Each year, Preterite, Cedar Crest’s literary club, strives to foster and highlight the creativity and talents of student writers at the college. One way we do this is by hosting an annual writing contest open to the entire Cedar Crest student body. Judges for the contest include faculty and students from across the campus. Onyx features the winning entries submitted for consideration in the categories of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

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Printed by Unlimited Graphics, Inc.  
Cover Art: Cobwebs by Meghan Cronwrath
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Fiction

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Sascha Fink
The Upstairs Family
In the sunlight at the kitchen window
you watch the autumn leaves
blooming on the street, autumn leaving the streets
one by one, walking away
through the crowds of people beneath the trees.
We all become
someone else's past.

In the underground station, a painter sketches
us among the enameled tiles, pressing fingerprints
to both sides of the window of a commuter
train. All of the unnamed colours in your eyes
will be in the lost and found inside my memory
by the time the train flashes like electricity
through the tunnels.

Above sea level, the silver snowflakes turn
like nomadic constellations above the street.
Spun sugar snow, and spearmint trees that
are almost bitter in their darkness.
It's never summer
in the winter: I carry the imprint
of your sweater on my cheek.

Artificial april light like clinic-white fluorescents
in the clouded garden. The body as the container
of experience, aluminum train that carries me
to Atlantic afternoons. Love is a colourless sediment
in the street: prescription drugs will ease
the allergy, another harmless
contaminant.
I pass the brick rowhouses in their summer shades of orange, a sky of leaves and an unpunctual twilight. I arrive in August at the station, catch you counting yellow lights on the water below the bridge. Streetlights shining in the twilight, say hello/goodbye to you and me, you and me.

The night is smooth as the inside of a pear. The star we chose a year ago to name chooses tonight to announce its wish to live forever and (almost) forever. After everything that has occurred, I see that nothing important is quantifiable.

It only is.
Second Place Poetry

What he Can't
Jennifer Wendel

I can't quit you baby...
You and your silent, wordless, seductive mewing.
What began one sweltering August eve,
became not merely a want, but a need.

Yes, you're cold, baby, but I summon you despite the falling snow,
Craving your icy heat on my tongue.
Sending shivers of pleasure from lips to curling toes,
Oh you know how love goes - and you have no use for it.

You give me what he can't - sensation with no expectation
You need no explanation, no meal preparation,
No fair deliberation or polite conversation.
You require only that I taste- taste every facet of you.

Oh how I love the sweet, salty, nutty flavors of you!
...the instant reaction as you melt against my eager mouth.

Mmm no, I could never quit you, baby.
We must meet again soon in the cool, dark of the night, under the moon,
Bathed in dim kitchen light, with my silver spoon...
Till then deeply of you I'll dream
Yes, you, and you only
...my beloved Ice Cream.
Third Place Poetry

Just in Time for the Fall... Out

Maureen Manning

Where do the flowers go when they leave us all?
For as the nettles of beauty start to fall
Kindness and sweet nothings would not bring
More time for lovers in the spring
Gapping mouths and outspread arms
Forced to rotting by worn out charms
Flown around with bated breath
Concealed behind the mark of death
How beautiful; we’ve come to see
The cast out lives of you and me.
I was the sort of child who spent her days reading about children who read. They all had secret gardens or closets or tree houses to disappear into while they indulged in book after book.

I did not.

Finding a space of my own was a difficult task. My mother’s garden was large, but often overgrown with pricker bushes. Also, I could not risk accidentally settling down on top of a prized bloom. My tree house, which overlooked the garden, was quaint and secretive. It was also too dark to read in and unwelcoming wasps had made their home in the window of the little structure. My closet was simply too small for me to fit inside. I desperately continued to seek out a place of my own. I felt that if I could find one, I would be opened up to wonderful adventures, as were the subjects of my books. These places held magic, safety and a sense of self that I did not have my own world. So, I tried out many more spaces with little success.

I took up temporary claim of the kitchen counter by the pretty stained glass window my mom had carefully pieced together one weekend., only to be told that it was rude to sit where food is served. My mother suggested the basement,
but that was too damp, too cold and had bugs that I had never seen before. My last attempt was to sit beneath the oversized kitchen table. The chairs, however, needed to be pushed in when not in use, and the action cramped my reading quarters.

As I spent my days in search of my space, my mom had invested herself in her own project. When my father left, my mother decided she needed to put herself into the house that had been built to accommodate him. For unknown reasons, she chose to express her new creative freedom in the complete and drastic renovation of our bathroom. Every morning, for months, I woke to the sound of her hand cutting tiles and cursing when they shattered as they sometimes did. She bought new cabinetry that smelled like the outdoors and she even carefully assembled a stained glass light fixture with bold reds and blues and yellows. It took up a place above the rectangle mirror, which remained untouched.

As I watched my mother grout tiles with sorrow and a fancy grout gun she purchased with money she didn’t have, I became obsessed with the space with which she was filling her time. The bathroom had been transformed into the most beautiful room in our house simply because I could see so much of my mother in every detail of the space.

I began to take long showers—at least that is what my mother thought. Each night I would walk awkwardly into the bathroom while balancing a paperback book in the waistband of my shorts and hunching my shoulders so my t-shirt would hang forward and hide the bulge. I would start the water and instead of stepping into it, I sat on the cool, cream tiled floor and open my book. There, with the sound of rushing water pouring from a showerhead and tumbling down the drain, I immersed myself in the stories of aliens who traveled to planet earth, of princes who fought dragons, and of quirky girls who hated school because they just didn’t fit in.

After the water had run for some time, my mother would yell over the sound for me to stop wasting water, and I would put my book down, undress and quietly pull back the curtain so that she wouldn’t hear me as I finally entered the bathtub.
For all my sneaky efforts, my mom became wise to my ways and began timing my showers. Though I no longer could read while the water ran, I would sit afterwards and do so, or, if I was not in the mood to read, I would examine the different bottles and solutions my mom kept in those cupboards that smelled like the woods.

Every night I came out of that bathroom with a new object adorning my hair, a book in my waistband, and smelling like rose and vanilla.

As I grew older, my bond with the bathroom continued. I no longer read in there, save the occasional book in the bathtub. Instead, I would stand in front of the mirror and look hard at my face in the red, yellow, and blue light of the lamp my mother had made and try to decide whether or not I was pretty. I spent much time coating my lashes with dark mascara, lining my eyes, and covering my pimples. I felt the cool tile beneath my bare feet as I pressed my palms against my unruly hair and tugged at my earlobes.

Then I began to date a boy who said I looked nice often enough. I stopped looking in the mirror as much. I started using the bathroom only when needed. I brushed my hair in my room and read on the couch. I didn’t waste water.

Then, the boy left and I was back to the bathroom, knees pressed into the tiles my mom had restlessly cut. My sorrow mixed with hers and there, with the smooth tile beneath me and surrounded by the blues and yellows and reds, I became conscious of my breathing. I ran my fingertips over the ridges of those cabinets and I reached back past the shower curtain and turned on the water just to hear it rush down the drain.
I heard about my brother today. His girlfriend called. It was during the day so I didn’t panic when the phone rang. When I heard his ring tone I should have regardless of the time. I expect the midnight phone calls. I’m sure he’ll be dead when the phone goes off at one in the morning. I’m a-stay-at-home mom during the day; a student in the evening. No one calls me at one in the morning. The person on the line is usually someone I don’t know; maybe a new girlfriend. She’ll be distraught, scared, and most likely unsure of what to say or do. Sometimes she’ll cry. “Your number was in his cell listed as ‘sister call if 911.’” I always expect any number of scenarios I’ve made up in my mind. He killed himself. He got into a drunken driving accident and he died along with a family of four. He got shot during a bar fight. I’ve played them out in my head over and over. I’ve habituated myself to the words that I will inevitably hear.

Today the daylight phone call was like one of the midnight calls I wait for. He’s in the hospital. His latest girlfriend is sweet and very charming and far too young to deal with this type of thing. The time I saw her after my brother had taken a razor to himself she had a blank look in eyes. There is nothing there. I watched her disappear right in front of me. Perhaps she’s protecting herself; making a folder inside her mind in
which to file away “the horror” of what she’s seen. She’s much younger than he is and I feel bad for her sometimes. I used to feel bad for myself but not really anymore. This is the second suicide attempt she’s witnessed. I’ve witnessed or known of seven, maybe eight? I’ve lost count over the years. He’s thirty three now. His first attempt was when he was sixteen. The car he drove into a telephone pole looked bad but he was drunk and managed to escape relatively unharmed. It was the last time anyone gave him a car.

My brother’s recent attempts have been a little harder to deal with because we’ve grown closer over the last couple of years. We’re burned into each other’s souls. He’s usually drunk when he does it. He’s a carpenter by trade so he has a toolbox of lethal weapons. Awls. Saws. Blades. Razors. These aren’t cries for help. He really tries.

Each time he does just a little more permanent damage to himself. This time he cut into his arm so deeply he severed some muscle and nicked a tendon. His arms are like the red highlighted Interstate routes on a map. All the slices are in various stages of healing. Some are red and raw. Looking at them makes my skin hurt. I get a tingle inside my body like it’s trying to reject the pain I should be feeling when I look at them. Some have faded to the natural skin color with just a raised scar. He sends me pictures from his cell phone after he gets stitched up. Once he sent me a picture right after he did it. I don’t know why he does that. I hate to see it. Maybe he just wants me to become desensitized. Maybe he needs to know that the one person who can truly understand him has seen what he’s done. It hurts to see them but in the end, I file them away in my own mental folder.

After his attempts he usually finds a way to get to my house. It’s calm here. Quiet. No one tries to psychoanalyze him. I just let him be. I don’t turn him away because he’s my brother and I love him and I’m mentally ill too so we have a silent understanding. He has more of an alcohol problem but that, mixed with whatever the doctors, in about five minutes of discussion decide which diagnosis to give him the next time he goes in just makes matters worse. I have Bi-Polar Disorder. Major
depression and dangerous mania. I’m on meds. I’m lucky. I have a doctor and health insurance. I’ve done most of the hard work and behavioral modification on my own. I fail sometimes. A marriage in the toilet because my ex-husband couldn’t handle the illness. I no had real support until I made it into an intensive outpatient program.

My brother’s not jealous of me even though I feel bad that I'm much better off than he is. I had a schizophrenic father who put a bullet through his head. He has a father, who has any number of serious personality disorders (undiagnosed and unmedicated) and was abusive to both of us; me on a lesser degree. I was able to escape knowing this man wasn’t my real father. My brother is stuck with him. Alcoholism runs through our mother's side of the family. One day we were talking and he said, "You know what? From the day we were born we didn't have a fucking chance." He's right. We didn't.

When he comes for a visit we don’t talk about what he did around my kids. My oldest daughter knows. She’s smart. She’s seen the look and she’s also seen me at the bottom of the pit. The youngest is just thrilled to see her uncle. He wears long sleeves and tries his best to seem happy and normal but he’s so weak and she can tell. He doesn’t pick her up and throw her around. Just hugs. It takes a lot out of him to physically heal.

He’s gaunt looking; almost wraith-like. He’s here but he’s not here. He’s trapped between the living world and the dying world and as hard as he pounds his fists on the walls, he can’t break through either side. It’s a far cry from the way he looked when he was running and winning marathons. His face is sunken in and his shoulders are droopy. Helpless. Hopeless. I think he tried really hard this time to find a way to stop the pain. He was left with physical and mental pain. Now he has to deal with both.

Right now he has no significant fine motor skills in the arm where he hit the tendon and the muscle. He can touch his thumbs to his fingertips. That’s about it. The doctors say with some physical therapy he should get 90-98% of his original strength and range of motion back. I wonder, as I’m sure he does, whether or not he can slam a hammer effectively into
a nail or ever do fine detail woodwork again.

I stopped wondering where all this mental health “care and concern” was in regard to my brother. He was put on a 72 hour psych hold three times. A psychiatrist always comes down to see him. The problem is he’s usually drunk when he gets there. Drunk and covered with blood. This last time the nurse told me he was combative. But you see, when you’re drunk, some don’t consider it a true suicide attempt. You were just out of it. You pulled a Mel Gibson. I didn’t mean it. I was drunk. I’m sobered up now. Could you put in a few stitches for me? Can I go home?

His dad never did him any good. He snatched away the only chance he had to start out in a program the right way. When he was a teenager and could be forced into programs my dad would pull him out. His son had no problems. His son would not be labeled as a drunk or a nut. No one should know about this. Keep your fat mouth shut. He can’t be president or a leader of men if he’s a drunk or is mentally ill. His dad needs to read a bit more history I think.

It’s funny but I actually think he’s listed as a seeker in the hospital he goes to. He’s categorized as someone who comes to the hospital with no real problems seeking drugs or attention. One day they’ll be wrong and he’ll die because they “treat ‘em and street ‘em.” That’s their policy. Oh humanity. Oh love thy neighbor. Oh, just stitch him and ditch him. Hippocratic Oath? Hypocritical Oath? Seems to be a much better moniker for that profound promise physicians take to do no harm. My brother has two armfuls of harm.

The harm decreases as the insurance increases. I suspect my brother would be sitting in a clean, warm robe with group therapy twice a day, meds galore, meetings, and doctors to stick their heads in just to check in and see how you’re doing. Maybe he’s get a hot, wet towel over his face in the morning before they shave him (he shouldn’t be using razors but that freshly shaved feeling really lift’s your spirits, doesn’t it?). Would you like some aftershave sir? It might sting a lit…oh, well, I guess it won’t sting anymore than cleaning those wounds with al-
cohol, will it. You can handle it.

I don’t believe in God (or gods if that’s your thing). To some degree, neither does my brother; but he tries. Sometimes he sits in churches when he’s distraught but I think it’s more about the serenity or more likely a desperate cry for counsel that won’t cost him money he doesn’t have. In all the time he’s been there he’s never been approached by a member of the cloth. No priest or minister ever came to him and asked if he wanted... needed to talk. Isn’t it a priest’s job to tend to the sick? I guess the guy sitting in the pew with clothing that hangs on him and the look of a Concentration Camp survivor isn’t sick enough. I guess I ask too much from priests and ministers. They probably figure he’s praying and they should leave him alone. He’s praying that they don’t leave him alone. He’s just far too weak in so very many ways. He can’t get up out of that pew and ask for help.

There are a lot of people out there that think my brother and I are gifted because we’re mentally ill. The brilliant ones are usually touched. Richard Dreyfuss. Ernest Hemingway. Abbie Hoffman. Jack London. Edvard Munch. Emil Post. Virginia Woolf. We’re creative. My best friend, a dirt poor unmedicated bi-polar from Mississippi, is the most gifted writer I’ve ever met. I write and I’m an artist. For me it’s mostly stories, poetry and sketches. My brother designs and builds things. He has a creative vision that other contractors envy. Well, I say let’s return this gift for a refund. I don’t want it and I’m pretty sure not one person out there wants it. Ask me any day of the week whether I’d trade my mental illness for a bland life and I’d say, “Yes, please.”

I’m of the opinion that we have to take care of ourselves. After my last breakdown and my brother’s last attempt I’ve embraced the idea of Humanism. It’s just you and me, baby. Let me take some of the load off your shoulders for a bit. Eat something. Lay down on my sofa and rest. Will you let me try to help you? Will you help me if I need it? If God made this world He definitely ditched us. Maybe He liked some other creation better. Humanity is the black sheep in His family.

Instead of being treated, he’s right outside the ER’s
door with a 50¢ paper ice pack wrapped around each arm, stitches that were done too soon, and a script for Ibuprofen. He’s a user and instead of taking pain medication they’ll just have him pop a couple of over the counter pills that won’t do anything for the pain he’s in; mentally or physically. He’ll have a discharge sheet in his hand telling him to follow up with the family doctor he doesn’t have. He’ll crumble it up and toss it on the ground. Maybe throw it the garbage if he’s feeling magnanimous.

He told me the other day that he was seriously considering taking a trip to California. Definitely with “an aching in his heart” though not the one that Robert Plant probably meant. He says he wants to sit on the sand and watch the waves. Maybe walk on the beach and feel the crisp, cold water mix with the hot sand under his feet. I think it’ll be good for him. I hope it’s not the last time I see him. I still want him to build my seven year old a dollhouse. I don’t know if that will happen. He’ll squeeze that tennis ball in his hands for months. Maybe he’ll work with wood again. Maybe not.

I feel like he’s dead already and I’ve already mourned him. Maybe that’s why I’m so unemotional sometimes. Hard. It drives my mother crazy. I guess she thinks I should be weeping and wailing and gnashing my teeth when I get those phone calls. I don’t. I’m calm. Cool. Collected. The weeping is her job. I answer the phone. Where? When? How? Did they find him a bed? No? Of course not. I can try to get him a bed up here. Oh, you’re discharging him tomorrow? Make sure he tells the doctor that he can discuss his case with me. What’s the long term plan? Oh, there isn’t one. I’ll try to figure out something myself if I can. I have the whole encounter memorized. It never changes. If he does kill himself I can see the funeral very clearly, as though it’s already happened a dozen times over. His father, pulling at what hair he has left saying, “Oh, beloved son (who I never really gave a damn about) why did you do this to me?!?” My mother, the honest and loving parent of the two weeping and crying, “Oh why did you do this to yourself?! Why couldn’t I help you?” And me? What about me. I suppose I’ll just say to myself, “I’ll miss you younger but bigger brother. I
hope you’ve found some peace.” No one wants to see a loved one take their own life, but in the end, sometimes it’s better than to sit there and watch them suffer and mutilate themselves until all the blood and life has run out of them; until they are emaci-
ated ghosts of what they used to be with nothing ahead of them but the return to the bottle, the needle, the blow, the razor; what-
ever their coping mechanism is. Is it a bad thing to realize that sometimes a life is over before the heart stops beating? Is it a bad thing to mourn someone who isn’t dead? Is it a bad thing to not feel sad if my brother takes his own life? If he does I’ll miss him. A lot.
Third Place Non-Fiction

Childhood

Rose Marsh

(We lay on the dock at night once upon a time. The stars were so numerous that the sky looked more white than black. We exchanged words about how the reflection of the sky in the lake made us feel like we were in space. Immersed in the universe. Surrounded by stars on all sides.)

The wind carries my thoughts and my violence back into my face.
Murmurings intertwine
with disapproving sidelong glances and
cling to the inside of my cheeks.
I don’t always realize the world can be fragile
and must be careful not to hurt it.

We’re different now aren’t we?
I’ll never smile when my heart is breaking.
My heart seldom breaks at all.
But you, you wait until you are alone
and in your sorrow you forget.
(Our grandmother was watching us from the house while we were spinning together. She said we looked lovely with our hair catching the fading sunlight and we looked like we were on fire. Years later she told us that she turned to tell our grandfather to come and look at us. In that moment she had forgotten he had been gone for many years)

You feel like you’re dying.
I’m on the brink of understanding.
I’ll wear the fire like barrettes.
It settles into me as I spin with the sole intention of losing breath.
My hands skim the surface, the edge, precipice, between madness and a mild sanity.

I spin with a longing close to your grown up heartbreak.
I wish I could carry every sorrow so no one else ever would but I know I would reject it, throwing up the poison and keep myself safe.

(I caught you crying in your room. Your face was red and shining from all the tears. The blue pillow was darker where your eyes had been. I couldn’t say anything. You calmly got up and closed the door on me. I leaned my face against the door for a second and then I left. I didn’t hold you at all. Not even for a second. I’m sorry.)
I can’t take it all but give me a little. I can manage a little and maybe it will be enough so that you can see that it can be beautiful here. The world isn’t terrible.
It just didn’t know you were fragile and never meant for you to feel hurt.)
Joey pulls his sweatshirt sleeves over his hands and hooks his chubby fingers into the fabric. He wishes that he had brought the sheets of paper he usually carries, but there is no way to bring them without anyone seeing, and he doesn’t want people to know he is different as he walks through the hallway of the hospital. Different is what his mother calls him when she tries to explain why Joey’s classmates after he falls. Joey just looks at her blankly as he picks the gravel bits out of his knees. No one ever lets Joey go anywhere anymore.

***

Every day, Alice walks Joey to school. She drags her feet across the cracks in the sidewalk as he shuffles slowly with loose pages of notebook paper tucked under his arm. Alice doesn’t like when people look too long in her brother’s direction as she walks him to school. She knows Joey cannot understand why, though.

Alice seems much older than she actually is. She is only a few minutes older than Joey. He tries to remind her of that when she tells him to finish drinking the milk left over in his cereal bowl, but it’s no use. He whines that the flakes and crumbs left behind tickle his throat, and he coughs as he swallows. Alice tells Joey to stop making such a scene and drink the milk.
“Do you want to be hungry today?”
Joey just looks at Alice, swallows hard, and grabs the letters from the table. He doesn’t wait for her to walk out the door.

Alice sees Joey standing halfway down the street as she turns her bent key to lock the door—wiggling it anxiously to release it. She yells to Joey, but he doesn’t turn around or acknowledge her. She wonders if he ever hears her. As she picks her way down the icy steps, clutching Joey’s coat against her chest, she decides that she’s not certain she ever says anything worth hearing anyway.

“You want to be cold today?”
Joey stops and waits, knocking his foot against a street lamp. The hollow echo makes the air seem more frigid.

Alice catches up and tosses Joey’s coat to him. She won’t look at him although she knows Joey is watching as she readjusts her jacket collar and tugs her hat lower on her ears. She’s aware of his gaze as she narrows her eyes at people passing by, sometimes rolling them if a person makes sound as if to say “what a shame.” Alice isn’t sure if the “shame” is Joey or her glare, but she’d prefer the ambiguity. Joey is distracted by a dog barking at a fence across the street and makes a move to walk over. Instinctively, Alice reaches for Joey’s arm, the one the coat is draped over, and pulls him back onto the yellow curb of the sidewalk.

“You want to get hit by a car today?”
Joey is obviously startled, but Alice knows that it is not because of the tug; he is unnerved by her touch. Alice rarely touches Joey. She reasons with herself that it may scare him, but actually, Alice feels like his state of mind might be contagious—she might catch the way it wanders and then settles obsessively on a single thing. Like those damn papers.

Alice used to hide them every morning. She would tuck them under the cushions of the torn couch or put them between the ice cube trays in the freezer or toss them into the dirty laundry pile that sat on top of the dryer. She tried, but Joey would calmly sit, looking at her, refusing to talk or eat or move until she brought them back out and set them next to his spoon at the kitchen table. She would wonder as she pulled tacky couch
fuzz off of the tattered sheets how a boy who had no control over himself could control her so well.

Joey is tugging at Alice now. He holds the jacket up to his pink cheeks and she sees his breath manifested in little white puffs. There are no cars in sight, so she lets go of Joey’s arm: actually, she throws it down and her lip curls up a bit, but Joey doesn’t notice. Alice doesn’t step from the curb, but Joey doesn’t wait for her. He walks toward the barking dog. As he crosses the street, he tucks the papers he carries tighter beneath his arm. Alice hesitates for a moment, wanting to keep a certain distance from Joey. She watches Joey shuffle away from her. A large red car blurs through her vision, and then Joey is gone. All that is left are the loose pages of notebook paper as they burst into the air like feathers after a bird hits a windshield. They settle on the gravel and Alice walks into the street to gather them. Leave it to Joey to be so mindless. Joey. Alice hears the scolding leave her lips before she can stop it: “You want to get bit by a rabid dog Joey? Do you?”

Joey isn’t near the dog. The barks are different from before. They aren’t greeting woofs; they are now an urgent announcement. Alice can’t move quickly like she usually does when pursuing Joey. She shuffles like Joey. She stops when she reaches his limp feet. His pant leg is pushed up and there is gravel in his knees. A man steps out of the red car, which is stopped a little bit down the road. He’s running at Alice and Joey. Alice feels a hand grab each of her arms. She’s holding the sheets of paper still. How can this stranger touch her when she can’t even touch her own brother without flaring her nostrils? Alice hears voices and sirens and sees lights and feet. She can’t look any further than Joey’s gravel pierced knee.

Their mother comes and pulls Alice away. She doesn’t say a word. Alice knows her mother wants to scold her the way Alice scolds Joey.

Do you want to lose your brother? Alice is left at the house while Mother goes to the hospital to see Joey. Alice knows Joey wishes he had his pages, if he is still alive. He seemed dead, but she knows dead bodies
aren’t surrounded by flashing lights and taken to the hospital so quickly. Dead bodies are covered with sheets. Alice imagines an outline of Joey’s body on the pavement—bits of chalk mixed with the gravel. The place of the accident becomes a crime scene. Yellow caution tape is draped on the fence nearby and the dog’s owner takes it inside so that the barking will stop.

Alice sits at Joey’s place at the kitchen table where he left his cereal bowl that morning. The milk has created a glaze on the inside of the bowl. Alice hates when the dishes are left to sit all day, but Joey was going to be late for school, so Alice had left it, even though she knew it would be a pain to wash later.

Alice runs her finger across the bottom of the bowl, cutting through the gummy milk residue. Then, she picks the bowl up and carefully cups it in her hands as she walks to the sink. The window above the sink lets in the brightest late morning light and in her reflection on the smudged glass, she can see her vacant eyes staring back. Alice lifts the bowl high above her head, and lets it go. It smashes to little pieces that bounce out of the sink and onto the counter and the floor. She doesn’t pick them up. Instead, Alice walks over to the cabinet where mother keeps her pills—an extensive collection gathered over years of never throwing out an unfinished prescription—and grabs three bottles. Alice empties the contents of each bottle carefully into the palm of her hand. The long, two-toned capsules bump into each other as she tips her palm back and forth slightly to watch them move. Alice isn’t sure why, but as soon as the pile of pills settles in her hand, she realizes she cannot hold them any longer. She smacks her full palm against her open mouth, tilts her head back, and swallows painfully.

***

Joey reminds himself every day that both he and Alice are alive. He pulls his sweatshirt sleeves further down and shoves his hands into the pocket across his stomach. He could’ve kept the notebook pages tucked in there—no one would notice. Joey feels guilty as he nears the hospital doors, the same doors he had been rushed through after the accident. As he thinks about that day his breath becomes shorter and exaggerated. Despite
the bad memories, Joey is oddly excited to have a chance to go out, though he wishes Alice could see him walking so well without the papers she hated so much. But Alice’s eyes are closed when he enters the room. They’ve been closed since the day Joey was hit by the car. Joey can’t remember why mother said Alice took the pills, but he knows that if there were no accident, Alice would still be glaring at people on the sidewalk.

He looks down at her eyelids. They still flutter sometimes. Joey used to think that was a good sign. Now he knows that it means nothing. It’s been a month since Alice went into the coma. Joey no longer goes to the school for different people. Now, he stays in a white room in a building with white and green fluorescent hallways and buff leather seating along the walls. Someone else looks pointedly at the pile of pages, someone else gets him cereal in the morning, and no one lets Joey near the street.

Joey looks at Alice: “Do you want to be awake today?” he asks her. There is no response, not even a meaningless twitch. Joey is shown out of the room.

--Once back in his new, pale room, Joey sits on his bed and lays the papers out in front of him. He stares at the lined sheets. On them are carefully, meticulously shaped letters: Alice’s name practiced repeatedly across each top line, sometimes in print, sometimes in a shaky, disjointed cursive. The rest of the pages are dedicated to a history, an inventory, of sorts. He turns to the newest looking sheet and on it he writes, “Alice is still tired. She does not want to wake up today.” Then, Joey gathers the pages back up into a neat stack and tucks them under his pillow. Joey feels closer to Alice when he lays his head on the soft cushion and sleeps too.
I.

It was a decision that they made early in the year, set in motion in the moment when the car was exactly thirty-seven feet from the center of the bridge over the wide river, on their way toward Main Street and the grocery. They had passed the center, tires turning soundlessly, by the time she spoke. “I think we’d have an abortion, if it happened.” She twisted his ring on her finger.

The open light of the setting sun pinwheeled past the car windows, in and out of the spaces between the buildings as they pulled into the salt-streaked parking lot. She wanted him to say something, but when he didn’t she swung the car door open and got out, fading January sunlight warm in her hair. She kicked a brown leaf. In a memory a chaos of red and orange, yellow leaves as he threw them. Raking leaves, four months ago. He closed the car door too hard. “What did the leaves ever do to you?” he said. “Nothing,” she walked around to his side of the car, looking down. “Just turned brown.”

Ten months passed. She looked out the clinic win-
dow at the beach. The Atlantic looked like the print she loved so much, The Great Wave, thirty-six views of Mount Fuji. She looked at him across from her, reading a newspaper printed months ago. She tried to smile at him when the nurse called her name.

She was silent, sleeping, on the car ride home, wrapped inside their jackets. At the red light he turned the radio on, and off. She woke at the familiar bend of the driveway, half-awake and dizzily. She opened the door and walked inside, and dropped her coat on the floor.

Her steps were silent, precise. In their bed beneath the window, her fingertip traced the outline of trees against the glass. Her hand dropped against her shoulder. Her weight unsteady against the floor and her bare foot caught in the folds of his dropped sweater. It still smelled like hugs. She rubbed her eyes.

She stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. A brilliant drop of blood traced the inner margin of her thigh. It followed the curve of her knee and the straight bone down the front of her leg. After the curvature of the inside of her ankle bone, it dropped slowly to the cold white tile, and, hesitating for a moment to wobble and reform, sank finally into the grout between the tiles.

She slipped deliberately down against the white wall of the shower. As the hot water pressed her hair over her forehead, red diluted to fevered pink around her body. She thought of him numbly.

She heard the key turning in the lock but didn’t make a sound. She listened to the ocean on the other side of the wall. She closed her eyes and they were looking out to sea, both inside his raincoat. She turned the water off.

She wrapped herself in his sweater, brown fiber soft against wet skin and white cotton staining between her legs. She walked into the kitchen, where irises bloomed on the oak table. Left right left right. A petal dropped, heavily, when she leaned against the table.

Abruptly she fell. The floorboards slammed against her bones, and she saw the white room and the yellow leaves
outside of it, dimming, slowly. The Atlantic is really only so many tons of cold saltwater, she thought. In her dreaming, they descended over the sea.

She lay in a starched white bed. She woke to clinical lights in the ceiling and a twilight of fragile stars, breaking. His hand precisely holding hers, rough blankets, plastic cups of water, his hair and his lips brushing her cheek. Her eyes were dark as bruises and her lips were dry as they reached for his. When she’d gone to sleep again, he noticed the delicate beauty of the spaces between her fingers. She woke again, hours later. He climbed into the hospital bed behind her, the hollowness of his ribcage supporting her fragile weight. “If we’d had that child, he would have looked like you, preciously.” She was certain as she twisted the fraying cuff of his sweater. “He’d make that same face you do, when I wake you Saturday mornings.” It was an evening, Friday. Her cheek fit softly, perfectly, against his shoulder.

He was there to watch her go. She gave him one last smile but took with her her laugh, her kisses, the monologue of sunlight and the changing colours of her eyes. She curled like a brown leaf.

In the sky a blind white moon rose against the fading orange, yearning to be buried in the sibilant darkness, bottomless blue. It was a decision they made at the beginning of the year. It had something to do with love. It would have been alright.

II.

Each time he remembered it, it happened again. “It’s going to be too hard to decide when it happens, if it does,” he said. He looked briefly at the river: a hundred different blues, shifting, changing, conjugating, because the blues were like letters, forming constantly new words, anagrams of colours. “We should decide now, and it’ll hold all year.” He looked at her, when she said it, hoping it wouldn’t happen. He leaned over to kiss her at the red light, she turned
and their kisses collided. “I trust you to know if you’d be ready—” he wasn’t sure if he’d said it out loud or not. He was thinking about the river and all the different kinds of blue, the variations of grey staining the pavement. She was a landscape, always changing, subtly, he thought. And he was a still life, fruit slowly decaying on a piece of silk.

He sat on the couch that was too soft, folded the newspaper shut. The weather mattered a lot in the newspaper. Her coat was draped across his lap. He noticed the light, white from the table lamps and yellow from the leaves at the window. He thought of their dancing in the park. Late roses and red leaves.

He laid her coat across the back of the sofa. It folded substantially in his hands. She had left. He decided to go to the grocery for the prescription, bread, and flowers.

The blind passage of the few miles it took to cross town. He looked at the ocean and thought of summer nights on the beach. She orbited him, throwing sand and saltwater and kisses. In this memory the stars turned like silver coins over and over in the sky. Red taillights, white snow on the beach.

He walked up and down the aisles of bright packages under the too-white fluorescent lights humming, hovering on the ceiling. The letters that spelled her name stood out to him. He paid, clumsily mumbling, and walked out into the cold from the store. He was losing his voice in the silence.

He thought he heard his wife calling his name. His breath caught in his throat.

He opened and closed the door. The keys caught awkwardly in his palm. He walked slowly through the apartment, putting things away in the kitchen. Everything was silent except for the clock ticking loudly. He lay down in their bed. In the window, a small crystal iridescent with her fingerprints tossed tiny spectrums, floating. He caught one, tiny amalgamation of memories turning over in his hand.

A memory of her lying quietly as he entered the room, to climb in beside her, her bare knees pulled inward to her chest and her shins smooth against his chest. His palm
against her back. He still saw her there, softly breathing. He memorized the shape of her.

He hadn’t gotten there in time to catch her. Iris petals fell like drops of water. Nothing can ever change this. He got up to look out the window, the monologue of sunlight still continuing as it disappeared. They told him to go home, a place he couldn’t know anymore. He left and walked to the beach. The dreams of sunlit rooms and tiny feet and sugary birthday cupcakes, and all of it receding from his view like the tide form the beach. The sand beneath the rubber soles of his shoes as he remembered hanging tiny yellow Christmas lights, her feet in his slippers and the secrets they whispered in the half-light of a TV show that neither of them was watching. The cold blue of the ocean, and the bare red skin of his hands as he pulled one from his pocket and half expected to find one of hers.

In this memory he hadn’t opened the car door without saying anything. He hadn’t forgotten to mention that he’d have liked to hear a child call her mommy. Personal histories are always, approximately, incompletely false.

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In the yellow light of the bedside lamp, he hung them on the wall. A strip of photobooth film hung by a brass thumbtack. “If we’d had that child, he’d have looked like you, preciously.” He curled beneath the white quilt, the world rocking while he grieved. For her, with his arm across the pillow where her head would lie. For the imagined child upon his chest, as he lay looking into the opacity of the ceiling. For both of them whom he lost, as he lay on his side, cradling her invisibly as she would cradle their child. It would have been alright.

The bathroom was still and full of light. The lines of ceramic tiles were smooth and white, their immaculate uniformity marred only in one spot where the oxidized rust red of
a drop of blood stained the grout.

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The bathroom was still and full of light. The lines of ceramic tiles were smooth and white, their immaculate uniformity marred only in one spot where the oxidized rust red of a drop of blood stained the grout.
This is the second time this year my family has moved. It’s not very much fun. We have to quickly pack our meager belongings and move out as quietly as we moved in. Sometimes we have to run. I guess the term “squatters” is appropriate to what we are but I always liked the word “hoboes” better. It sounds more romantic; like the hoboes of the Great Depression. Men living the free life; free to move on when they choose. They are free to be who they want to be with no one to tell them what to do. I know it wasn’t all that romantic. Starving never is but the movies make it seem like such a great life. Our life is probably a bit more like the reality. It’s a bit different with us because we are a family. We have to work together. We aren’t free.

The homes we stay in are occupied but we make sure there is a basement or an attic to hide in; one that is seldom used. It smaller towns it’s not all that uncommon. We prefer to squat in barns out in the country. It’s easier to hide. We can sneak out a back entrance when the owners come to check their property or do any work. Squatting in houses is a little more difficult and it takes a bit more creativity. It’s easier when the houses are empty but there aren’t too many of those around. Besides, empty houses don’t yield much food or useful items.
We live in a Painted Lady in the heart of a mid-sized town. It’s a beautiful house. The house has a dumbwaiter (which believe me, makes things easier sometimes) secret passages between rooms, gas light fixtures (the gas long since extinguished), raised wallpaper, hardwood floors, and every possible comfort anyone could ask for; especially in today’s day of efficiency. A little luxury and opulence goes a long way for self esteem and self worth. We borrow it. It’s never ours to keep but we enjoy pretending it is.

We broke into the house when the owners were away. It’s just me, my parents and my little sister. We found an unlocked basement window. My father lowered my little sister in. She was the only one who fit. When she dropped to the floor toddled over to the basement door and unlocked it for us. It was hard for her because she’s so small. Her hands don’t have the strength or dexterity of adult hands, or even a hand my age.

We crept through the house and explored before we took residence. We found the kitchen and the bathroom. We looked throughout the rooms to see if there were any trifles we might take that wouldn’t be missed. Some people have so many things; far more things than they need. We found a toothbrush behind a bathroom cabinet. It was old but useable. It just had to be cleaned. We found the old newspaper pile near the fireplace and took a few for reading. It also helps sometimes if it gets cold. Our blankets are thin and putting the newspaper between our bodies and the blanket helps a lot.

We tried to get as many things as we could on our first expedition through the house. Once we’re upstairs we only come down once in a while for food and that’s usually when the owners aren’t home. For the first couple of days we watch them and learn their schedules and habits. We also get to know their neighbors; when they come around, what they see, what they say. We have to stay hidden. Papa once foolishly walked past a window. He said he was thinking about getting us some crayons and coloring books from the family room. We had to rush out in a hurry.

It was a shame. I liked that house. The people seemed really nice. They were a family kind of like us. Loving.
I like houses where there are kids my age but more so when they are my sister’s age. She’s lonely. I’m lonely too but I can find ways to cope. She’s too little to cope. We like to listen to what they hear on the television or listen to their music. My sister likes Spongebob Squarepants. In one of the houses I took her down to a little girl’s room while she was at school and very softly I put on her TV. My parents were upset that I made noise but it was worth it. When I hear the kids come home from school sometimes I wish I could just run out and say, “Play with us! We’re kids just like you!”

I once asked Papa why we didn’t just try and find a shelter for those like us. He told us that they would split us up and we’d never see each other again. He said he couldn’t provide properly for his family (we objected of course) and they would take us away from him and momma. I can’t imagine life without my family. I don’t want to be apart from them so I just accept our fate. One day I’ll be on my own. But not now. Not while my family needs me and while I need my family.

We pick families that are out during the day; school and work. It’s easier to move around. We can’t be confined in such a small space for so long. I read about a girl named Anne Frank. I don’t know how she managed to stay so still and so quiet for such a long time. I’m always twitchy. I always want to go somewhere even though I know I can’t. We never wander around too long and we try to never be seen.

We do our “shopping” during the day. We take bits and bites of food. Two pieces of bread and two slices of salami feeds two of us and the owners never miss it. We like it when they buy bags of things such as string cheese. We can take one or two and no one misses it. Juice boxes are great too. You have to be selective with food; pick only the things that come in bulk. We can’t take slices of cake or left over pizza. That would be noticed. We’re all very thin but we aren’t starving to death. It hurts our bellies when we smell the microwave popcorn or the fresh apple pie but we are thankful that the hurt is only inside our heads and not actually in our bellies. We’ve almost starved before. It’s painful.
Daytime is also when we do our picking. We pick things in the attic to keep us busy at night. We find all sorts of things up there but by far the most of what we find are books. Old books that smell good. On occasion I’ve been able to “borrow” one of the kid’s book lights. Most of the kids don’t use them anyway and don’t miss them when they’re gone. I like to read. It’s quiet. We need to find things to do in the evening when the family is home that make no noise, it works out well. I’m teaching my sister to read. She likes it. Papa usually sneaks outside to the recycle bin and gets old newspapers. We might live up in the attic but we still like to know what’s going on in the world.

Sometimes we live in a house that has teenagers like me. I like to listen to their conversations. I like to hear the gossip. I don’t know the people they talk about but I imagine what they might be like. I live life through others and I really am content. I suppose this life has made me so fearful of the outside world that I would freeze solid if I had to interact on any social level with anyone my own age. I don’t wear make-up and aside from quick glances I don’t know much about movies or movie stars (though truth be told, I think Johnny Depp is very handsome). I’ve learned about so many kinds of people from reading and listening. In the house we live in now, the girl downstairs reads a lot of books. When she’s done she usually slides a box of books in the attic. She never comes up all the way.

When I read I wonder who I would be if people could see me. Would I be bold like Eówyn the Shieldmaiden standing tall like a goddess ready to slay the fell beast? Would I be courageous and intelligent like Hermione from Harry Potter? Would I be idealistic and independent like Helen Schlegel? There are so many lives to choose from. I wouldn’t choose my own. My life isn’t interesting enough to be a book. I recently started to keep a journal of sorts on some of the old school notebooks the girl has tossed into the attic. I re-read them on occasion. I am pretty boring.

It was nearly Christmas time and we had been in the attic for about four months. None of the downstairs family had
any idea we were there. We were very good at being the Upstairs Family. We were looking forward to their Christmas party. The mother had been planning it for weeks. My own mother was planning the food raid after the part was over. There had been a Halloween party earlier that year and the downstairs mother didn’t bother to clean up the food until the next morning. It broke up very late and she was tired. We went downstairs quietly and ate so much food my stomach hurt from being full! Papa was able to have a bit of wine and my sister and I got to drink a little soda. Such a treat.

The Christmas party would be just as good. We knew it would. Momma was so excited. She was looking forward to drinking some eggnog. Momma never said anything about what she dream of or wished for. She thought it was a waste of time. She was there to love us and keep us safe. She was there to take care of us. But when she did break her wall we listened and did out best to give her what made her happy. Eggnog was what she wanted. Papa thought maybe we should put a bit of brandy in it to make her feel all warm inside. He was looking forward to a beer. I smiled at the thought of momma snuggled down next to father feeling warm inside; perhaps to mask how cold she was on the outside.

The day before the party the unexpected occurred. The girl came up into the attic all the way. I was sitting on the floor reading to my sister. From where we were the girl could not see us when she would go up the first few steps to slide a box in. When she saw us she froze. We froze. Momma and Papa froze. We expected her to scream. We were ready to run. It would have been terrible. I hated when we got caught. All the things we had managed to collect would be left behind. There was no time to gather our things and leave with any kind of dignity. We ran. The owners would probably throw out all of our things. They would consider it dirty garbage, but that dirty garbage was our life. The girl tilted her head and smiled.

“Hello there,” she said, “My name is Alma”. She wasn’t afraid of us. She didn’t run to her mother and tell her we were here. My little sister smiled back and waved. The lit-
tle girl moved closer to us inch by inch. She looked at me and then down at the book I was reading.

“You know, Matilda was one of my favorites when I was little like her,” she said pointing to my sister. “Are you hungry?” she asked. She tilted her head and looked at us for a long time.

“You look hungry. All of you. We’re having a party tonight and I can bring food up for you.” We still hadn’t moved. No one had ever spoken to us, let alone taken the time to try and help us. It was one of the reasons Papa didn’t trust people. He said no one helps anyone anymore. He was happy and content to be with us and hidden from the world.

Not one of us could utter a word. It was like we had all lost the ability to speak. The only thing I could do was nod my head. The girl smiled again, turned and left. Each of us sat for a moment waiting for the thumping of stairs, the adult legs running up steps to throw us out. Setting a dog on us. That happened once. Papa still has a scar on his leg from where the dog bit him.

When it was clear she hadn’t told anyone we relaxed a little. We could hear the mother and father setting up for the party; speaking over the holiday music they turned on to get into the Yule mood. They couldn’t hear us so we quickly collected our things. If the girl told her parents we were here we would at least be able to run with our treasures. We hid ourselves in the attic as best we could as we packed.

I tucked Matilda in with my belongings. It was an extra weight and it wasn’t actually mine. It also wasn’t a found treasure; something someone threw out that we could use. I was going to steal it. I hated to think I was capable of that, squatter or not, but I couldn’t leave the story in the middle. My little sister would be crushed. Unless we found a hidden spot inside the basement of a library we probably wouldn’t get access to that specific book again. I remember reading From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. I always thought it would be wonderful to hide and live inside a museum like Claudia and Jaime. Maybe the next time we had to move on, we could hide in the bathroom of the library until it closed. Then we could live there. I told Papa about the story once. Maybe when
we have to leave we’ll try the library next.

But no one came up to throw us out. Later the next night, Alma brought up a few plastic plates with food. There were bits of turkey, cheese, bread, ham, spice cake, some vegetables, crackers, and mashed potatoes. Everything was cold but we didn’t care. She set the plates down and ran back down stairs. We still didn’t move. Quickly she returned with a few plastic cups. Some filled with water, soda, and one with eggnog. She hadn’t brought any beer but papa felt confident enough to sneak down-stairs for one once Alma and her family went to bed.

“Please eat,” she said, “It’s my Christmas present to all of you. I used to imagine we had a family of ghosts that lived up-stairs. I always thought it was a neat idea. Maybe I got the idea from a book I read or something. Maybe that’s why you didn’t scare me. I always expect to find a family when I come up. You mustn’t have been here too long or else I would have seen you before.” She pulled a few napkins from out of her sweater pocket and laid them down on the floor.

“I’d like to visit again if I can,” she said. This time Papa nodded. He was still afraid of being caught but it was hard not to like such a friendly, lovely little fairy-like child. She smiled and ran back down the steps. When she left we ate. We ate all of it. We were hungry and it was nice that we didn’t have to wait until the dead of night to take what we needed. For the first time since I could remember food had been given to us. We kept our belongings bundled for a hasty exit but felt a little safer.

Two weeks passed and we saw Alma about three times a week. Sometimes she came up and read to my sister. My sister would cuddle up on her lap. No one had ever read to her beside me but I wasn’t jealous. I liked to listen to her voice as well. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Her thick brown hair was always scrubbed clean and we could smell the flower scented shampoo. She was like an angel to us though she visited us from below, not from above. Soon not even Papa jumped when he heard her footfalls on the steps. Momma liked her. We could tell. She liked warm, charming little girls. She told us that all the time. We were her charming girls and we
were glad that she thought to add Alma into our little club.

It didn’t take long for us to let our guard down. The next week we heard someone coming up the stairs. It was about the time Alma would visit. Then we heard the voice.

“Alma, bring that second box of stuffed animals up to the attic. I’m going to put them away.” We heard Alma run to the base of the steps.

“Mom,” she said, “Let me take it up. Please. I’ll go.” She tried hard not to sound frantic but we could hear her voice tremble. Things were quiet for a moment while her mother contemplated. We didn’t stir at all. We were statues. We were afraid our panicked movement would be heard and her mother would investigate. We were afraid. I didn’t want to leave. I started to cry very quietly. I loved Alma.

“No,” her mother said, “I’ve got it.” She moved so quickly she caught sight of us as we scrambled to hide behind the old furniture and bins. She screamed and dropped the box.

“Oh my God, Alma! Tell your father to come up here! We have rats in the attic!!!”
Guidelines for Submitting

Submitting to *Onyx* is open to all Cedar Crest students, enrolled during the academic year in which the magazine is published.

Students may submit up to three works in each category of poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Each piece must have a title and author, no anonymous works will be accepted. Entries should be sent to preterite@cedarcrest.edu as a Microsoft Word attachment with a submission coversheet. Deadlines will be clearly announced on the Cedar Crest campus by Preterite each year.

All submissions may also be considered for placement in *Pitch*, which has rolling submissions throughout the year.

All work must be of the writers’ own creation. Any reference to any other work(s) must be cited.

Preterite reserves the right to edit all submissions for grammar. *Onyx* is available to the Cedar Crest campus and every member of the community is entitled to one copy free of charge. Additional copies of this publication are $1.00.