine and unicorns…

You’re a teenage girl.

You’ve had a fairly good life. Your parents raised you and your little brother well, and did their best to do whatever they could to make you happy as a kid. You’ve never really had problems with anyone in your family. You love them all and don’t mind going on trips with them or just hanging out. You can be independent, but it’s not like you have to totally abandon your family, right? You only live with them so long, after all. Might as well have fun with them now, while you are still young and can do so without having to worry about working and paying the bills and caring for a family of your own.

Your grades aren’t perfect, but you’re getting by and doing your best. You’re not in danger of failing, and your parents
understand you don’t really have time to study much, so they’re not on your back too much, as long as you try. You also have to make due with secondhand clothing, because money’s a bit tight. When you were in seventh grade, your mom got really sick, and has been in and out of the hospital ever since. This meant she couldn’t work a real steady job, since she would often miss a few weeks of work without any warning ahead of time. To make ends meet, Dad had to get a second job, so watching your brother fell to you. You do your best to study whenever he’s engrossed in a TV show, but he’s at the age when you can’t go too long before he gets bored and starts to make trouble. It’s a bit hard at times, but it’s fine. You know that, when Mom gets better, things will get better. Until then, you have to do your part to help out.

Through all this, you’ve depended on your best friend. You don’t tell her about what’s going on, though, since you don’t want to feel like you’re bothering her; still, it’s still nice to have some normality, to help you forget for a little while that things are less-than-perfect at the moment. You’ve always looked up to her, the way she’s always winning awards and getting such good grades. Maybe when your brother has a play date, you can see if she wants to study together, and maybe improve on the C- you got on the last science test? You also try to be friendly with everyone at school, since you never know who else might be going through hard times, like you are. You’re nowhere near as popular as she is, though.

It starts with a little comment one morning. Just pointing out that your shirt was a bit too small, and maybe you should buy a new one. Then, a week later, she oversees a score you got on a homework packet. A B? What are you, stupid? She would never let herself get a grade that low! Suddenly, asking her to study with you doesn’t seem like such a good idea…

Things just escalate from there. It goes from your clothes and your grades, to commenting about how frizzy your hair is, and how you could stand to lose a few pounds, and pointing out that everyone is just pretending to be your friend because
you hang out with her. It upsets you, but you can’t exactly do anything about it. After all, everyone thinks she’s so nice! You must just be too sensitive about what she’s saying if you feel this way. And…what if she’s right? What if everyone else is just pretending to like you?

Your mom starts to get better again and even finds a job that is willing to make a few adjustments, should she get sick again. You’re happy for her and that your family might be a bit more financially stable again, but it just doesn’t carry over to your actual emotions. Despite having more time to study, now that you don’t need to babysit, your grades still continue to drop. You just can’t seem to get the concepts down! Maybe you really are stupid… Slowly, your heart begins to die.

At the beginning of sophomore year, a boy you knew vaguely asks you to be his partner on a class project, and the two of you eventually start to go out. Things look better for a while, but it just leads to more pain. Your friend starts to worry about you, asking tons of questions about you two. If you tell her about how scared you are of having your first kiss, she calls you a baby. If you tell her how you sometimes think about… someday…not right now, but maybe in a few years… making your relationship a bit more serious, she can’t believe how much of a whore you suddenly are! You’re afraid to talk to him about it, because you don’t want to give him reason to hate you, but you still feel like you’re dragging him down…

You’re a teenage boy.
You have an average life. Your family life is decent. There are a few problems, but nothing outside the normal familial bickering. You don’t like spending a lot of time at home, but you don’t dread it either. When your older brother has a disagreement with your dad, you just roll your eyes, turn up your music, and go up to your room. By dinnertime, they’ve usually reached some level of compromise, and it’s all good.

There’s this girl in your class that you like. She’s pretty,
but not in the way her one friend is. Still, you like her better. Her friend has this air of superiority as she talks (and why shouldn’t she? She’s a fucking genius, from what you’ve heard!); this girl… she is nice to people simply for the sake of being nice. But, lately, she seems more distant that usual. She walks with her head down, and her head seems to be thinking about other things. You think maybe she had a fight with her friend, but they’re still hanging out, so maybe not? Whatever it is, she hasn’t been talking to people as much. It isn’t that she’s being rude to them, because she still is fairly nice when people do talk to her, but she just seems less outgoing.

In class one day, everyone’s pairing up for a project, but she’s just sitting by herself, staring out the window, and you’re not even sure if she knows what’s going on. Swallowing, you ask her if she wants to be your partner. She accepts. Then, while you’re working on the project at her house, you ask if she wants to go out for ice cream after school after you present the project, as kind of a celebration, and she accepts again. Then, after you pay for her strawberry cone, you finally work up the courage to ask her out. And, one more time, she accepts! You lean forward and want to kiss her, but instead just taste her ice cream, and then offer her a bite of your own. Not yet. You’re not sure if she’s ready. You’re not sure if you’re ready.

Things go great for a while, until…they don’t. She slowly falls back into her old gloomy state, and you can’t figure out why. You ask and ask, but she says it’s nothing. You hug her, you kiss her, you swear that you’ll do anything to help her, but she doesn’t give you any information.

She breaks up with you. She says she’s tired of hurting you because she can’t seem to get her shit together. You insist that you have no problems with the way she is and that you’ll always be there if she needs you, but she just shakes her head and walks away. Then, you sigh and walk away, too. You still love her, but there’s nothing you can do. You have no idea what’s wrong, and even if you did, you have no idea how you would go
about fixing it. All you can do is wait it out until she gets better, then see if she wants to try again after she feels a bit better about herself.

Then, she doesn’t come to school. Rumor is that she tried to kill herself, but her parents called an ambulance on her. They say she’s getting help for it, but nobody’s quite sure what “it” is. And, in that moment, you feel the world drop from beneath you. You should have been there for her. You should have tried harder to help. What if whatever help she’s getting doesn’t work? What if she tries again? Slowly, your heart begins to die. You’re horrible. You should never have abandoned her. If she dies, it’ll be your fault. You can’t believe yourself. You can’t live with yourself. You can’t live. You can’t continue to live, when you almost let the girl of your dreams die…

You’re a young man.

You have an average home life. Yeah, you fight with your parents a lot, but who doesn’t? You’re working your way through college, but you still need a place to stay in the meantime. You find all kind of things to clash with your dad about, but it’s no big deal. You can usually work something out, even if it means giving in a bit to your dad’s demands. You’re not perfect, but you try to put up a good face in front of your brother, so he’ll follow your good influence, and not know about the bad stuff you do in your free time occasionally.

Your brother’s awesome. Or…he was, at least. You just found out that, on his way home from school, he walked in front of a car. It had killed him instantly. They think it was an accident, but you can’t forget how gloomy he looked recently. Gloomy, like that girl he was going out with before…

A few months later, you see your brother’s gloomy girlfriend walk by the house. Only she’s not gloomy anymore. This is the first time you’ve seen her since your brother’s funeral. She was sad then, but who wasn’t? And, the funeral was the first time you’d seen her since she and your brother broke up. You
don’t want to place blame on anyone, but you can’t deny how strange it is that he seemed to get sad after they were done with one another.

The image of her, walking down the street and smiling as she talked with friends replays in your head for a while. And, slowly, it begins to infuriate you. You don’t want to think your brother killed himself. Of course he didn’t. But, if he did, it’s probably that girl’s fault. She broke your little brother’s heart. And, after his life ended and a major part of yours was ripped away forever, she has the nerve to laugh. Has she no shame? Doesn’t she ever consider what her actions can do? What they may have already done?

Slowly, the rage kills your heart. Your fights with your parents get worse and many times don’t end with any sort of agreement, like they used to. Now, they end with slammed doors and hurt feelings. You move into a friend’s apartment to get away from them, but the anger follows you.

For a few months, you’ve been dating this girl. It hasn’t gotten real serious yet, but you weren’t rushing things. And, as everyone does, you’ve gotten into a few fights, but nothing too serious. That is, not until your first fight with her after moving out. You’re getting into a shouting match when, before you even realize what you’re doing, you draw your hand back and slap her. She looks up at you in shock afterwards. You look down at your hand and realize you need help. Now.

You’re a young woman.

While your home life wasn’t horrible, you still prefer living in the dorms when you go to college than having to stay with your parents any more than you have to. At school you are doing pretty good. You’re passing, you’re in a couple of clubs, and you have a great boyfriend. You’d do anything to stay with him.

And, that statement is put to the test one night when, during a fight, he slaps you. After you get over the shock, you
realize that something isn’t right. Yeah, he shouldn’t have slapped you, but it was only one time. It isn’t like he throws you around all the time. The two of you make up, and you put it in the back of your mind, not thinking much of it.

Then, he starts to spend less time with you. You try to make plans, but he always says he’s busy. You try to figure out what he’s busy doing but he just looks embarrassed and says it’s nothing. Afraid to anger him again, you don’t press, but start to fear that he may be cheating on you. What else might he be doing? If you want to keep him, you need to show him you’re willing to be the best girlfriend ever.

One afternoon, you’re making out on a mutual friend’s couch, and things start to get steamy. Your friend is out, and your boyfriend starts getting a little extra grabby. Right before he’s about to go all the way, he pauses and looks at you, as if asking for permission. You don’t feel ready yet, but at the same time, you don’t want him to leave you! So, you let him. It feels good, but you still don’t feel right. You just push it away, though. You have to make a couple of sacrifices if you want to stay with him.

Then, one time turns to two, then three. Soon, you’re sleeping together at least every other week. And, no matter how many times it happens, you don’t feel any more comfortable, but you don’t refuse, either. You can’t just lead him on, and then all of a sudden cut him off! You kill your heart slowly, in favor of his happiness and a lasting relationship.

Then, strange things start happening with your body. You take a home pregnancy test, then go to the doctor. Sure enough, you’re pregnant. Fearfully, you tell your boyfriend. After much discussion, you decide to keep the baby. Your boyfriend had just lost his brother a year ago, so he’s looking forward to having someone younger who will look up to him again one day, someone he can hang out with and be a mentor towards. You plan to get married, and you’re going to stay in college as long as you can, but you know that, once the due date draws closer, you’ll have to quit to take care of the baby. Your boyfriend – now fiancé
– is staying in until he graduates, though, so he can support his child. Until then, though, you both have to work whatever jobs you can find, and you’ll probably still have to work after it is born, anyway.

The first year or so of the baby’s life is fine, but then things begin to sour. You both still care deeply about your baby, but your love for each other is beginning to fizzle. Plus, paying for a baby is harder than you thought. You both work your asses off and come home tired to a screaming baby. You don’t want to break up, because you can barely keep your finances under control combined, and know neither of you could ever make it alone. But is staying with someone you don’t love for the sake of the baby you created together really such a good idea?

You’re a newborn baby.
You were conceived by accident, and though your parents are doing their best for you, they are young and naïve. No matter how much they try to make things great for you, there’s always going to be something missing, if not financially, then emotionally. After all, you’re expensive and only going to become more so as you get older, and you’ll also desire their attention more and more. They’ll have to either work to ensure you have everything you need or want, or sacrifice a few bills or a few essential school supplies to spend time with you before they collapse from exhaustion.

Hopefully, you’ll break the chain. Hopefully, they will choose right, and you’ll grow up happy. You may have to make a few sacrifices, such as not having the best clothing, or navigating a divorce that leaves you with two homes, but it will be for the best in the long run. Or, if not that, hopefully you’ll find a way to fulfill those needs in a healthy and acceptable way. It may not be the same, but you’ll be a smart kid. You’ll know right from wrong. Whether you pick the right one is up to you.

But, in the long run, we all play a part. We all see someone who could use a hug, or a shoulder to cry on. But will
we provide it? Or will we heed the calling of the heartbreak telephone, and just pass the message of sadness on to yet another unfortunate soul.

Ring Ring
Hello? …It’s for you.
I’ve always been told “Life is a journey, and you never know what’s around the next bend.” Well, I wish I had a better roadmap. Maybe then I could avoid falling into these ‘surprises’ in the road.

I suppose I had a pretty good, if not average, childhood. I was my parent’s only child for quite a while, so I was a bit spoiled. As long as my parents could afford it, I got whatever I wanted. My room was a paradise of stuffed animals, Barbie dolls, and books. I was happily cruising along, just Mommy, Daddy, and me.

Then I hit my first pothole. When I was in 3rd grade, my mom and dad began to fight a lot. By the time 5th grade graduation came along, I was in a “broken home.” My parents lived in separate houses, and I was expected to trade off with them throughout the summer, and then only visit my dad on weekends once school began. Maybe that’s where my obsession with schedules began.

The middle of 6th grade, my mom got married again, and I got a new step-dad and step-sister. Olivia was cute, but she was still pretty young, so she was a bit of a brat. We got along pretty well, though. I let her have the toys I outgrew, and she also got new toys from our shared parents. Mom and Steppy, as I took up nicknaming him, were trying to “keep the flame lit,” so I was in charge of babysitting Liv. It wasn’t much different from the way we usually were, except that I was expected to give her my full attention, so I had to have everything done by then.

That’s when the scheduling, my “roadmaps,” if you will, really came into effect. So that my grades wouldn’t suffer, I made
a huge dry-erase calendar in my room and wrote down when projects were due, when Mom and Steppy’s date nights were, dad’s weeks/weekends, and any other important events. I was still relatively lax, though, and I even let Olivia draw pretty pictures on the blank days, as long as she didn’t erase or write over anything.

But every road has seen its fair share of car accidents, right?

It was the summer after my freshman year of high school, and I was babysitting my sister. I was still cruising at a pretty smooth speed down Life Boulevard, but a few rings of the house phone brought me to a sudden stop.

“Hello?” I asked, not thinking anything of it. It was probably something for mom’s work. She got a lot of those calls then.

“May I ask who I’m speaking to?” a man’s voice replied. “Amber Charles, sir.” I responded, still oh so innocent. “Well, Amber, I’m sorry to tell you this, but your father has committed suicide.”

I dropped the phone. How could this happen? My life had been going so smoothly and now…this?

I picked up the phone, and took down some information, trying to remain calm and professional to the policeman who had found him. But inside, I was a wreck. I spent the rest of the night crying.

When my parents got home, I got the whole story. It was too difficult to run me back and forth between houses, and my mom didn’t like having to plan her date night around when I’d be home, so she had requested getting full custody of me once school started, and just increase his time with me in the summer. According to the suicide note we got a few days later, my father had been having problems at work and with the bills. I was the one thing that had kept him going, and the fact that my mother had “selfishly taken me away from him” had sent him over the edge.
It was then that I snapped. In addition to the calendar, I began writing detailed to-do list every night, carefully planning every hour of the day. I left no time for crying. No time for thinking about dad. No time for any more surprises.

And every time I made a mistake, I was punished. If you break a traffic law, you pay your fines. Forgot to do my math homework? I’ll just pay with my dinner tonight. Forgot my gym clothes? I’ll just run the mile or so home instead of waiting for the bus. Made my English essay all wet because I started crying. A few swift flicks with my pen cap will bring me back to attention. I can just hide the marks with my shirt tomorrow, and the next day, and until they heal.

I look down at my scarred arm sadly. My stomach growls from not eating lunch, and my legs are still sore from when I ran home on Monday. This has gone on long enough. It’s time to stop the car and get out. I need to get off this winding road, with all its potholes and detours. A roadmap can only get you so far, and this road doesn’t have any place to ask for directions. I sit in my room, fingering the sleeping pills. Falling asleep is too easy a death for a slacker like me, but it was the only thing I could get my hands on. I’m following my dad onto the final detour.

Then, my door opens, and Olivia comes in, teary-eyed. She’s grown quite a bit since when our parents first married, and barely ever whines anymore, so this is a surprise. I quickly stash my contraband in a drawer. “What’s up, Liv?” I ask, trying to stay cheery.

“Mom and Dad are late, and it’s icy out. You don’t think something happened, do you?” she asks, climbing into my bed. Now that I think about it…she has been a bit paranoid about our parents’ safety since my dad died…

“It’s fine. They’re probably just stuck in traffic.” I tell her, running my hand over her hair.

“Well, can you stay with me, at least until they get back?” she asks, “I don’t wanna be alone.”
Something about her words…she could have chosen such different ones, but she said the ones that were so relevant. It was almost like a message from God. Did she know what I was doing? No, she couldn’t have.

“Come on, I’ll make you a sandwich.” I tell her, and make a mental note to put the pills away later. After all, who needs a flawed roadmap when you have a little angel leading your way?
“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…”

The Presidential Fitness Test—the day I get to prove just how physically inadequate I am to the entirety of my gym class. Every year I am forced to publically compare my athletic ability (or lack thereof) to those of my classmates. In a typical English or math classroom, where my talents truly shine forth, teachers return tests face down and homework is passed in individually. Educators and school administrators mandate that no student should feel inferior to another student; however, this seemingly “revolutionary” idea has not found its way into the gymnasium. “In the pursuit of secondary education all students are tested equally. That they are provided with similar and indiscriminating opportunities to perform successfully in the scholastic environment—except gym, never gym.” Such a declaration could possibly exist, hidden within the secret pages of the “Educator’s Guidebook”…I would believe it.

I finished second to last in the mile run. The highest count of crunches I performed totaled three. I have resigned myself to the fact that I cannot accomplish the physical feats of my athletic classmates, but the teachers of the physical education class make me prove this point every year with this fitness test.

The end of the week coincided with one of the fitness days, a small diffuser to the day’s humiliation. A two-day reprieve to forget the muffled laughter of my peers, forty-eight hours to let my reddened cheeks fade back to a normal hue. I stepped off the bus grateful for the weekend. I pretended to
tuck my headphones into my pocket until it slowly rumbled up the hill taking away all prying eyes. I was alone. I was invisible. I shouldered my backpack and tore off down the lane, finally feeling free of judgment. I wasn’t running for class, or for my G.P.A, or for the damn Presidential Fitness Test, but for me, only stopping once my sneakers slapped the front porch. Perhaps just over a quarter mile, the lane certainly couldn’t compare with track used for period eight gym, but I took some small bit of pride at not stopping once—a consolation prize.

Thinking it wouldn’t hurt to let my homework ferment for a few hours, I walked down to the barn and grabbed the small training halter. The alpacas, part of my life for the past four years, watched me as they worked their cud. I leaned up against the gate and propped my head in my hands. I let my eyes wander over the small herd of five females and one baby, and watched for a moment.

The females stood around the hay feeder munching away, the matriarch in the prime position closest to the food source. Occasionally one of the others tried to venture close, but Dolly, head of the small band, would tilt her head back and spit a warning.

Suddenly, the baby, Thunder, wandering around for the past few minutes, took off running right for one of the females. He leapt and barreled into the side of Rosie, our pregnant girl with a mean streak. She whirled to face him, her ears back. Her head snaked down and she tore off after Thunder, chasing him around the paddock. The short-lived pursuit ended when Thunder sprinted to the safety of his mother. Rosie received a face-full of stomach bile from Thunder’s dam for venturing too close. I laughed and opened the gate. It was time for Thunder to learn how to obey commands and walk in line.

“…that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”
The winter season that year was dreary—too warm for snow, but the sky remained a constant grey, always threatening to release its seasonal load in the form of freezing rain. During this time, phys. ed. moved indoors to focus on court sports. For three glorious days we played badminton, my sport, when I was athletically competent enough to blend in with the rest of the class. This cycle in our curriculum never lasted long enough for me—soon we converted over to “matball,” a version of kickball where mats served the place of bases.

On the way to 8th period gym on perhaps our fourth or fifth day of “matball,” I hurriedly jogged down the main stairwell, passing a multitude of REFLEX signs hanging like wallpaper in the vertical corridor. The posters, silently screaming our school motto, “REspect For Learning at EXeter.”

I found one of these signs trampled on the stair.

I wasn’t particularly surprised when I was picked last for teams. Incredibly, on my turn, I punted the ball and made it to first base.

The opposing team tagged me out two runs later.

The opposing team snickered, my own groaned. We lost. The teacher’s eyes flicked to the other students and back to me. She heard them. As I walked to the locker room, she smiled at me and said, “Good try.”

“…that among these are Life…”

Darwinism—a theory I frequently heard in 10th grade Biology or on Animal Planet—animals competing with each other and the world to survive…that’s just how it is. Humans are above such basic instinct; we even hold faith in a government system that’s supposed to give voice to the voiceless. There may be three social classes, but in the grand ‘ole United States of America, we believe everyone is equally important.
“...Liberty...”

I schlepped out into the bone-chilling rain to feed the alpacas. Ever impatient, the girls waited at the gate for their grain. I obliged, spreading the pellets out onto the trough. The females tended to be overly possessive about their food, and I noticed Thunder couldn’t find himself a dinner spot that evening. Any time he tried to make room, one of the females spit at him until he moved away.

How was that fair? The youngest one who needed the food the most got bullied out of a meal.

“Scat!” I yelled. They all bolted outside. “You should all get the same. You’re all equal!”

All six of them stood out in the rain, ears pricked, round black eyes staring.

They looked at me like I’m crazy.

“Today, you will vote for your class president,” my homeroom teacher announced. “Remember, the student who wins the election will be the head of your class for the next year. Choose wisely, this is not a popularity contest.” The jocks at the back of the room laughed. They knew the truth. I glanced at a poster on the wall. REspect For Learning at EXeter.

Something stung my shoulder before bouncing to the tile at my feet. An eraser cap, chewed up.

With the alpacas, I try to make everything fair. I am the leader of the herd, after all. Who better to implement equality?

I turn around and see the future class president hi-fiving another jock, grinning. Now I’m not too sure.

High school—humanity—it’s all just survival of the fittest.

“...and the pursuit of Happiness...”
Dawn lingered beneath the edges of the horizon as my husband and I walked our daughter into Denver Children’s Hospital once more. The lobby was still silent and sleepy as only those scheduled for surgeries, like us, waited to register. My husband walked our daughter around to keep her busy while I sat in thought. I knew what was coming. This was her third reconstructive heart surgery, but this time, she was different, and we were different.

The first surgery was terrifying. We went from bonding with our week old daughter, planning a life of imaginative firsts, and watching her sleep in peace, to a world of chaos. We were stripped of the life we had dreamt for our newborn daughter and given an alternative life with limitations, precautions, and unknowns. Her heart was the size of the top half of an adult’s thumb when her surgeon cut into it for the first time. She had to have her breastbone broken and her heart stopped while she went on a bypass machine. Her surgery took ten hours the first time---ten excruciatingly long hours in which we paced the long white corridors and feared the worst.

When we saw her in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit after surgery, we were wearing sterile gowns. We washed our hands with the hospital soap; the smell was a mix of sweetened alcohol and pain. Her nurse led us to her tiny, 13 day old body which lay bare beneath tubes. Her chest was still open just in case the surgeon needed to get to it quickly. There was a white Gore-Tex patch covering it, but the heart was beating against it, softly fluttering and desperately fragile.

The second surgery was four months later. Afterwards, we went through athletic feats to keep the oxygen cannula on a
4 month old. She needed oxygen to maintain her saturations, which stayed below normal levels. We feared each illness, kept her sheltered, watched her wake up with nightmares, and fell even more in love. She became a little person with thoughts and feelings, personality, and so much love. Sometimes, we could even forget that she had a heart defect, until a doctor’s appointment would come around.

The third surgery was the most feared because we had built a life with her, a life that could be taken away. The night before the surgery was a sleepless one, and the morning coffee was mixed with anxiety. We stayed in a hotel the night before since we lived two hours away from the hospital. I slept next to my daughter, watched her breathe, brushed her hair from her peaceful face, and tried to imprint her image in my memories so it would last. The morning came quickly, and my husband and I went through the motions. Our daughter could not eat, so we tried to distract her while we packed our things. She danced to The Wiggles on her portable DVD player, as I tried to get her to slow down enough for me to put her hair in a ponytail. She wore her pajamas to the hospital because she would just change into a gown when we got there. I grasped her hand, as much for my sake as it was for her.

“Bridgette O’Toole!”

The woman behind the registration desk called our daughter’s name, and my heart skipped a beat. My husband and daughter joined us as we signed papers. Our daughter looked on with curiosity, her eyes following the pen as it scrawled my signature on each page. We were given bracelets that matched hers, a safety precaution. She fought the bracelet as she fought everything; she had become so wary because of her surgeries. We took her to the third floor on the glass elevator, overlooking the people below. The place was beginning to wake up as more people flooded the first floor. We made a special stop on the second floor to visit my daughter’s favorite purple cow. It was an art installation, donated to the hospital; a purple cow with
various designs painted on it. We then proceeded to the third floor, walking slowly so we could stop by the fish tank with angel fish, and fish that looked like Nemo and Dory.

The nurse who would keep us informed throughout the surgery met us by the elevator. We spoke with the surgeon and anesthesiologist while she was prepped, and then we were allowed to walk by her as they pushed her bed to the operating room doors. Even though I had done this twice before, it felt even harder this time. I had to hand my little girl, my daughter, to these people that I knew were good and wanted to help, but with the knowledge that I could be touching her soft hand and silky hair for the last time; knowing that if she passed away on the table at only 2 ½ years old, we might have made the wrong choice. We were given three options after her diagnosis, but this seemed to be the best of the three. I could not just let her die, and a heart transplant would only last about 10 years. While I knew this was the best choice, I also knew that if anything went wrong, I would question my choice, and blame myself.

I watched the doors shut with tears flooding my eyes. My husband and I hugged, then gripped each other’s hand and walked down the hall. The waiting room was at the end, and we knew our families were there waiting to support Bridgette and us. Our parents, his sister and sister-in-law, and we knew others would arrive throughout the day. I couldn’t look at anyone yet; I needed this moment to be with my husband, the only one who could possibly feel the same grief I felt. Part of our very being was in that operating room.

We sat in a small alcove with two chairs. I looked in his eyes which were more blue than green today because he wore a blue shirt. Like seas of sorrow, I could lose myself in them sometimes. He sat across from me, and my hands rested on his knees. His soft, worn blue jeans were comforting at the moment. The sun peeked through the windows beside us, the windows that overlooked a courtyard. Despite the size of the world beyond, I could only give myself to our tiny sphere.
I would compose myself, and then cry some more. It took about 20 minutes to pull myself together so we could meet our families.

They greeted us with hugs and tears, and we knew we were not alone, but deep down, I felt alone with my fears. I noticed the seats that were empty where I imagined my sister and her husband sitting. She made it clear she wanted no relationship with the family, but I still thought she cared about her niece. Those empty seats added to the pain I felt throughout the day. I was thankful for those who were there, bringing conversations, food, and compassion when we needed it. The tears would well up every now and then, but I needed to stay strong around everyone because it was the only thing I could attempt to control at the moment, when so much was taken from me and put into the hands of fate.

Breakfast came and went, then lunch. We had been updated regularly as they opened the chest and made it past scar tissue. We were told early on that each surgery she had had caused scar tissue to develop, and this would be the most difficult part of starting her surgery. I bought coffee. Things were going well…until they weren’t. Our nurse didn’t look as cheerful as she approached us in the early afternoon. Her pace was hesitant, and the confidence in her voice had disappeared. I could feel myself panicking.

“The left pulmonary artery is in bad shape. It’s practically shredded and needs to be fixed with an artificial material. The surgeon is creating one for her now, but it’s risky, and we won’t know anything until we try to start her heart again. It should be another hour before my next update.”

We were all stunned. She had made it through the past two surgeries without any complications, and now we were hit with this news. I had to get out of the waiting room and walk around. My husband and I went to the cafeteria to talk, to the gift store, and then back to the waiting room.

45 minutes since the update
My family talked about random things, and each conversation moved through my mind like a mist behind the worry. I don’t remember a single conversation.

**1 hour and 25 minutes since the update**

I looked at the clock, then peeked at the hall. I listened for the door and footsteps. I begged to hear them. Why was it taking so long? I felt hot and it was hard to breathe. I knew a panic attack was coming. Why couldn’t she come tell us something?

**1 hour and 47 minutes since update**

I started to feel sick. I knew it was because I was nervous. I heard the door and footsteps, and I noticed my whole family, like me, looked at the hall. The nurse came around the corner and said in the most angelic voice, “She is done and headed to the CICU. Everything went well, but because she had to have more work done, she will have to be closely monitored. She also has a temporary pacemaker until we feel her heart is regulating everything on its own for long enough. She is on Versed and morphine. We’ll keep her asleep through the night so her heart can rest. You can see her in about 30 minutes.”

When I finally got to see her, my heart was whole, and I realized that while her heart was physically half of a heart, mine was just as incomplete without her. While some see her heart as a defect, I think it is exquisitely unique. Her heart survived surgeries that many others did not. The intricate details of work that came from the precision of her surgeon made her heart work like no other. She has a scar down her chest that we called her zipper, and it is the very definition of her strength. Every part of her that signifies the trials she has endured due to her heart make her that much more special. There is no other heart exactly like hers, and she has a personality to match.

She was not happy as she awoke to pain and even though she was medicated, when the nurses tugged the chest tubes to help clear them, she would get angry or cry. On the day after her surgery, she told a nurse to go take a walk outside.
She finally worked her way out of the CICU and into the cardiac floor, but first, two of her chest tubes were ready to come out. That would leave her with two more. They gave her versed and morphine, but the doctor was late and the effects of the meds started to wear off when he showed up. I asked him if she should get more medicine, but he said the versed was enough to make her forget. He pulled the tubes and she screamed and cried while in and out of sleep. I knew she could feel it, and I was so angry. He was there to help her, but the protective mother in me came out and I wanted to punch him for hurting my little girl.

I remember saying as he walked off, “You should have given her more pain meds because she felt that.”

He said, “The Versed will help her forget.”

“Would you have done the same if it was your daughter?”

He walked away without a response, and I thought, what will make me forget?

When my husband showed up, I had to leave, I had to cry, and I needed to get it out so I could be strong for her again.

Most of my experiences with the doctors and nurses were great. Bridgette had fans on the cardiac floor and all of the nurses loved how sassy she was. We would pull her in the wagon around the cardiac floor, and we met another little boy like her. She loved knowing there were other children like her. After our rounds, we would get her settled back in her bed. She had short brown hair that I would put in a ponytail on top of her head so she looked like Pebbles from The Flintstones. She would sit on her hospital bed with her legs crossed, and defiance shining in her big, brown eyes. I knew then, she would always fight. Fight to survive. Fight the system. Fight us. It is this fighter in her that has helped her to beat the odds. She grew stronger each day, had her staples removed, and we were finally allowed to take her home.

She has had a cardiac catheterization since, and we moved to a low altitude location to give her a better chance.
While I see a spirited young 9 year old in front of me, I know she is far from done with surgeries. Her heart works twice as hard as an average heart, and eventually, it will start to fail. When that happens, she will need a transplant. We do not know if she can have children, or how many limitations she will have in her life, but we know she has lived like a normal child since her last surgery. She can run and play, laugh and smile. She dreams of being a doctor one day. She carries physical scars, and some phobias that stem from her surgeries, and I carry mental scars that will never go away. While I will always remember the doctor taking her chest tube out, she has no memory of it, like he said.
I am driving home from work on a Saturday night. I am soaked through two layers of shirts, but I can still feel the occasional drip on my back from the bun I haphazardly tied on top of my head ten hours ago, which had held up all day but now droops under the weight of rainwater. The rain is a wall 20 feet in front of me, and I’m going on blind hope that any car beyond it will stay out of my way. The storm came so fast that the water has nowhere to go, so it stays on the road in thick streams and puddles. The defrost setting that keeps fog from my windshield freezes me in my wet clothes, while sporadic flashes of light in the sky toy with my vision. And I feel fine.

I knew the storm was coming. Over the past ten years, I have observed and become attuned to the patterns and variances of summer weather in the Allentown area. I have spent days walking up concrete hills in 80-90-100 degrees. I have learned which clouds appear simply to shade the scorching sun and which ones are moments away from unleashing a deluge worthy of ark-building. I didn’t need The Weather Channel App to tell me this storm was coming, and it’s all because I do fake tattoos and face paint at an amusement park.

For ten years, I have worked for an art company that operates in parks and zoos. That means ten years of weekends that did not belong to me, ten years of spontaneous road trips I could not join, ten years of missed adventures. But when you’re a high school freshman, a job is an adventure of its own. Still, 14-year-old me, terrified of intricate henna designs and angry customers, could not begin to guess how much of her future self would be tied up with this work. I imagine that girl, standing in her first storm, at the bottom of a hill where rainwater rushed
down and settled around her feet, up to her ankles, saturating her blue and white Nikes. There was a lot she didn’t know, like the fact that it would take about 4 days for those shoes to dry completely, or the fact that there would be countless additional storms for her to stand in over the years. She did not know that she would become so addicted to vitamin D from sunlight that she would begin dreading winter in late August, and even a deep affection for Halloween and horror movies couldn’t dull the pain in her soul as summer slipped through her fingers each year. She definitely would not have guessed that she would be where I am now: still in college, still in Allentown, still driving home from work soaked.

My heart jumps as brake lights come into blurred view, and I step too hard on my own brake, even though I have plenty of time to stop. The car ahead speeds up again, and as I pass the spot where he stopped so abruptly, I detect no disturbances. Idiot. My heart jumps again at the sound of something hard slamming into my roof. It must be hale, hitting my car with such force that I can’t believe it’s not cracking my moon roof into glistening spider webs above my head.

It reminds me of the worst storm of my ten years at the park. I was 19, supervisor of my department, standing bored under a giant purple umbrella and hoping for word that I could close my stand early, when a guy with a tie and a manager name tag told me I had to go take cover under an actual roof. This was exciting! Park managers almost never talked to art people, and no one was ever concerned about the effectiveness of our shelter. As I jogged across the midway to the booth where we sold photos, I felt a vague stinging on my arms as little solid crystals started to fall. Once safely inside, I watched park guests scramble for cover until we had to pull down the shutters to protect the computers from rain that was moving almost horizontally in a continuous gust of wind.

When the weather eventually calmed down, I returned to find my kiosk knocked over. The purple umbrella I’d been
standing under had been lifted from its heavy base and had flown into the grassy safety area surrounding the ride behind the stand.

That was the kind of storm I hoped for today, which was probably the worst weather we had all season, and it waited until September to arrive. Temperatures surpassed 90 degrees and the air was thick with humidity. This weather seemed to have been building for weeks, with a slow crescendo of moisture in the air and various days of forecasted rain that didn’t yield a drop.

As I stood out there today with a manager name tag of my own, selling photos from a booth with heart-wrenchingly inadequate airflow, I thought about how easy it is to become accustomed to such a state of discomfort. My co-workers and I, we complain, but in reality we are resigned to the situation. We were disappointed that we had to wait until every single guest had exited the park, but when we finally descended the dimly lit hill, whose lights had already been changed to blue in preparation for Halloween, and passed the deserted place where the carousel music played eerily in the darkness, and a cloud in the distance finally lit up, we did not curse the universe or ask why. When thunder crashed in response to the lightning, we did not say we couldn’t believe it. Instead, we said, “Of course.” Because this is exactly the kind of thing that just happens.

So I didn’t get an umbrella from the office to use while going to my car. I didn’t run; I didn’t even walk briskly. This day did not go as I had hoped, but nothing about my life is the way I hoped or expected ten years ago. Still, I usually feel I am in the right place at the right time. So I strolled through that rain with my head held high, letting the water stream down my face, because there is no better time to get caught in a storm than while walking to your car after the most disgusting day of the summer. In five minutes, nature manages to undo the damage it took all day to build.

The rain slows as I drive, and by the time I get home it’s barely a drizzle. When I open the car door, there’s a chill to the
air, a crispness sneaking through the lingering moisture. We barely had a storm all season, but I can tell this one waited to come and wash away the summer. This year, I don’t feel a sense of dread. Summer is not slipping through my fingers; this time, I decide to let it go.
Nonfiction Honorable Mention

Depression and Dragons
Lauren Marie Nocheck

My first dungeon master was the jolly green giant. Not the giant that sells green beans but a character that was a giant. That giant happened to be a druid and after years of being surrounded by plants, his skin had turned green. My first campaign, my first dive into the magical world of Dungeons and Dragons, ended on the shoulders of a bright green giant that came to take my adventuring party home.

Dungeons and Dragons is known as a tabletop roleplaying game; essentially it’s a game where a group of people gather around a table and create characters from guidelines set by books before immersing themselves in a fantasy world. The game is driven by interactive story-telling through stories that are referred to as campaigns. Campaigns come prewritten for the game but quite a few dungeon masters decide to write their own with directions given in the Dungeon Master’s Guide.

The Dungeon Master is the person in charge of the story. They create a world for their players to explore with just their voice and creativity. They cast a spell to draw you into their world and help you to create another life within it. At twelve, I was ready to fall under that spell. I had just been diagnosed with a social anxiety panic disorder and depression. Weekly sessions with a therapist didn’t help. I just couldn’t find out the right way to interact with other students in my class without wanting to hide away under a mountain. They terrified me and I internalized that fear in a big way. I felt like a half orc abandoned in a realm populated by elves and there was no common language to be learned.

Dungeons and Dragons, with its odd name and creative origins, gave me somewhere safe to be myself; it gave me a place
to escape. It didn’t matter if I was a little odd; everyone in the group had some oddity about them and they weren’t afraid to show it off. They imbued me with a new kind of bravery and courage, at least when we were pretending to be people that we weren’t. This lasted for a few months before school ended and my family moved from North Carolina to Pennsylvania just in time for me to start high school.

I became a half orc adrift in a sea of elves once again. I didn’t know how to interact with these new strange specimens, and I withdrew from it all. My depression went unchecked and while I was on medicine for anxiety, it didn’t help me learn how to interact. I must have rolled a critical fail all four years of high school; it felt like I just kept running into walls that I should have seen long before I hit them. I was trying to solo an epic level dungeon and it left me hurt, alone, and confused. I kept watching parties march on by me, too scared to reach out for help and instead locking myself deep down in my own personal battle against a dragon.

My first year at college went very much the same way except I was now a goblin. I felt smaller than ever before, trying with no success to learn the language and ending up not only hurting myself but others as well when things got missed in translation. A self-destructive cycle started again as the dragon started to gain control. I wanted to submit to it, willing to let college become a repeat of high school since I just didn’t have the strength to fight against it. I let it destroy relationships and lock me away in a cage while waiting for a knight to come that I hadn’t even tried to call. I didn’t banish the dragon until the second semester of my freshman year when my spell of binding became a brand new core set of D&D books. I studied hard, breaking away the bars of my cage bit by bit as I prepared my own ultimate attack.

Those three books gave me a new blast of energy and a reason to fight back against the dragon and escape my dungeon. It took me a little while, but I managed to claw my way to
the surface again, finding myself on a quest to find a group to play with. I quickly found that the interest was there but the experience was not and that nobody wanted the hat of storyteller. I took up the role by chance; I knew the basics of creating characters and playing so it made sense for me to lead the first quest while everyone got comfortable in their new fantasy skin.

The first quest terrified me. I had no experience being a leader and here I was, guiding four other people on a journey into a whole new world. As I led them through dungeons, they helped me to control mine. Leading them through the world that I created for them and trusting them with the delicate features of my stories was a therapy better than any therapist. I learned how to interact with people by seeing how my players worked through all of the puzzles that I threw their way. It was my job to cast a spell on them and give them a challenge. They worked through the maze in game and helped me to find myself in the process. They finally taught me the common language by immersing themselves in a fantasy world that I controlled.

There are always going to be things lost in translation; languages change far too frequently for me to constantly have a grasp on them, but now those mistakes won’t send me scrambling back into my dungeon. If they do, I have allies to help me fight my way back out. Even if they aren’t there, I know how to beat that dragon on my own now. It isn’t the end of the world if I get lost in the dark again. Everyone makes mistakes; we’re all human after all and if we’re not, well, then there are spells for that.
About the Authors

**Gabrielle Johnson** ’15 is an English major/Communications minor with a passion for mythology and magical realism. They plan to pursue a career in screenwriting or game design, and hope to live abroad in the future.

**Stephanie Karpeuk** ’17 is an English major with a deep affection for narrative in various forms. She is a consultant in the Writing Center at Cedar Crest and also works as a henna artist and face painter. Though her precise future plans are uncertain, she intends to travel and to continue finding ways to utilize her creativity.

**Tara McCurry** is a Freshman, set to declare a double major in Psychology and Integrated Studio Arts with a Gender Studies minor. She loves Sylvia Plath, Ken Kesey, and accurately representative queer literature. She hopes her time at Cedar Crest will set her on the path to making an impact on the world.

**Lauren Marie Nocheck** is a senior writing and art major at Cedar Crest College, graduating in spring of 2015. They look forward to life beyond college and is planning to use the skills they learned in writing and art to pursue their dreams.

**Emily Orischak** ’16 is a Writing major who loves the creative arts such as creative writing, photography, pottery, and fiber arts. She wants to pursue a career in writing, in both the professional and creative field, and broadens her horizons by taking a wide variety of writing courses while at Cedar Crest College.
Tina O’Toole ‘15 is an English and Business Administration major with a love for reading and writing. She plans to pursue a career which includes writing, speaking, and advocacy. She sees graduation as bringing her one step closer to reaching her goals.

Chelsea Rauch ’16 is a double major in Secondary Education and English. She loves reading and writing fantasy and poetry, though occasionally dabbles in other genres as well. She hopes to teach Communication Arts or Reading in a middle school while working on her novels, and is determined to be published. She loves to spend time with her friends and fellow writers on campus and at home, and hopes to one day travel to Europe.

Amy Webster is a freshman nursing major with a passion for reading and writing. Amy also has a great interest in psychology which she hopes to attain a minor in here at Cedar Crest. Upon graduation, she aspires to find a career in nursing which will integrate her love of the creative arts and the mind. In addition, Amy plans to do a large amount of traveling to destinations both close to home and across the world.

Paula Wesson, ’15, is a nutrition major and managing editor of Crestiad. Although she has always loved to read and write stories, she’s experiments with poetry to get the message across in fewer words.

*Each author provided their short bio to detail who they are and their ambitions.