

# Roots and Wings

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*Identities and Aspirations*

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*By Autumn Nguyen ‘28*

# A note from the staff of *Roots and Wings*:

Last spring, we reintroduced *Roots and Wings*, Thaden's very own literary magazine. It started off with a simple idea: to compile and showcase the extraordinary works of our talented artists and writers. And this year, *Roots and Wings* soars even higher.

For our sixth volume, we decided to unite our writers and artists under a common theme: Identities and Aspirations. We invited Thaden's creatives to produce work speaking to aspects of their identities, moments of their experiences, futures they hope for, and potential that they see.

The results form an engaging compilation of creative work. This magazine features short stories spanning historical fiction, coming-of-age narratives, and science fiction, poetry in a variety of styles, personal essays diving into family dynamics or exploring the nuanced definitions within our language, and bold, wide-ranging artwork from our upper-school students.

We encourage students to continue pursuing their creative passions over the summer for our Winter 2025 volume! We look forward to seeing more extraordinary student work and to assembling the magazine's seventh volume.



By Cora Hardin '26

# Innocence

*By Ana Sofia Galindo '27*

The word innocence is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “Freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with, evil; moral purity.” Innocence is a fragile and complex state. Like the flame of a candle smothered by an unforeseen breeze, your innocence can come to an abrupt end; it is a precious privilege that must be safeguarded until it is time to let it go. Once it is lost, it is not something one can search for and regain. Innocence is often rooted in a lack of exposure to the real world and relies on external protection. Suddenly, when that layer of protection disappears, we find ourselves at a fork in the road. This turning point in our lives can be seen as both critical for our growth and tragic as we become aware of the complexities of life.

When we experience something traumatic at a young age, our fragility is shattered, like tiny pebbles hurtling through a glass window. Prior to this moment, innocence is cherishable, allowing us to see the world through a lens of absolute goodness. It is innocence that enables a child to look at a world filled with violence and hatred and only see beauty and endless possibilities. Innocence enables a sense of wonder and curiosity that, as we grow older, gets buried deep inside us.

While it would be wonderful if everyone could conserve this childlike curiosity and openness to the world, perhaps the fragility of it all is what makes it so precious, making it invaluable as it is slowly replaced with bearing the heavy weight of experience and self-consciousness.

We walk a thin line between the loss of innocence and our oblivion as we retain it. We take for granted the innate sense of innocence we are all born with, and the universality of the experience of losing it. One day, we wake up, and we see the world as it is, our delighted lens through which we saw the world gone, shattered. There is a delicate balance between the fear of losing innocence and the fact that it is imperative to our being. This fear comes with any life-altering experience, but as humans, being able to overcome our initial remorse of maturing can be the defining moment in our lives. We can not fully be who we truly are while constrained by the naivete of childhood innocence.

There comes a certain point where we can no longer fall back on our childhood when something goes wrong. It is so much easier to blame our childhood selves for things that we had the choice to change. But there comes a point where the loss of innocence is necessary to recognize who we've been and who we want to become. As children, we are malleable and easily influenced by the world around us. When we grow up, we have the power to make a conscious choice to form our values, though perhaps it may require us to lose our innocence to discover what those values are.

For me, it was 2020, and a widespread and deadly disease came as suddenly as a flash of bright lightning. I found myself surrounded by my closest family and yet in a state of isolation. There was one important family member in particular that I had a complex relationship with. As this deadly disease spread through her body, it consumed her, draining her smile, her glow. She had a complicated medical history, which she felt the weight of with each passing day. At a time usually filled with laughter and

communal joy, fear and the realization of the fragility of life washed over us like a harsh wave. Up until this moment, I had been able to rely on the comfort of my parents' reassurance that everything would be okay. Suddenly, that wasn't enough. What about all the moments I could have spent with her, treasuring what little time we had? I was filled with a deep sense of guilt, and yet felt increasingly distanced from my loved ones as disease lingered in the air. I can still picture my mother's face as she solemnly looked at me and my brother whispering, "She might not make it out of this one." And a single question lingered: How can a person's life be taken by a force so far out of their control? My childhood belief that you would always have another day vanished. And though she narrowly escaped being taken by this deadly disease, I came to the stark realization that we only get one chance. The way someone may have acted in the past can no longer define how you live in the present or how you choose to respond moving forward. Following this difficult time, I began to make the conscious choice to mend the wounds that cut deeper and deeper as years went by, saying the things that needed to be said. It was a wake-up call, shifting my view of relationships and precious time, and making me value the agency of moving forward and shaping who I want to be.

I have learned that there is far more power in continuing to see the inherent goodness in the world despite being in the midst of such harsh times. The choice to know and embrace who you fundamentally are and what you believe in is a personal one. You have to know how not to lose yourself. With the loss of innocence comes the yearning for a deeper understanding of what comes next, and it is this nagging wonder that provides a platform for us to give our lives meaning.

If you never lose something, you often do not realize the full extent of how much you love that thing. Often, people treat the loss of innocence as a period of grievance; like it is perpetually gone, when in reality, we should appreciate how much power it has to shape who we become.



*The Weight of the Liberty Spikes by Robby Apple '25*

# Me

*By Natalie White '28*

I am a Bird...  
but I have no wings

I am a Tree...  
but I have no leaves

I am a River...  
but I have no water

I am a Mountain...  
but I have no peaks

I am Me...  
but without the M and E

# Death of Me

*By Natalie White '28*

I can never be happy for long,  
but that also means I will never stay sad.  
One version of me dies and another is born.  
I can never get comfortable in my new skin,  
before I shed it and another takes its place.  
Like a snake, I slither into a hole,  
trying to hide from the change,  
but it happens anyway,  
and I am  
different  
again.



*Colin! by Meadow McGinniss '25*

# The Diary of Roger Whitman

*By K Libby '27*

29-8-'54

That bloody shrink better be right about this.

Dr. Peters (Damn him!) has told me to write out how I feel when I'm encountered with anything that triggers my "trauma". Blast him! Back before the war, we didn't have "trauma". Barely even sure what it is, to be bloody certain. Bloke kept on badgering me about my flashbacks or "panic attacks". Never used to have those, either.

3-10-'54

Today was hard. I hate to say it, but Dr. Peters (Damn him!) may have had a point. I haven't been writing bloody entries and I've had two "attacks" in the past two weeks.

I wouldn't even know where to begin.

I was drafted as a 39-year-old, in the year of our Lord 1939, for two years that became five. I've lost my good hand and a few bits and bobs of my arm.

That's all that's happened. Nothing more to it.

7-10-'54

Dr. Peters (Damn him!) has caught me in a lie. The spiv said I couldn't have done nothing during the war and insisted that if I wouldn't tell him what happened, I would at the very least, tell this bloody journal.

Damn.

To be quite bloody honest, one of the worst parts was the bomb. That's what took off my hand and disfigured my arm. My...

I watched good men die that day. Dear Lord, it was bloody. Bloody and loud. I'm deaf in one ear now. I still hear all of them. Each one. Michael and Wilhem and Joseph and Sammy. But George...

He was the worst. George nearly made it out alive with me, but the bleeding was too much. He had so many pieces of shrapnel in his chest and face and I held him as he bled out screaming in my arms.

There's not a day I go by without thinking about him. He was the reason I stayed so long. Five damned years in that Hellhole. He was my best friend, practically family from how long we had known each other. Granted, five years isn't too long, but the war was different.

It had changed us both.

I can't do this.

14-10-'54

Dr. Peters (Damn him!) is pleased that I've been writing but is still completely knackered that in our meetings I've told him naught. It's not his business anyway. He's not fought in any way. Certainly not as long as I had.

Though, I did tell him about George a bit. I had another one of those "attacks" part-way through and he told me I didn't have to share anymore and could leave early if I wanted to. All I had to do was write more.

Damn him.

George was everything. He was the only good thing about the war. He told me that he sent every bloody paycheck to this lass he had back home in the states. Her name was Emily and she had a little girl under her care named Emma George, after the two of them. George owned a little gold locket with Emma George's photo on one side and Emily's on the other.

When the bomb hit, and George was dying in my arms, his locket fell out of his coat pocket and landed in the ashy mud.

I still have it. Emma George and her mother's photos were both soaked in his blood and the mud where he rested.

Dear Lord, who art in Heaven, I pray over little Emma George. I hope she knows that her father was a good man. Bless her. I pray over George, who is certainly in Heaven with You. I hope he knows that he was the only being that could ever bring me true happiness and that he is most deserving of anyone to be by Your side. Bless him. And lastly, I pray over Emily. A lovely woman, I'm sure. I pray that she is able to find another man who can love her like George could (Though I am sure there is none.) and can guide her and little Emma George through the rest of their lives. Amen.

Of course, it's been nine years. Little Emma George must be a fine young woman by now with many younger siblings of her mother's and step-father's. I wish them all the best.

27-10-'54

I heard him again last night. This time he wasn't screaming. He was talking to me. Comforting me. I still hear his voice echoing in my head. He told me, "I'm glad you're talking about this. One day in the future, people will write stories about us. About what happened during the war. It'll be dark, but it'll need to happen. You writing this journal is what we need. Thank you, Roger. God thanks you."

I wish I could talk to him. He was everything to me. Most people would think I was mental for staying in such a horrid place three years longer than I had to just to uphold a friendship, but it all just made sense at the time. Nothing makes sense without him.

# The Unstoppable Wave

*By Alesha Imran '27*

The one who used to calm the oceans inside me  
Is the one who left the biggest wave inside me.  
She left without telling me.  
Now I wait for an answer from her.

Awaiting her in my dreams  
Hoping to see her moonlit face.  
Just once again to hear something  
Or see something.

Don't leave.  
Don't leave without saying something,  
You were my dearest of friends.  
So why not stay?  
For you used to calm me  
When I needed someone to stay.  
So why not be the one to stay?

Come back, my dear Ami.  
You are the one I await.  
No one else but you.  
You are the one I wait for.

The world keeps moving  
But I have stopped.  
Waiting for you  
But I know you won't return.  
But I won't stop waiting for you.

I will wait for you  
If not in this world.  
I will wait for you  
Till the next world.

But know that I won't stop waiting for you.



*By Austin Krug '25*

# Irrational Thoughts

By Anna Schwammlein '28

I know it's there. I don't know where exactly, or how it's there, but I know that somehow, somewhere, it's watching me. The duck. The doctors call it anatidaephobia, the "irrational" fear of being watched by a duck or goose, but it's not a goose. And this fear is not irrational. I'm sure of it. There are lots of kinds of fears: the fear of snakes, the fear of being alone, the fear of being touched, the fear of having a fear, and so on. But those aren't a problem, because so many people don't like snakes or being alone or being touched, and even though most people aren't afraid of being afraid, it's a perfectly logical fear for them. But not for me. Whenever I tell people about my phobia, they burst out laughing or think I'm weird. No one gets it.

I walk over to the window and push aside the curtain to look out of my dusty apartment. There are absolutely no cameras except for my phone camera. There are heavy and dark curtains on every window, all the vents are closed and blocked from sight, and anything that looks remotely like a duck or its "supposed" eyes are always swiftly taken care of. Yet still, the fear lingers.

I walk down the street to work every morning and I always carry an umbrella with me to hide as much of myself as I can. I stop by my favorite coffee shop, The Fox's Thirst, and wonder again why they named it that. I still don't know, and I don't think I ever will, but it comforts me a bit. I buy my favorite drink, and then I stroll the rest of the way to the office where I am *currently* an accountant. My *current* job. My *previous* job was finding, capturing, tagging, and releasing wild ducks. Then I began to have trouble sleeping, thinking about all the ducks who must've wanted revenge and quit so I could be an accountant instead. Most of my friends think that that was the cause of my fear, but it wasn't.

Ever since the first time I saw a duck face-to-face and made eye contact when I was five, I've known it's watching. It'll always be watching. I've tried moving to foreign countries. I've tried all kinds of therapy. I've tried ignoring it. I've tried staring at a picture of a duck. Nothing works. Other people don't know how lucky they are, not having this phobia, yet they are unaware that they have that luck. Sometimes when people are sick they say how they forget what it feels like to not be sick and how jealous they are of their past or future selves who don't have to live through that. I haven't had the weight of anatidaephobia off of my chest since the day I looked at that duck. I know it's there.

# The Future I Hope For

*By Eila Giglio '28*

I hope for a future that seems nowhere near.

I dream of days when power stays  
A voice, women lift and raise  
No dream denied,  
No path erased,  
No truth ignored,  
And no rights replaced.

No hands that harm,  
No silent screams,  
No blame for skirts or shattered dreams.  
No mother is forced to beg or lose,  
No body governed,  
Nothing but her choice,  
Nothing but her voice is heard.

No laws that play a cruel game.  
No hands that bruise, no blame, no shame,  
Just strength to lead, space to grow.  
Just power shared, just futures bright.

This future lives in what we do.  
What will you do to rise and make it true?



*Friend By Emil Song '27*

# By Definition: Black

*By Dimaya Hintz '28*

The word “Black” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “Of the darkest color possible, that of soot, coal, [and] the sky on a moonless night in open country... to have no recognizable color.” The word “Black” over time and through generations has been defined in a multitude of ways, often associated with evil, impurity, dirt, and filth. This was the same logic used during the transatlantic slave trade and segregation in America. Black has a bad name, it has been beaten, it has been killed, it has been cursed at, and spit on. But I think it’s beautiful.

Nowadays, it also refers to Africans or people of African descent. Being “Black” looks different to everyone. To me, it is sitting between my mother's legs, watching TV while she braids cornrows into my hair. My family told me when I was little never to let anyone touch my hair without asking first, that it doesn’t matter if they’re curious or tell me how much they want it, and that they shouldn’t treat me like their plaything. When I was young, getting my hair done would hurt, and whenever I squirmed, my mother would lightly smack the hand that shot up to hold my poor aching head when one piece of hair hurt more than the others. “Quit that. Plenty of little girls have hair like yours, and you just have to take care of it,” she would say. She always told me to be proud of my hair, that it came from struggle and pain. People at school used to make fun of my twists and cornrows. I later learned that the patterns braided into hair like mine are traced back to pre-colonial African traditions, where they could represent a plethora of things, and, during slavery, African Americans would braid complex patterns into each other's hair to relay messages and plan escape routes. I was too shy to enlighten those kids on what I had learned, but the knowledge alone made me proud.

Black is the laughter and joy I hear when visiting my grandparents in their small town, the laughter and dancing I hear going to the family reunions in Naples, Texas. Dominoes are played, and the lemon cakes are baked. The Texas heat buzzes through my head while I make a plate of piping hot Southern food for my grandma, slapping mosquitoes off my legs and scratching my head. “The UNO tournament is starting,” one of my cousins shouts. The laughter resonates there, too, older cousins picking on the younger ones and the athletes of the family throwing a football around. It’s peaceful when we leave at night, the cicadas of the South singing along with the rumble of the car wheels.

Black is a “style,” African-American culture being influential from music to clothes. For example, the precursor of denim, what our everyday blue jeans are made of, was considered a “slave cloth” and was a way of physically separating the enslaved from the landowners. It became a trend that was then reclaimed in the ‘60s by civil rights activists and became symbolic of the fight for equality for Black people in America. Half of my closet is full of jeans; I wear my blue-jean shorts on a hot sunny day when my parents bump music in the car and give me life. It reminds me of the overalls I saw my granddad mowing his lawn in, cowboy hat on, his thick accent making it hard to understand what he was saying when he yelled at us, “Shauna, move that charcoal! Make sure that dog don’t get out.”

Black is music, it's art. Rhythm and Blues, or R&B, is a music genre that originated in the '40s and features some of today's most popular singers like Beyoncé, Frank Ocean, Steve Lacy, and SZA. I belt out chorus after chorus in the shower, high notes and low notes, while downstairs, The Isley Brothers resonate throughout our kitchen when my family is making big meals, and I hear my dad croon along to the sound of their voices while chopping peppers. R&B eventually evolved into rock and roll, and the emergence of hip-hop shocked the world, causing it to be heavily integrated into our "American Culture" today. Even my cousins sport gold and silver grillz all in their teeth; they glisten and gleam every time they smile, giving their happiness extra flair. From hip-hop came streetwear, graffiti, and dances that captured the hearts of people from all races and ethnicities. My sister shakes her hips and moves her arms when Cali Swag comes on, and my uncle catches a rhythm when Nelly is played: "What do y'all know about Nelly? This was a long time ago."

Black is exploring culture. When I was younger, my babysitter, Becky, was my family's close friend. She was from Ghana, where a lot of my mother's ancestry comes from. When my parents would leave to go to work or spend some time together, Becky would cook food for us; the most popular requests were okra stew and Nkatenkwan, a ground peanut soup. Before bed, she would tuck us in and tell us the stories of Anaasi, the trickster spider god, and Nyame, the sky god. These characters were a part of the West-African folklore of the Akan people, and every story was meant to be a lesson: don't be greedy, don't lie, don't steal, which of course was all Anaasi did, but every time he'd learn something new.

I have been told by a few kids that I "didn't act black." That I "wasn't even that dark." There, of course, is still colorism within the African-American community, but to hear someone outside of that community say that to me is completely absurd. So I ask them this. What is Black to you? What makes one person more Black than the other? Is it because I don't use slang? Because I don't use curse words all the time? Because I don't wear eyelashes or get silk presses? I am biracial, born to a black mother and white father, but I cannot just choose if I want to be Black or White. My skin color, big hair, facial features give me a disadvantage in this world that is so set on putting people of color down through systems of oppression big and small. Many people in America today believe that Black is everything they see in the media: rappers, singers, comedians, and actors. Entertainers and trends. Black is all of those things, but Black is also strongly tied to the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. Even before that, we should learn to be proud of the royalty and culture that came before us in Africa because that continent holds some of the world's most interesting, valuable, and dynamic history. But people don't care for African history as much as they do for European history; they don't know that there are close to 2,000 languages spoken there, or that the wealthiest person in history, still to this day, is Mansa Musa, or even that Ethiopia has one of the world's oldest Bibles.

Despite all of the hardships and criticisms, being Black is not devoid of light. It is dancing and singing through pain to remember. It is making something edible out of scraps. It is creativity and artistic expression. It is teaching the next generation about the past and how you can affect the future. It is togetherness.

# Rivers and Snowfall – A Song

By *Amelie Herndon* '26

Tell me, *cantator*, of your journeys in Christmases past  
I ask to myself and my child  
In fields of shimmering glass.  
All rise to the spring,  
All fall to the fall that we know,  
But you were the snow,  
You were the snow.

I was a river with a renaissance path of my own,  
But with one single crystalline vision,  
My scheming had been overthrown  
Scary and different  
Cold, but a beautiful sight  
And then came the sun's holy light.

Melted and withered away,  
How I mourned, how I wept, how I "woe'd is me"  
Et cetera.  
So I fled to the mountains.  
I wanted an avalanche  
Wanted a final hurrah.  
Went up to see it,  
Be buried in all that I wore,  
But I wanted more.  
I wanted more.

And all it cost me was my body and my mind,  
Frozen over, given to the winds of time,  
And once a thousand years had melted it away,  
All I was thinking of was a way  
For it to be resolved.

I was a spiteful obsessor,  
A hopeless romantic,  
A babe.  
And when I think back on it deeply  
I know that the snow didn't need what I gave.  
Tortured myself  
All for the sake of the game.  
But I wouldn't play.  
I wouldn't play.

And if I played,  
I played to win.  
Waiting on the reckless confession  
Of someone else's supposed sin.  
And even though nothing's really changed,  
I'm better each day,  
I'm better each day, and I'm learning to love  
In a healthy way.  
Better each day.  
I hope that's OK.

I still love the snow.  
I still love the snow.  
I still love the snow.

And sometimes when I see you  
On a mountaintop far from my home,  
I know that you're not  
Alone.

[Hear the full song at [youtu.be/Xw-xtjmeENM](https://youtu.be/Xw-xtjmeENM)]

# Friends

*By Lily McGrath '28*

It was October 14th, and I was frantically driving to the hospital. My sister was giving birth, and I had to meet my niece. I was over-the-moon excited for her, but part of me wondered if, one day, I would be here waiting for my wife to give birth to our child. But that didn't matter; it was her day, and I needed to be there. I parked my car and ran into the hospital.

I made it past the front desk, and the elevator door was about to close when an arm shoved itself in between the doors. Then there she was, with what seemed to be her husband. My first love. Right in front of me, with another man, and pregnant.

"Oh hi, Zach," Marie said, shocked.

I wanted to apologize for everything and pour my heart out. But all I could manage to mutter was, "Hi, Marie."

Hi Marie?! That's all I could come up with?! I mean, it's not like I could've poured out my heart when she was with, most likely, her child's father right there.

"How do you guys know each other?" Marie's supposed husband asked.

"We were..." She paused, "...*friends* in high school and college." Marie said as she looked at me in disappointment.

Friends? FRIENDS? We were best friends, lovers. You don't love a friend how I loved her. She was everything, maybe even still is. But I knew deep in my heart that she did not feel the same. I hurt her so much. I started to relive that whole night...

*"Marie, I'm sorry, this isn't what I wanted to happen!"*

*"Oh, so you just 'happened' to cheat on me with my best friend?! A part of you must've wanted this to happen or else it wouldn't have!"*

*"Marie, I am so sorry. I love you so much. I'm so stupid."*

*"Yeah. You got that right. I'm leaving, Zach. We're over."*

*Marie ran upstairs to pack her things. I was panicking. I couldn't believe what I had done. Soon after, Marie came back downstairs.*

*"Please, Marie. I love you. We can work this out, just please give me another chance. Marie, please."*

*"Bye, Zach."*

*She slammed the now faded blue door behind her shut.*

...I snapped back to reality. The elevator door opened, and Marie's supposed husband left, but Marie stayed behind.

"Is that your husband?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. We got married last year."

"Congratulations," I paused. Marie started to walk out. "I'm sorry, Marie." I blurted.

“For what?” Marie asked as she turned around to face me. She knew what I was apologizing for. I mean, I cheated on her. What kind of person does that? I knew it was horrible, so all I said was, “Everything.”

I paused. “I miss you. I’ll always love you. Always. I hope your husband treats you well. You deserve the world,” I said as I started to tear up.

Marie took a breath like she was about to say something, but no words came out of her mouth.



*By David Rios '26*

# My Family

*By Andi Darling '26*

My mind has always felt like an ocean. One minute it's serene and beautiful, and then the next, the waves are crushing my bones as inky black water fills my throat. Thankfully, though, the waves only appear when things get overwhelming, and it feels as if the whole world is against me. Then the waves close over my head, drowning out my ragged screams for help.

The most recent time this happened was after my Nana's Christmas party. I didn't think it was going to be that bad. In fact, I was actually looking forward to it. I thought it would be a pleasant escape from school, and my Nana was my best friend. She raised me until I was two. She snuck me cookies and Pop-Tarts. She took me shopping and to get ice cream. She let me stay up late and watch TV when I knew my parents would kill me if they knew their eleven-year-old was awake into the early hours of the day. She always made things better, but in the back of my mind, I was anxious about this being the first Christmas party without my papa. I worried I would instantly feel his absence. But he never talked much before anyway. Maybe his absence wouldn't be all that noticeable.

Life changes when you get older. You see things differently. I've always felt out of place in family gatherings. I was the first grandkid, separated by at least four years from everyone else. I never belonged with the adults or the kids, so I hovered in the in-between. I would listen as laughter floated in from both sides of the house, but I would never participate. I wonder if my Papa always felt the same way, that he wasn't made out of the same substance my Nana was made of. Maybe that's why he asked for the divorce.

This year there was no festive joy that should have been there for a Christmas party. Instead, there were cardboard boxes, filled with faded memories, stacked in the corner. My Nana perched on the couch, babbling about the new men who wanted to take her out for a drink. My mother cringed in her seat. Mandy, my aunt, scrolled through her phone, never glancing up, even as her daughter pulled on her sleeve, begging for attention. I knew I had to leave. I knew that I never wanted to be like them. I never wanted my child to look at me with the same disgust that I was viewing them with. So I sank into the playroom with the other kids, smothered by their uncontrollable laughter. Eventually, I got up to steal a powdered cookie. No one would mind. I was the oldest, my Nana's favorite, her best friend. I never thought that privilege would be an unbearable burden. Turns out there is a downside to everything. When I lifted the cookie out of the box, I should have noticed the powder drifting down, I should have seen the innocence trickling away, because when I turned, I saw her, and it hit me like a brick.

My Nana stood in her bedroom, sobbing uncontrollably. I walked to her, trying to console her in any way I knew how. She never answered me. She never intended for me to see this. She left the room without an explanation, wiping her tears away. I watched her back as she walked away, as if everything was completely fine. I just stood there in shock and listened as the Christmas music floated from the living room into this horrific bedroom. The music was the wrong backdrop for this moment. It was the ghost of what this evening should have been, and this bedroom was the ghost of what their marriage should have

been. These picture frames need to be shattered. My Papa's clothes no longer belong here. His book on the bedside table should be tucked away. All of those thoughts that belonged to my sixty-year-old grandmother fell onto me, her sixteen-year-old granddaughter. Her anger and pain were dealt to me. By her leaving this room, she left her crumbling marriage for me to salvage, to carry.

The night wasn't the same after that. I cried in the dimly lit backseat the entire way home. I had finally seen the reason my mom couldn't stand her mother. I wasn't born to be my Nana's best friend or her therapist. That wasn't my role in this relationship. It wasn't my job to carry that weight. She can fall apart as many times as she wants, but not in front of her grandchildren. Imagine if that had been my baby cousin. Imagine if that three-year-old girl had waddled into that bedroom to see her Nana breaking down. Thank god it was me that had to see that and not her—the one to carry the weight of my grandparents' toxic relationship, and not her.

The next day wasn't the same either. My family felt it too. My siblings were wary of my short fuse. My parents became frustrated with my attitude. I spend most of the day hiding upstairs in my bedroom with my assigned English book. At around five in the evening, my dad entered my room and took a seat on my bed. For a long moment, he didn't say anything. But eventually he just asked me to tell him everything. And I did. I couldn't stop. I talked about everything. I told him about the party. I told him about the crushing depression my English book was inflicting on my well-being. I explained my deteriorating relationship with my best friend and my suffocating amount of schoolwork.

After I finished all he said was, "Yeah, but all of that stuff doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. You could fail every class and disappoint every person and be just fine."

My father came up the twelve steps that separated the kids from adults just to give me that one piece of advice.

Then my mom came.

Then it was my little sister.

Then it was my little brother.

Each person in my family came up one by one just to ask me how I was, and that's when I knew. My aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were falling apart, but not my family. And just like that, I was fine. All of my problems dissolved. That suffocating moment was gone. Because we weren't dysfunctional. My mom and dad have never fought like my grandparents. They have never neglected me or my siblings. My mom would never put me in the middle of a divorce. My siblings would never put me in a position where I needed to hold them together.

Our family is one unit and they have never failed at throwing me a rope when my head was going under.

# Shimmer in the Light

By Jesse Covington '28

“Hey, I can help you pick those up,” offered Amy, a girl in my eighth-grade class. We didn’t really know each other but when we interacted, she seemed friendly and kind enough.

“Oh, thanks,” I said enthusiastically. Social interaction wasn’t really my jam but I was good at it.

“Congrats on those awards today,” she said, sheepishly, as she paged through the certificates. “Best sportsmanship and highest GPA, you don’t really see those two together, do you?”

“Yeah, I guess not.” I tried to act happy receiving the compliment, but I really wasn’t. I never liked getting all of these compliments. I’m an introvert. But, they just kept on coming.

Amy handed the stack of award certificates to me before we waved goodbye. As I carried what felt like a thousand documents down the hallway, I received many congratulations. Most stared at me as if I was a runway model. A pop star who had just released a new hit. A basketball player who had just scored the winning shot. Why doesn’t this happen to anyone else? Why do *I* have to be the perfect one?

I opened the doors, stepped outside, and took a deep breath of fresh air before sprinting home.

I arrived at my house and rang the doorbell, well aware that all my moves were on-camera. Not something that I was super stoked about. But, hey, it’s my life.

“Hey, Mason! How’d the awards ceremony go?” asked my Mom. She asked the same question every year and I was absolutely certain that she knew the answer. It is like those conversation starters that people use where they (of course) know the answer that you are gonna give but still ask it anyway. And, of course I did well. That’s what I’m known for. I’m the popular kid, the smart kid, the athletic kid, the good-at-everything-kid.

But, I still answered in the most enthusiastic way that I could muster. “Yeah, yeah, it went amazing! I got fourteen different awards.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you, Mason,” my Mom exclaimed as she gave me a hug. “Dad’ll be home in just a few minutes. I’m sure he’ll be excited to hear too!”

Honestly, how could Dad be excited to hear when there was nothing exciting about it? Stuff is exciting when it is *abnormal*. Not when it is *normal*. How could this normal occurrence be exciting to them? If you’re the best chess player in the world in hundreds of tournaments in a row, are you still gonna be that excited when you win again? It’s kinda to be expected.

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“Mason, how’d you do so well on that stupid science test? Everybody knows that Mr. Arnold is the most difficult, most insane, grader in the entire school.”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just better at some things than others.” As soon as I let that last sentence slide off my tongue, I immediately regretted it. It wasn’t true. And on top of that, it sounded *crazy* egotistical. Of course, I had to be good at *everything*. Now, they’d go on to interrogate me about what I *wasn’t* good at.

“You have got to be kidding me, Mason,” Judah yelled as he joined the conversation. “You have an A+ in every class, you are the highest-scoring player on all of the *four* sports teams that you play on—except for golf, but like, I don’t think you’re supposed to be the highest-scoring player there. How the heck are you telling us that you are better at some things than others? You have pretty much been engineered for all of these activities!”

“I swear. I am not good at *everything*. I’ve gotten bad grades. I’ve lost sports games. Just trust me, I have.” I said all of that, hoping they’d believe, although I couldn’t remember any time any of those things had happened. And then it would all start to spiral. They would want to see the truth. But I didn’t have any truth. But then I couldn’t admit that. And the fact that I didn’t give any proof just continued to prove their point. It’s just exhausting.

“Bro, that is such a lie.” Darn it, Judah was not buying it. Would they just shut up about *oh, Mason is so perfect* and *Mason got an A+ in Ms. Shelle’s class* and on, and on?

“Shut up, Judah. I’m not perfect at everything and I won’t ever be.” Right after I said that, I realized that I said it in an awfully loud voice. The cafeteria grew awkwardly quiet as everybody stared at me. It felt like an eternity, the silence, even though I knew it was just a few seconds. I’m a theater kid so I know.

“Listen, Mason, unless you can give me some like, *tangible*, proof, we won’t believe you.” I was laughing in my head because Judah is *such* a jock that I couldn’t even imagine him saying a word like “tangible.”

“Fine, I’ll play your stupid games. Tomorrow I will bring *tangible* proof of my imperfection.” I promised this even though I knew I probably wouldn’t be able to find one.

“And, you know that if you come back empty-handed, it’ll just be worse for you?”

“Yes, I fully understand. I’m not dumb. That’s why I won’t come back empty-handed.”

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That night, after I finished my homework, I snuck into my parents’ closet (I knew that I wasn’t supposed to be there.) and pulled the box off the shelf labeled Mason. They had a few other boxes for my older siblings. They never let me see my old rubrics and report cards because they didn’t want me to develop an ego or be “full of myself.” Out of pure curiosity – and in hindsight, I shouldn’t have done this – I looked at my older brother Lucas’s box.

Before he left for college, he was always so stressed about his grades. I never knew if he did well or not in school. He wasn’t a very open person. I looked at his ACT score and saw a 14. That’s not great. All of his other scores told the same story. All of them weren’t that great. But, enough of that. It’s time to do what I came in here to do: look at *my* scores. Prove Judah wrong.

I paged through the papers, each with a giant A+ in the top right corner. Why does everything have to be an A+? I have to have failed at some point in my life, right?

OK, one last check I guess. This time, I paged through the papers especially slowly, each reading the same. But then, I caught a glimpse of something different. Something not perfect. I flipped back to that page. On the front was the letter **D** in bold print. I was ecstatic! I didn’t get an A+! This is real, *tangible*, proof to set Judah straight, once and (hopefully) for all.

But then I realized that this wasn't a class assignment. It was a legal-looking document of some kind. Why have a legal missive mixed in with all of my assessments? I started reading:

## **DNA**

### Full Genetic Modification Report

*Authored by Epsilon Labs Corp.*

The goals of this process, as detailed by the parents, are to:

- a. increase athletic ability of future child
- b. increase intellect level of future child
- c. increase overall mental and physical well-being of future child

Above genetic modification procedure, using CRISPR technology, was completed July 19, 2031.

The rest of the document was just legal jargon but I got the point. I was a lab rat. I was an experiment. *I'm not talented because of the work I put in, I'm talented because of the stupid money my parents put in. I haven't deserved any of those awards that I have earned. I didn't actually accomplish anything. That is really messed up, Mom and Dad.*

I quickly put the documents back into the same place and shoved the filing drawer back onto the shelf. I ran through our large house until I made my way to my room. On the left side of my room was a glass trophy display box with hundreds of gold, silver, and bronze trophies shimmering from the sunlight shining in through my blinds. It was blinding, at this time of day, and I couldn't see where I was going. I walked over to the windows and closed the blinds but some light still penetrated.

I locked my bedroom door and took my baseball bat off my shelf. I tensed my hands as I grasped the baseball bat and counted down in my head. 3... 2... 1.... I swung the bat, channeling all my anger and rage. Glass shattered all around me – pieces of shrapnel grazing past my arms and legs. I felt a little scratch and I looked down and saw a few droplets of blood flowing down my calf. I felt numb, emotionless. Then, red streaks appeared on the now-not-pristine light-colored vinyl floor.

I took another whack, this time knocking all of the most prized trophies off the shelf, allowing them to land on the floor and shatter into a million pieces. A million tiny pieces. Now, even with the blinds closed, the shards of metal shimmered more than ever in the light. I couldn't imagine what it would be like if I hadn't closed those blinds.

Breathing uncontrollably, I heard a knock on my door. I didn't answer. Then it came again, even harsher. My heart was beating inside my chest. The adrenaline was flowing through my veins.

"Mason, are you OK in there?" It was my mother.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." My voice stuttered a little in that last sentence. I thought that saying those words would make me believe it. Make it come true. But I knew, deep down in my heart, I was not fine. I was not fine at all.

# The Last Stop

*By Bella Woodson '28*

The bus jolts to a stop, and I wake myself up from what was almost sleep. Surely, I'm the last one on the bus tonight, I think. I look away from the bus window and see a woman getting on with a little girl who looks no more than six years old. Too young to still be awake 30 minutes before the bus stops running.

Before she sits down, I notice that the girl's face is stained with tears that show faintly on her beautiful bubblegum dress. The gift bag in her tiny hands that reads 'Emelia and Daniel' is crumpled almost to the point where the wedding ring printed is not visible. The woman—her mother, I assume—is not dressed up like her daughter. She has no gift bag, either. She seems pretty tired, and it shows through her messy bun and sweatpants. I reach for my earbuds because I don't want to invade the limited privacy the bus provides for them.

"Does daddy still love me?" The young girl breaks the silence, and I see the woman look down at her with a worried expression. I can't help but watch the conversation unfold.

"Of course he does, sweetheart. That's silly. You're his little girl, and nothing can ever take that away. What makes you think he doesn't?" In response, the daughter turns her body away from the woman and crosses her arms.

"He told her 'I love you' in front of everybody." There is a pause. "Does daddy not love *you* too?" I hear the little girl's voice quiver, and I wonder what could have happened to worry a child so small as this. Curious, I keep my earbuds in my hand and watch the trees pass by out the window.

"Daddy loves Emilia now because she's his wife, but that doesn't change how much he loves you. We still care for each other because we both care for you."

"I don't like her," she says with a pouty tone and fragile voice.

"Why not? You have so much fun with Emilia." The mother's voice carries both exhaustion and comfort.

"Because she's not you. I don't want her to take you from me." The daughter's plea pulls my gaze back up to them.

"Oh baby, come here." The woman gently takes the girl into her arms and kisses her forehead. "Nothing in this world can take me away from you. I will always be your mom, no matter what. You should enjoy spending time with her." She fixes one of her little but neat curls.

After an oddly comfortable silence, the child looks up and asks, "Can I have ice cream?"

The mother pauses and then smiles. "Sure," she nods. "When we get home."

