

Spring 2018 Canterbury Proposal
Creative Writing Therapy at
Lucile Packard Children's Hospital

Riley O'Connell
SCU ID: 1073191
roconnell@scu.edu

Faculty Mentors:
Kirk Glaser
Claudia McIsaac

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*Written respectively in Steven Saum's Creative Nonfiction (ENGL175) course freshman year and Kirk Glaser's Poetry (ENGL 72) and Advanced Poetry (ENGL172) courses sophomore year.

* "Terminal" was published in *The Santa Clara Review* Volume 104 Issue 2.

**"My Father's Son" is one of my poems awarded 3rd place in the 2017 Shipsey Prize and, alongside "Are You There, Dog? It's Me, Riley," 1st place in the 2018 Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize.

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I. Project Proposal: Introduction + Goals

Heavily shaped by the power of literature since I was three years old learning to read from my brother, I have always been quick to express myself on the page. Creative expression came easily to me, because reading and writing were presented to and cultivated for me at an early age and fostered by friends, family, and teachers throughout my formative years.

At the same time, when I was five, my brother was diagnosed with an incurable brain stem glioma, for which he was treated at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital (LPCH) at Stanford University from 2003-2005 by Dr. Michael Edwards, MD. During Kyle's treatment and after his death, journaling and creative writing became a form of therapy to me, even still to this day.

During my senior year at Regis Jesuit High School, I enrolled in a poetry course which led me to apply for the position of Denver's inaugural Youth Poet Laureate. In late March of that year, [I performed a 14-minute poem](#) about my brother's passing and was honored to be [chosen for the position](#), with which I would be given a platform to "use creativity...to create change in [my] community" (Davies). Unfortunately, I was only able to hold the position for a week, as I then made my decision to attend Santa Clara University. Fortunately, SCU has provided me with the mentors and the opportunities to create change in the community here. Since the winter of my freshman year, I have worked closely with the SCU English Department and English Club, *The Santa Clara Review*, and the [Santa Clara County Poet Laureate Mike McGee](#), to put on a quarterly poetry slam and student music open mic called the [Bronco Slam&Jam](#), with the intent of providing an artistic platform for SCU students to express themselves. This goal is furthered by my being Editor of [The Owl](#), a student-edited magazine dedicated exclusively to publishing the creative work of actively-enrolled undergraduate students at SCU. Next year, I will be the Chief Editor of *The Santa Clara Review*, giving me an even larger platform for publishing creative work around the world. Simultaneously in my senior year, I would like to volunteer with the [Child Life and Creative Arts](#) division of Lucile Packard Children's Hospital doing creative writing therapy with the Canterbury Fellowship.

At LPCH, creativity is a large part of young patients' day-to-day lives through [art therapy](#), [music therapy](#), [play therapy](#), and a [family-centered Makerspace](#) with [Ronald McDonald House](#). According to the Child Life and Creative Arts division of the Lucile Packard website, the department

"uses developmentally-appropriate education, preparation, support and therapeutic play to minimize stress to help children and their families cope positively with their health care experience."

All of these outlets are intended to take the young patients' minds off of their treatment and pain, a mission which I believe could be furthered by the addition of a creative writing therapy program. With the guidance of a Canterbury Fellowship and in connection with the Lucile Packard [Healing](#)

I. Project Proposal: Introduction + Goals

[HeARTS](#) magazine, now on its fifteenth year and described by its founder Grace Cheng, MD, as “a way to help prospective doctors see kids as people, not just as diseases,” I would bring this program to life for children like my brother at Lucile Packard. Cheng also said of Healing HeARTS,

“when children are ill, they are unable to participate in sports and other common childhood activities that promote feelings of confidence... Healing HeARTS compensate[s] for the absence of such extracurricular activities and give[s] the participants the satisfaction of seeing their work publicly displayed.”

This, I can relate to. Throughout my brother’s treatments, we would sketch and play pretend with our stuffed animals to pass the time, especially when he could no longer play basketball or baseball after losing function in his left arm and leg. Kyle brought home joke books from the library, and I wrote stories and poetry. At parent-teacher conferences, my 1st grade teacher even told my parents I needed to “get my nose out of a book and get a life.” (I, of course, still haven’t taken that advice.) The worlds we created and lived in made my brother and me happy, made us laugh, made us forget for awhile.

My freshman year of high school, [I gave a TEDx speech](#) at Regis Jesuit High School about writing as my *magis* — a Latin term that Pedro Arrupe, SJ, called “a supernatural strategy [that] continually seeks...the greatest possible service to God [and others]” (Geger). In the 9-minute speech, I discussed wanting to unite my writing with the fight to find a cure for pediatric brain cancer. Now, looking back on my 14-year-old self, I can’t imagine a better way to do that than through this work at Lucile Packard, a hospital and foundation to which my family and I donate annually through the [Kyle O’Connell Foundation](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit we founded in 2006 after Kyle passed, whose mission is

“to create awareness and raise funds to support pediatric brain tumor research, as well as [assist] families impacted by the many struggles associated with pediatric brain tumors.”

I feel — and have felt for years — a calling to give back not only to the communities that supported my family and me during Kyle’s sickness, but also to patients and families going through similar situations as we experienced and continue to experience.

If awarded a Canterbury fellowship, it is my intention to volunteer with the Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital Healing HeARTS magazine doing creative writing therapy alongside their existing art therapy program. At the end of the year, it is my goal to compile a chapbook of my work written in response to my experiences at LPCH and to my experiences losing my own brother to cancer as a child. The chapbook likely will not contain work of the children at LPCH, as their work would be published in Healing HeARTS.

II. Connection to Jesuit Values

Creative writing and arts programs are a space for growth, positive self-expression, self-understanding, empathy, and pride. This is true for anybody in the world, regardless of their age, wellness, background, or necessity. That said, it is the [Santa Clara University mission](#), as a Jesuit institution, to “serve the communities of which we are a part in Silicon Valley and around the world” through the education of “citizens and leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion.” Committed to SCU’s fundamental values, my Canterbury Fellowship would adhere to them as follows:

Academic Excellence: We seek an uncompromising standard of excellence in teaching, learning, creativity, and scholarship with and across disciplines.

- Since my arrival at Santa Clara University in the fall of 2015, I have been eager to channel my passion for writing into my college experiences, an aspiration which I have worked to achieve as an English major with minors in Creative Writing and Communication, a former peer educator to Claudia McIsaac’s Creative Writing & Social Justice course (ENGL 176), a contributing writer for *Claradise*, a two-time nominee (2016, 2018) and one-time winner (2018) of the [Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize](#) for the state of California, the third-place holder of the 2017 [Shipsey Poetry Prize](#), a published contributor to *The Santa Clara Review* volume 103 issue 2, the Secretary of Sigma Tau Delta: Pi Phi, a member of Alpha Sigma Nu, President and Founder of SPSCU and the quarterly Bronco Slam & Jam, current Chief Editor of *The Owl*, and Chief Editor-elect of *The Santa Clara Review*. In addition, I have represented the English Department at the Edward M. Dowd Art & Art History building opening (October 2016), the College of Arts & Sciences’ Family Weekend [Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression Forum](#) (February 2017) and [College Showcase – Curiosity, Innovation, and Passion: Transforming our World](#) (May 2017), the [Geography of Hope](#) exhibit presented by Sinatra Visiting Artist Anna Deavere Smith (April 2017), and as an evaluator for English professors seeking tenure at SCU (January 2017). Outside of SCU, I have also served as a [featured artist](#) at the Poetry Center of San Jose’s National Poetry Month event at the Sunnyvale Library (April 2017) and a judge for PCSJ’s inaugural collaborative [poetry contest](#) with De Anza College.

- With all of these relevant experiences and accomplishments under my belt, it is clear my dedication to my passions and to the SCU English Department, as well as the school as a whole. To execute a creative writing program at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital, with a tangible result, would be my most considerable honor thus far.

Search for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty: We prize scholarship and creative work that advance human understanding, improve teaching and learning, and add to the betterment of society by illuminating the most significant problems of the day and exploring the enduring mysteries of life.

- In my aforementioned 2012 TEDx speech, I referred to creative writing as “an exploration. You start from nothing, and you achieve something beautiful, something worth sharing and telling the world about.” Creative writing therapy advances human understanding of one’s self, each other,

II. Connection to Jesuit Values

and the enduring mysteries of life by fostering positive self-expression, self-understanding, empathy, and empowerment in topics such as life, relationships, grief, etc. Not only that, but writing also “strengthens [the] immune system,” according to the American Psychological Association.

Engaged Learning: We strive to integrate academic reflection and direct experience in the classroom and the community, especially to understand and improve the lives of those with the least education, power, and wealth.

- Through my own writing that I intend to do during the duration of this fellowship in response to and reflection of who and what I discover at Lucile Packard, I will better my understanding of children and families who may feel powerless in the situation they have been placed in through no fault of their own. In the same way, I will better my understanding of my own mind and heart, which at times felt and feel powerless with grief.

Commitment to Students: As teachers and scholars, mentors and facilitators, we endeavor to educate the whole person. We nurture and challenge students — intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically, morally, socially, and physically — preparing them for leadership and service to the common good in their professional, civic, and personal lives.

- It is my belief that every human being is a potential student, and I would like to commit myself in the Jesuit practice of *cura personalis* to children and families grappling with cancer and other sickness at LPCH to help better their mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. This experience will also better me in leadership, collaboration, and self-awareness, all qualities necessary to any job I take and any interaction I have after graduation.

Community and Diversity: We cherish our diverse and inclusive community of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni, a community that is enriched by people of different backgrounds, respectful of the dignity of all its members, enlivened by open communication, and caring and just toward others.

- Grief and sickness, as well as creativity and imagination, do not discriminate. By volunteering with children and families at Lucile Packard, I am engaging myself in the diverse community that exists within the walls of the children’s hospital, from varying ages to diagnoses to backgrounds. Throughout this process, I will always be respectful of the dignity of those I meet through open and caring communication and empathy.

III. Books

Included here are the books that I feel would better my understanding of the task I am setting out to complete, as well as the people with whom I will be working. Below the titles and authors are synopses of the texts from Amazon or the equivalent site from which I would purchase them. This is a working list, as I plan to add more as the year goes on.

- The Periwinkle Foundation & Texas Children's Cancer and Hematology Centers — *The Splendid Review*

The Splendid Review is an anthology of poems, short stories and autobiographies written by the talented young writers at Texas Children's Cancer and Hematology Centers. In collaboration with Writers in the Schools, The Periwinkle Foundation unites professional writers with children battling cancer and blood disorders to share their stories. Through arts and creative writing programs, The Periwinkle Foundation celebrates self-expression and empowerment as a vital part of the healing process.

<https://issuu.com/theperiwinklefoundation>

- SURGE: The Zone's Teen Art & Literary Magazine

SURGE: The Zone's Teen Art & Literary Magazine is a publication produced by the Child Life and Creative Arts Therapy Department where teenagers in the Kravis Children's Hospital and those in our communities come together by having their original creative writing and artwork published.

<http://www.mschildlife.org/surge.html>

- Karin B Miller — *The Cancer Poetry Project: Poems by Cancer Patients and Those Who Love Them*

A single poem -- heart-rending, fearful, raging, beautiful, grotesque, even hilarious -- lets us know we're not alone in dealing with cancer. This was the idea that launched *The Cancer Poetry Project* and drew more than 1,200 submissions from published poets, first-time poets and everyone in between. The award-winning result is a national anthology of 140 poems, plus the story and people behind each.

Hailed by critics and readers alike, *The Cancer Poetry Project* offers not lofty verse, but accessible, extraordinary poetry. From the hopeful *Farewell to Hair* (Terri Hanson) to the poignant *Slow Dancing at the Med-Inn* (F. Richard Thomas) to the laugh-out-loud *Empathetic Ode* (Dorothy Stone), there is a poem for everyone in this powerful collection. These are the words we long to say when someone we love is diagnosed. Cancer survivors find solace in its pages. And it is frequently used by cancer support groups. Truly, *The Cancer Poetry Project* is for anyone affected by cancer.

- Geri Giebel Chavis — *Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression (Writing for Therapy or Personal Development)*

Poetry and short stories can act as powerful springboards to growth, self-enhancement and healing. With the guidance of a facilitator, participants can engage with their own creative

III. Books

expression, and with that of others, and in doing so find opportunities to voice their truth, affirm their strengths, and find new ways of coping with challenges.

This accessible book explores the therapeutic possibilities of poetry and stories, exploring ways of selecting appropriate works for discussion, and providing techniques for facilitating personally relevant and growth-enhancing sessions. The author provides ideas and suggestions for personal writing activities that emerge from or intertwine with this discussion, and explains how participants can create their own poetic and narrative pieces using other media, such as music, photographs, film, paintings, objects, and physical movement. The book references a wide variety of specific poems, short stories and films to use as prompts to creative writing, and contains a useful bibliography of poetry collections, story anthologies and film resources as well as a list of further resources and template feedback forms.

- Matt Tullis, *Running with Ghosts: A Memoir of Surviving Childhood Cancer*

In *Running With Ghosts*, author Matt Tullis reminds us that surviving childhood cancer can be a challenge as formidable as fighting for your life—and more enduring. The eldest of three sons born to a trucker and an office-worker, who lived in the idyllic village of Apple Creek, Ohio, Tullis was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia at age 15. In short order, the sports-mad teenager found himself on the cancer ward of Akron Children’s Hospital. One of the lucky ones, he walked out and kept on going.

Years later, as a journalist and college professor, Tullis began to wonder about all the friends and caregivers he’d left behind on 4-North. As his curiosity intensified, he decided to seek them out. *Running with Ghosts* is about friendship, loss, triumph, and closure: one man’s effort to understand more fully a life shaped by a random mutation in the code of his DNA.

- Ross Gay, *Against Which (New Voices)*

An exploration of the various ways language can help us transcend both the banal and unusual cruelties which are inevitably delivered to us, and which we equally deliver unto others. These poems comb through violence and love, fear and loss, exploring the common denominators in each. *Against Which* seeks the ways human beings might transform themselves from participants in a thoughtless and brutal world to laborers in a loving one.

- Jeremy Radin, *Slow Dance with Sasquatch*

Slow Dance with Sasquatch is an invitation into a private ballroom, a banquet hall in the middle of the woods. Here, you will sit and feast and waltz with your monsters. Here, you will harvest imagination from loneliness and longing. Here, you will coax laughter from the beasts' mouths. Here, the table is always fully loaded. Here, the cake is always warm, and no matter how much of it you eat, you will never stop being beautiful.

- Judith Tannenbaum, *Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades*

III. Books

Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes guides teachers who want to explore writing poetry with their primary students. The lessons are easy to follow and contain numerous model poems written by primary students. Lessons build on one another in their exploration and use of image and sound as well as in their organization into themes. The book contains information on how to create projects, publications, and performances once students have created a body of poems.

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- Derrick C. Brown, *Hello. It Doesn't Matter.*

"Derrick Brown doesn't just report the human condition, he sings it— capturing how it feels to be absolutely alive in poems that are simultaneously romantic, wacky, soulful, wounded and full of wonder." — Janet Fitch, author of *Paint It Black and White Oleander*

"Derrick's poems, for me, are so generous. Generous in their wit and honesty, mesmerizing fragments of vivid memories. Like sitting next to the most fascinating drunk stranger and hearing his tales. All of them are happily part of my life now." —H. Jon Benjamin of *Bob's Burgers* and *Archer*

"In his rapturous new poetry collection, Brown confesses to every crime of the heart and somehow beats the rap. He does it with keen, unflinching lucidity and breathtaking art." —Brendan Constantine, author of *Birthday Girl with Possum*

"Derrick C. Brown is our modern day Pablo Neruda." – Amber Tamblyn, Actress, author of *Dark Sparkler*.

Brown returns with a new collection of beautiful longing and his surefire blend of poetics, humor and darkness.

IV. Timeline

Spring & Summer 2018

- April 2: Speak with Ann Rose, Senior Director of Foundation Relations at Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health (LPFCH)
- April 3: Speak with Meg Cruz, Assistant Director of Major Gifts at LPFCH
- April 10: Meet with Meg Cruz at LPCH
- April 26: Get in contact with Barbara Sourks with "[Healing Hearts](#)" magazine and Susan Kinnebrew in Child Life Programs at LPCH
- May 9-10: Meet with Meg Cruz and Barbara Sourks at LPCH
- Begin reading from book list
- Begin writing poems re: Kyle, cancer, childhood, tragedy, adulthood, growth, etc.

Fall 2018

- Meet at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital 5 times
- Revise spring/summer writing and begin drafts of new poems
- Continue research on creative art therapy, particularly with children
- Meet with advisors to discuss progress

Winter 2019

- Meet at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital 5 times
- Revise fall poems and begin drafts of new poems
- Continue research on creative art therapy, particularly in hospitals/with sick populations
- Meet with advisors to discuss progress

Spring 2019

- Meet at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital 5 times
- Revise winter poems (and others, if necessary) and begin drafts of new poems
- Continue research on creative art therapy, particularly with families
- Begin drafting chapbook, arrange poems in final order
- Meet with advisors to discuss a final presentation of some sort

V. Budget

<p>Books</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Karin B Miller — <i>The Cancer Poetry Project: Poems by Cancer Patients and Those Who Love Them</i> \$12.94 • Geri Giebel Chavis — <i>Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression (Writing for Therapy or Personal Development)</i> \$26.98 • Composition Notebooks — <i>Get Well: Large Journal Notebook for Boys & Girls with Lined and Blank Pages for Their Free Drawing and Writing</i> \$7.49 (x20) • Matt Tullis — <i>Running with Ghosts: A Memoir of Surviving Childhood Cancer</i> \$20.40 • Ross Gay — <i>Against Which</i> \$13.81 • Jeremy Radin — <i>Slow Dance with Sasquatch</i> \$8.84 • Judith Tannenbaum, <i>Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades</i> \$15.89 • Derrick C. Brown, <i>Hello. It Doesn't Matter.</i> \$15.00 <p>— \$263.66 +more \$400</p>	
<p>Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ~\$7.00/roundtrip* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 22 miles @ 24mpg - \$3.50/gallon • 4 roundtrips/month • 9 months/school year (September-May) • CalTrains to Palo Alto — April 10, May 9, May 10 <p>*This price is \$4.50 less than a Day Pass on CalTrain from Santa Clara to Palo Alto, if I chose to take public transportation instead</p>	<p>\$7.00 x4 = \$28 x9 = \$252 (\$12)x3 = \$36</p> <p>— \$288</p>
<p>Hospital costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shots, background check, etc 	<p>\$100</p> <p>— \$100</p>
<p>Writing supplies, printing/copying fees</p>	<p>\$120</p>
<p>Total budget</p>	<p>\$908</p>

VI. Writing Samples

The Big Pause

Here's how it happened.

My brother fell at basketball practice. He collided with Coach Lazzeri. He wasn't hurt, just badly shaken up. He sat out the rest of practice.

Let's start over.

Dad was teaching Kyle and me how to throw a perfect spiral in the backyard. Neither of us had much interest in football, but Dad used to be a quarterback and Mom needed rest. The funeral had taken something out of her. Something important. I tried not to think about what it must feel like to lose a father. Kyle tried not to think about the numbness in his left arm.

Let me tell you about arms.

They can make sense of how big or small something is. For example, when outstretched, they can make you feel huge, like a mountain. But when they're crossed, they can make you feel tiny. Irrelevant. Arms have hands, and hands can hold basketballs and footballs and pens and paper and clipboards and other peoples' hands, and sometimes, when something shocking happens, they try to hold onto counters or chairs or walls. Sometimes, they cannot get a good enough grip.

Let's begin again.

It was February 25, 2003. Twelve days after my grandfather died. We took Kyle to see Dr. Gin because he couldn't raise his left arm above his shoulder. Dr. Gin directed us to Children's Hospital for a brain MRI. The word *concussion* blossomed on my mother's tongue, became her prayer.

"He fell at basketball practice a few days ago," she said to each new doctor, as though in obvious explanation.

"Your son has a brain stem glioma," the doctors said. "The worst kind of tumor to have."

That was the day I, a five-year-old, learned the word *inoperable*.

•••

It was March 7, 2003, when Dr. Michael Edwards called us from Sutter Memorial Hospital in Sacramento.

Every doctor before him said there was no hope, had given my brother steroids for the swelling, given my parents pamphlets for the questions, given us nothing for the fear.

The tumor, they said, had made a beach out of his brain, and there was no possible way to get all those grains of sand out without doing much greater damage. See, because the tumor was in the pons — the central part of the brain stem that many critical nerves go through, those responsible for facial movement and expression, and breathing.

And they said there was no hope.

It was March 7, 2003, when Dr. Michael Edwards called us from Sutter Memorial Hospital in Sacramento and told us there was hope.

The tumor wasn't entirely within the brain stem, he said. Part was outside, to the right.

He could biopsy it, he said.

VI. Writing Samples

He could buy my brother more time.

But what about those other doctors? Every single one of them, all saying the same damn thing. No hope, no hope, no hope. The brain stem communicates directly with our nerves. Too risky. More damage. No hope.

But this.

This was Christmas morning, this was a birthday party at Jungle Quest, this was a brand new copy of *Harry Potter*, this was every puppy in the world nuzzling into my chest all at once.

This was Stage 3 cancer, but this was hope.

This was not being able to feel or move his left arm or hand or leg, this was hair loss and weight gain and nausea and this was radiation and so much chemotherapy.

But this was a biopsy, and this was hope.

We were on a plane to Sacramento three days later, and Kyle was in surgery two days after that.

•••

My dad was a quarterback, but I've said that already. Not professionally; not even in high school. Just through eighth grade. Then he took up basketball, tennis, lacrosse, and soccer. In college, he started both a lacrosse team and a fake Welcoming Committee to meet girls. He met my mom via the latter, and loving her has been his favorite pastime since.

His second favorite is the Denver Broncos.

I've never had an interest in football, but I've said that already. But my dad tells me often about the 1998 Super Bowl when, at the leadership of John Elway, the Broncos beat the odds and the Packers in the second biggest upset in Super Bowl history. To celebrate their first Super Bowl win, my dad ran maniacally around our Highlands Ranch home with me, just seven months old at the time, tucked under his arm like a football.

When I was seven years, seven months old, my father held me for a different reason.

See, Kyle was sick.

That was nothing new.

But Kyle wasn't getting better.

That, unfortunately, was nothing new, either.

The Broncos weren't in the Super Bowl that year. Not even close. Peyton Manning and the Colts had run us into the ground, 49-24, nearly a month ago to the day. We hadn't won a playoff game since 1999, when John Elway retired. And Lord knows my father wasn't about to watch the Patriots win that Sunday. The only thing worse than Tom Brady, we all knew, was cancer.

•••

My parents told me it was cancer by accident.

Mom drove a red Isuzu Rodeo back then. I remember it because of the way saying *Isuzu* left

VI. Writing Samples

my lips puckered like people kissed in the movies. And because red was my favorite color — except when it was lipstick. Or blood.

It was the first appointment of Kyle's I'd been to. All the other ones I spent at Brooke's house, or Uncle Vic's, or Momma's. But Kyle was seeing Timmy's dad that day, and I knew Timmy's dad. Kyle and Timmy were friends at school and his dad could fix sick kids. I wanted to know how. I wanted to know a lot of things. So when Mom pulled that red Isuzu Rodeo into a spot in the front, I stopped her before she'd hardly put it into Park, with my first question that wasn't really a question at all: "Mom, we can't park here."

And a beat.

She turned around to look at me, her seatbelt straining against her chest. "Why's that, sweets?"

Well, I thought it was obvious. I pointed to the sign on the parking spot, the one that read: **ROCKY MOUNTAIN CANCER PATIENTS ONLY.**

Another beat. They said nothing. I continued: "We can't park here because Kyle doesn't have..."

"It's okay," Mom said quickly, and her eyes looked misty but maybe that was just a glare on her glasses. "It's okay, Ri, we can park here."

The signs were clear. I just didn't want to believe them.

•••

I was on my couch when Mrs. Cook came to the door. The "Band Geeks" episode of SpongeBob was halfway through and it didn't matter that my grandma thought it was killing my brain cells or that I'd seen it a hundred thousand times in the 1,247 days since it first aired on Nickelodeon at 8/7c on a Friday night in 2001. It was Kyle's and my favorite episode. And the doctors had said he was going to have to stay another night in the hospital, even though they'd promised he could come home that afternoon, so I wanted to have something good to tell him about when I saw him.

So Mrs. Cook let me finish the episode before we left for Presbyterian St. Luke's. She cried a lot on the drive over. So did my grandma.

They both pretended they were fine.

I knew they weren't. I just didn't know why.

•••

The National Alliance for Youth Sports says that children ages 5 to 7 have the necessary motor skills to compete in the game of football. It is at this same age that children exposed to excessive trauma may begin to blame themselves for not preventing or changing the outcome of said event.

Kyle's fourth grade class was scattered all over the church, drowning in tissues and oversized

VI. Writing Samples

First Communion suits. They said the intercessions. They brought mementos of his life to the altar: his Spyro PlayStation game. A basketball. A bowl of sand from his favorite beach in La Jolla. A joke book. I wondered if they understood this any more than I did, if they could read the signs like I could.

I wondered what was the last thing he said to them. To Brooke. To Drew.

Was it *I love you?*

Or was it that joke about the polar bear with the big pause?

•••

It's two thirty-six in the afternoon when I call Drew. I've just gotten out of fourth period for the long weekend. Columbus Day. His disembodied voice is gravelly over the phone. Like sand into the speaker. Like the sand in Kyle's beached brain nine years ago. Like the sand on Kyle's funeral altar nine years ago. Like the—

"Riley?"

I suck in a breath, hold it, get lightheaded, rest my forehead on the toilet paper dispenser in the bathroom stall I've locked myself inside.

"Riley? Hello?" And distantly, as though to someone else, "Am I crazy? This phone's a piece of shit. Riley!" Back again. "Riley, you there?"

"Here," I croak, thick and adenoidal from the tears. "Sorry, I'm here."

"I'm just walking to class, what's—Yeah, hey man, no I'm just talking to my"—a nearly indiscernible pause—"sister." He says it like a question, but likes the sound of it and continues. "My sister, Riley. I've never told you about my sister? Well yeah, say hi, man."

Another voice, honeyed, greets me from Santa Clara University.

"That's my buddy Jonathan," Drew informs me. "He's from Spain."

A beat. In the silence, I hear his longboard hitting every break in the sidewalk.

Another beat. A flash of him at the funeral with that dirty blonde bowl cut, hair in his eyes while he led the fourth graders and the rest of the congregation in the intercessions. Watching his hands, numb, unblinking. In disbelief.

He did not cry.

They'd been best friends for four years. Like brothers.

"Riley?"

I hold my breath. *Hey man, no I'm just talking to my sister. My sister, Riley.*

"This fucking phone, I swear to God."

I hang up before he does.

•••

Drew calls me back. I ask him to tell me a story about Kyle.

He tells me the joke about the polar bear with the big pause.

VI. Writing Samples

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Sixteen hours before the Denver Broncos kick off Super Bowl 50 at Levi's Stadium just 6.3 miles up the 101 from my room, my neighbor finds me in the fetal position on my carpet in an oversized tee and an old pair of Kyle's boxer shorts. I'd been fine all day with Drew, until I got back to my room. I don't know what happened. She sits down beside me, sets an unopened box of tissues at my side, and immediately moves to rub my back. She does not ask me what's wrong. Unlike me, she is used to my panic attacks.

"I remember it snowed that day," I murmur about fifteen minutes later, when I've finally found my breath. The words sound distant, like they're coming from somewhere else, from someone else. I hardly hear her response. She says it again.

"What day?"

"Today. Today, eleven years ago. I remember...patches of it in the cemetery when we buried him. I remember being so cold."

She is silent for a while until she exhales sharply through her nose — one of those odd half-laughs people do when they don't know what else to do. "You're not gonna see a lot of snow here."

I laugh, but it's warped. "Yeah. So now the only white mass on the ground is me, right?"

She says nothing.

"I didn't want to go that night," I say in an exhale. Water wells up in my eyes but does not escape. "I didn't want... And I know what you're gonna say," I snap before she's said anything at all, "that I couldn't've known, that I was just seven, that of course I wanted to stay home and watch SpongeBob. *Of course*. But I..." The backs of my eyelids sting and my head pounds nearly as fast as my heart does. In my peripherals, Sabina is dabbing at her own cheeks with a tissue. She inhales sharply, exhales. "Do you know the last thing he ever said to me was 'I love you'? It's a fucking cliché." I laugh sadistically. A beat. Another. The tears finally spill over, and I freeze, letting the ceiling panels waver in and out of my vision. "I don't remember if I said it back."

•••

Getting Kyle O'Connell as a brother was like winning that Lombardi Trophy: unbelievable.

Losing him was the same.

I didn't watch the Super Bowl for ten years after he died. Like I said, I've never had an interest in football, but his death just amplified it. There were always parties, always too many Prius commercials and too much beer and artichoke dip, always too much and too little going on to distract me from the day's significance. Nobody wanted to hear about my dead brother when they could watch grown men run around and hit each other on television for a few hours.

I didn't watch the Super Bowl for ten years after Kyle died. The eleventh time around, though, I did. And we can attribute that to any number of things: its location in Santa Clara, the

VI. Writing Samples

vintage Broncos sweatshirts my dad sent me in the mail, the obnoxious Panthers fan who lives across the hall from me.

Whatever the case, I watched. And better than that, even, I watched us win, despite what the “experts” said. Cam Newton was a multi-threat and they thought he was too good to stop, even against the Broncos’ first-ranked defense. Peyton Manning — who had since grown from a Colt to a Bronco — “wasn’t the Peyton of years’ past,” our running game was sputtering, and the Panthers hadn’t played from behind for a single minute throughout the 2015-16 season.

But we won.

And my dad says I’m a champion just like those Broncos. A World Class Champion. And my mom says Kyle won big with me.

And I wish I could retire this pain like Peyton could his career, I wish I could say this is the best and the worst it’ll ever be, but I don’t know. I’ll just have to keep playing and see.

VI. Writing Samples

Terminal

I have this recurring dream where
I'm back in the hospital,
four months shy of my eighth birthday,
death a faraway train that had not yet stopped
at our station,
the impending alarm all but I
could hear.

And I'm watching *The Cat in the Hat*,
white walls,
blue sheets,
orange bottle of hand-sanitizer
on the table beside the tissues,
the pamphlets,
bed a thousand times more firm
than my understanding of why I am here.

And I'm texting my brother.
He's sitting across from me,
but he cannot speak, so I
text him,
tell him about that "Band Geeks" episode of SpongeBob
he loved so much,
and he laughs, types back,
"omg Riley,
I'm literally dying rn."

VI. Writing Samples

My Father's Son

My Italian professor asks
me when I want
kids we are learning
the future
tense it is simply a practice
question in the book
it does not have to be
true but she is smiling
expecting we are women
meant for mothering why
would a sweet girl like
me not want kids
she makes me give her
a number a ballpark figure 26
is a respectable age
to start a family of course
you can have a dog
too
parenting is so rewarding
and I feel eyes on me
like ice on me my voice
shivers I do not know
how to say I've seen my
father cry only twice
in my life when his son
died and when I became
a poet laureate
but that's a lie I know
how to say that just not
how to be okay with it
with my future
kids not having family
on my side because
my father's son died and
I became a poet and I am
scared I will always be
scared around nine-year-old
boys that look like

VI. Writing Samples

my father's son

VI. Writing Samples

Are You There, Dog? It's Me, Riley

I hope you don't mind that I'm writing this to you
instead of The Man Upstairs™.

I guess I hope He doesn't mind, either.

Sometimes I just feel like I've learned more about the world
looking at a Golden Retriever
than a crucifix.

Is that bad?

It's not that I don't want to talk to God,

I'm just worried it's been too long.

What if He has a new number? Or,

what if He doesn't?

What if He just leaves me on read again?

Are you there, Dog? It's me.

Ever since Kyle brought you home from the shelter,

I've believed more and more

in magic. Or karma.

They're kind of the same thing anyway,

sort of,

right?

Like, if I'm good

and God's Good,

everything will be good,

sort of,

right?

I remember the first time I called God in vain.

It was a Sunday, I think

maybe he was resting. I was, too.

I don't remember who was supposed to be watching.

My brother had cancer.

Diagnosable but not curable.

That last part, I wouldn't find out till my freshman year of college,

in an email from my mom.

She didn't mean to tell me like that.

She thought I already knew.

Are you there, Dog? It's me.

VI. Writing Samples

It's been thirteen years and everything is still
whiskey-raw, still
fuzzy, still
I am shocked that my arms can bear
the weight of it,
that my grieving fingers keep
counting the days, inaudibly,
a sitcom on mute.
Each mass feels like an interrogation to which
I have no answers.
I never do.

What I do know is this:
When it comes to M&Ms, the smaller the better.
The opposite is true for dogs.

Here's what I don't know:
When God ceased being the blanket I crawled under on rainy days.
When He became the rain, instead,
when He drowned me by not letting me in
on the emotional ark of my life's story.
When the tears of my childhood became
the type of flood I can't adulterate.

Are you there, Dog? It's me, Riley.
I've got a bone to pick with God,
and it's not the kind you're gonna like.

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