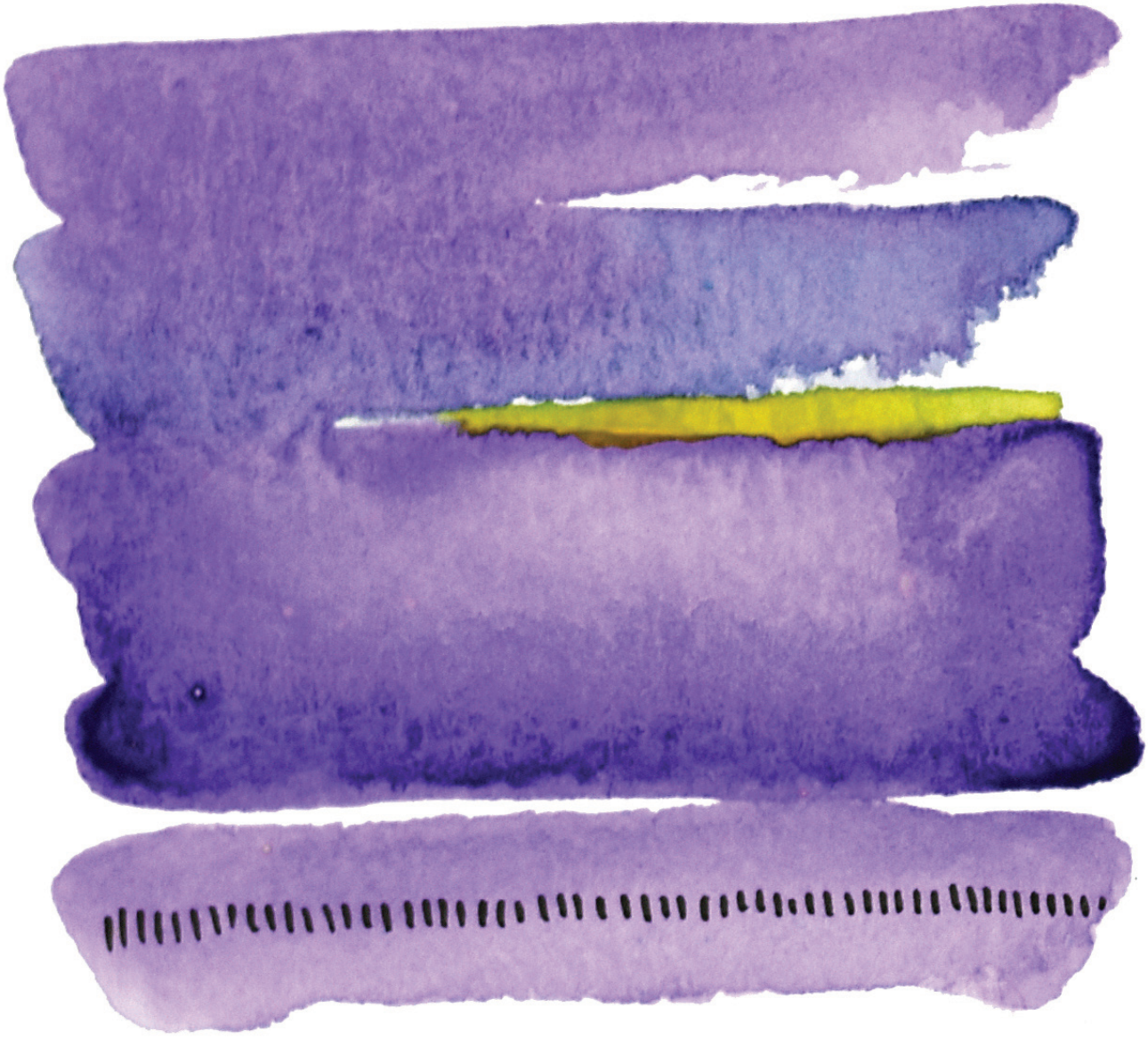
litmosphere

journal of CHARLOTTELIT



Featuring:
Jericho Brown
Clyde Edgerton
Maggie Smith

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Kathie Collins

Editor's Note

We are so pleased to present the third volume of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit* and honored to be able to include an array of finely crafted poems and stories selected from hundreds of entries received last fall in our 2024 Lit/South Awards contest. As an editor, it was thrilling to read one captivating piece after another, to know with certainty we could have filled this volume twice more with truly worthy work. As a member of the reading team tasked with preparing short lists for our guest judges Jericho Brown, Clyde Edgerton, and Maggie Smith, it was also frustrating. I'd have liked to send many more poems and stories forward than was possible. In the end, however, this year's prize winners were clear standouts in their fields. Huge congratulations to Arielle Hebert for her poem "Athazagoraphobia," Michael Sadoff for his short story "Decoy," and Caroline Hamilton Langerman for her nonfiction story "The Difficult Child."

Along with my fabulous team of fellow readers—Nikki Campo, Christopher Davis, Jacqueline Parker, David Poston, and Paul Reali—I also offer congratulations to each of the finalists (including several judge-selected honorable mentions) and semi-finalists whose poems and stories grace this year's journal. We are grateful for the opportunity to share your work with our community of readers and writers—a community that, like the Lit/South Awards region itself, extends well beyond our organization's home in Charlotte, NC.

And, to all the resident (and former resident) writers of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia who submitted to this year's contest—huge thanks! It was a privilege, often a humbling one, to read your entries. About this year's fiction finalists, contest judge Clyde Edgerton writes, "Any judgment about a story depends on the judge's literary leanings. I would not be surprised to see seven different judges find seven different winners in this contest. I felt an artist's care and love beneath each story's composition—and that composition was sometimes artfully simple, sometimes artfully complex. I found subtly, clarity, and also a dependence on a simple fact that lies behind much good fiction: meaning lies within the dramatic scene…I appreciated the suspense, the tension, and the portrayal of meaningful relationships that were evident in each story."

I dare say this assessment also applies to our poetry and nonfiction finalists—and throughout our contest submissions. Whether or not we selected your writing for publication, please know how much your voice matters. We learned something from every poem and story we read. You took us beyond our personal experience

and understanding, those limitations Arielle Hebert seems to argue against in her poem "Athazagoraphobia": "We see what we want to see. We get to be / our own unreliable narrators." In that light, I urge each of you to continue writing and sharing your work; by doing so, you contribute something essential to raising human consciousness.

With gratitude,

Kathie Collins
East Bend, NC

Lit/South Awards 2024
Winners, Finalists & Semi-finalists

Final Judges: Jericho Brown (Poetry), Maggie Smith (Creative Nonfiction), and Clyde Edgerton (Fiction). Readers: Nikki Campo, Kathie Collins, Christopher Davis, Jacqueline Parker, David Poston, and Paul Reali.

POETRY

Winner: Arielle Hebert: "Athazagoraphobia"

Additional Finalists:
Rosa Castellano: "A girl the color of sunshine on water..."
Erin Cowles: "Cut me, I won't die"
Jo Angela Edwins: "The Carriage"
Nadine Ellsworth: "Three Portraits of Women on Fire"
Janet Ford: "Pizza Hut on Central Avenue, 1:00 am"
Caeli Faisst: "Withering"
Regina Garcia: "High John"
Eddy Hicks: "Soiled"
Christine Marshall: "The Evolution of Flight"
Eric Nelson: "O My World"
Em Palughi: "Radnor Lake, July 4th"
Maria Picone: "To the guy who made me a pretzel at the mall and wouldn't give up until I told him where I'm really, really from"
Max Seifert: "The Incredulity"
CB Wilson: "Oak Gall Prayer"

Semi-finalists:
Isaac Akanmu: "parable of the young girl holding a basket of eggs"
Les Bares: "Crimes Committed in My Sleep"
AJ Baumel: "Cycle"
Tess Congo: "The Giver"
Barbara Conrad: "A Girl's Perfect Circle"
Steve Cushman: "Ars Poetics or Why I Never Made It to The Writer's Colony"
Morrow Dowdle: "A Universe, in Revolution"
Katie Dozier: "Time Traveling Haibun"

David Dixon: “If I Fell”
Mary Alice Dixon: “I seek the dirty god”
Tyler Dunston: “After the power outage”
Arielle Hebert: “Erosion”
Jenny Hubbard: “The evening darkens and comes on”
Justin Hunt: “Ghost Poker”
Paul Jones: “Only an Outsider”
Chanlee Luu: “Freezing Point Depression”
Christopher Massenburg: “Black Cloud”
G.H. Plaag: “Elegy for RHW Dillard”
Dannye Romine Powell: “Their Wedding Day, May 12, 1940”
Martin Settle: “Recovering Color”
Maureen Sherbondy: “Her Life as Ferris Wheel”
McKenzie Teter: “Stambaugh Auditorium”
Rebecca Valley: “A Long Time Ago This Was a Rich Man’s Back Yard”
AJ Vilen: “Into the Headwinds on Knife Lake”
Mia Willis: “(BOI)STEROUS”
Alida Woods: “Forgetting”

NONFICTION

Winner: Caroline Hamilton Langerman: “The Difficult Child”

Additional Finalists:
Kristen Dorsey: “Vine of My Soul”
Sarah Gallucci: “Just Five Minutes”
Steph Gilman: “Revisions”
Terri Leonard: “Gurus: Water Oaks on Mothering”
Mary Tribble: “Our Mothers Map Our Lives”

FICTION

Winner: Michael Sadoff: “Decoy”
Honorable Mention: Melanie Raskin: “Wishbone”
Honorable Mention: Anna Schachner: “The Lovely Woods Are Yours”

Additional Finalists:
Michael Brown: “Belize”
Vicki Derderian: “Binder of Guys”
Stevenson Richardson: “The Get-Gone Man”
Yance Wyatt: “Barbicide” and “Broken Water”

Steph Gilman

Revisions

I am editing an essay about "a challenge you have experienced and how it changed you" that my sister Rhonda's oldest son has written for his college application. Caleb is seventeen now, grappling with the difference between his world and *the* world. In my mind he is still a three-month-old infant with colic and squirrel cheeks, and I am a teenager watching my sister rub his back while he is crying: she presses her face against his to soothe him with her uncommonly husky voice, and he turns his mouth to her cheek because of the rooting reflex. She smiles with her eyes closed because even if he is screaming and searching for milk, he is with her and she is with him and it is the only place in the world they both want to be.

In real life, his mom died eight years ago. I am in my 30s, sitting in front of Caleb's 850 words and trying to whittle them down to 650 because, apparently, there's a word limit on recounting challenges that have changed you. His version of the story of his mom's death is hard to read, probably as hard as my version would be, but his is hard for other reasons. He's asked me to make edits since I was there and remember this story well and his memory is fuzzy.

But I don't know how to edit his essay objectively, as an impartial reader. Instead, I have an emotional attachment to every word. It's like something I have been waiting to read for years that I didn't realize I had been waiting for. Caleb does not often talk about his mom, and neither do his other three siblings. Darcy was eleven when she died, Caleb nine, Colin seven, Davis six. We have avoided the topic for the last eight years because I can see it makes them uncomfortable, and I've been told their dad and stepmom don't often bring it up.

To have Caleb's version of the story on the page in front of me is surreal, like an emotional autopsy which I wonder if I have the capacity or qualifications to conduct.

*

The essay begins: *Everyone knows life can be hard sometimes, and it will throw you a curveball every now and then. You just have to deal with it and move on; take the experience and grow from it; be prepared for the next challenge.*

I want to ask who told him losing his mother to cancer was the equivalent of a curveball. Deal with it. Move on. Grow from it. Be prepared. How many people handed out these adages after his mom died, like uncashable checks? They are ambitious, yet fraudulent, and I wonder how well they have worked for anyone who has offered them.

I'm editing the essay with tracked changes and am tempted to insert a comment that says *What does 'deal with it' mean to you?* but continue reading instead. He has written about the year his "birth mom" was diagnosed with cancer, when he was nine, which I change to eight. Then I note that since this is not a story of adoption, perhaps "birth mom" is unnecessary and misleading.

But is my note for the sake of the eventual reader, or for me? When am I treading into the Land of Overstepping? Every time I hear the term "birth mom" from him or his siblings, I picture them in the years before their mom—their biological mom and my real sister—got sick, their tiny arms clinging to her waist while she made dinner. I remember the specific years when she became their birth mother, in 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2008, after hours of labor. And I wonder if a consequence of death is that the ones left behind must carefully sift through the memories, sorting and even eliminating some, as a technique for warding off pain. I suppose it is because of these eliminations that I am here reviewing Caleb's essay.

*

As a growing child, Caleb continues, *I had no idea what my birth mother's death meant for me or what the future was going to have in store for me.*

The future is often conceived in the mind and based on experiences of the past. In the South, we love to add the phrase "Lord willing" to the end of "see you soon," and sometimes even "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." Our lives feel certain until they don't, and until then, we imagine the future in absolutes. As far as my sister's kids were concerned, they didn't have a past without her, and their brains were too undeveloped to consider a world where she would not forever exist as their mom. My brain is highly developed, and I still can't conceive of it. "Mom" is everything. We are tethered by an invisible cord long after that essential lifeline is cut. As a child, I consistently called my elementary schoolteachers "Mom" and felt the blush of my cheeks as I quickly corrected myself. We ask children their mother's names, and they often respond with simply "Mom."

I know that infants learn object permanence around eight months old, understanding that just because things disappear, they are not really gone. But when do we learn object transience or, even more startling, person transience? Do we ever learn it? The process of my sister's kids learning it was brutal to witness. It showed up in their little bodies with malfunctioning systems and erratic emotions.

Caleb began involuntarily throwing up after most meals, much like his mother had been doing before she died. Colin stopped using the toilet, Davis began wetting the bed. No one could explain it; they were six and seven years old and had been potty trained for years.

I watched rage build in each of the kids, especially in the boys, with no valve to release that pressurized need for their mom. More physical fights with one another, more bruises and blood. After one argument, Caleb ran away from home, and the

neighbors went searching for him. He was ten.

Shortly after that, when I was visiting, he erupted in anger at Davis, who was six. I pulled them apart and led Caleb into the bathroom to talk while he brushed his teeth. Sitting across from him on the toilet lid, I watched him squeeze the toothpaste with both hands, his mouth in a straight line, brow furrowed. I tried to keep my tone gentle. "What makes you feel so mad at Davis?"

He brushed his teeth slowly, wordlessly, then spit the toothpaste in the sink and wiped his mouth. Finally, he responded, "It's all his fault."

"What is?"

"Cuz mom died. He needed her too much."

I stared at him, processing the words, feeling them carve into me. They touched on a belief I understood to be true when I was his age: a child can be too needy. It was possible to wring someone out until they are emptied of their capacity to love anymore, and thus to live anymore. I wondered where Caleb had received this similar message, that a child could have so many needs that they could eventually kill his mother.

*

I continue reading Caleb's essay. *I grew up with my father trying to take care of myself and my three other siblings. Our family struggled financially, and my dad was constantly stressed having to take care of my mother, take care of his kids, and working as an architect full time.*

This narrative is familiar to me. It is the one that I have heard his father, Nate, recount, where something always feels missing, and it's not until I consider my uneasiness that I realize it is Rhonda who is missing—her life, her illness, her efforts to continue being a mom while dying. Her disappearance from the world was slow; she began to sleep more often, too sick to leave her bedroom while life went on outside of it. When I've asked Caleb about his memories of his mom, he says he doesn't have many but that he remembers sitting in her bed while she helped him with his homework. And while I understand this, that he can't help what he doesn't remember and that her erasure began long before she died, it's like watching her disappear all over again to read these words.

At the same time, what corrective liberties am I taking based on the version I remember? How much of it then becomes my own voice, my own pain?

In Nate's version of the story, the one I'm reading in front of me, he is the central character. His version allows life to continue functioning, albeit with a new normal, but my sister's death does not control the narrative. And, in fact, his experience of loss and rising from the ashes creates an affecting narrative arc, as illustrated in nearly every dead mother plotline from *Snow White* to *Bambi* to *Finding Nemo*. But as a sister, I have never thought of Nate as the hero of this story.

It's impossible not to recall the times Rhonda confided in me: how she felt like a

single parent in her marriage. How Nate was at the office from early in the morning till late at night. How she struggled with postpartum depression and suicidal thoughts after Davis was born, and she and Nate considered separating. Nate's refusal to do his own therapy. How she packed up the kids and left for three months to live at our parents' house.

And then there are other disconnected memories that collide with this timeline and take up residence in my resentments. Like when Rhonda asked Nate for a smartphone in 2012, just before she got sick, and his response was, "Why would you need a smartphone?" The unspoken addendum to this being "...when you don't have a job?"

I have always found this ironic, given that when she first met Nate, she was the founder and director of a Big Brothers Big Sisters chapter in middle Tennessee. Later, she moved to D.C. to be close to him and took a job working for the secretary of state at the time, Colin Powell. When they were first married, she was the primary breadwinner for the family while he finished architecture licensure. A few years later, she had four children under age five and could not come up with a good enough reason to own a smartphone.

Slowly, I delete Caleb's sentence, *I grew up with my father trying to take care of myself and my three other siblings and* add in the following language: *My mom stayed home to raise my three siblings and me, and when she got sick, it was hard on our whole family.*

I justify this decision because of the next section, which is about all the nannies Nate hired to help take care of the children after Rhonda died, who each promptly quit after a few weeks. Narratively, in my mind, there had to be an unavailable caregiver for there to be a sudden need for a nanny.

I fill a glass of wine before continuing to read: *Many nannies could not take care of four kids without going crazy,* Caleb writes. *Many quit within a few months of helping out, but we were just kids. We did not know any better.*

I am proud of him for recognizing the truth, that it wasn't his fault. I also want to interject and remind him that it wasn't just because there were four kids—they were four confused, terrified, grieving kids.

*

The essay is halfway through, and I find myself reading faster as he describes his mom being moved into a hospice facility. I don't know if it's that I want the essay to be over or to be finished editing, or if my brain is recalling those days in hospice, when the lingering feeling was for everything to end.

It reminded me of a senior living home, Caleb writes, *which it was in a way.* I type in a clarifying line: *Because most of the sick people there were so much older than my mom.*

At some point a nurse had accidentally left behind a chart in Rhonda's hospice

room, which listed all the patients currently in the facility. Line by line were their names, medications, allergies, diagnoses. Each of their diseases were typical of old age, including my sister's. 82, 85, 75, 90, then Rhonda—43. It looked like a typo.

I did not think about why she had to live there and not with us, Caleb goes on. I think to myself, "Because the house was too far from any hospital, her pain was impossible to manage, her children were young and needy, her spouse was not equipped to care for everyone, and being home meant she did not get the support she needed." I do not add this.

It began to get scary around this time. We would visit her every weekend when we had finished our homework and do an activity with her every week. What I did not realize was that these activities were supposed to be bonding moments with my mother before she passed away.

What I'm sure he doesn't realize is most of us didn't realize it either. We had not allowed ourselves to realize it. The morning I finally got on a plane to Tennessee I had just run a 10-mile race. It was only at the prompting of Ruthanne, the middle sister between Rhonda and me, who sent me a text that said, "I think we're at the end," after days of assuring me that hospice was meant to be temporary until her pain and weight had stabilized enough to continue chemotherapy.

There is so much I know Caleb does not remember about this time, and the fact that he remembers these final moments as scary feels significant to me. I wonder if he recalls sitting with me in the hospice kitchen and filling plates of macaroni and cheese someone had brought for dinner. Anything to get the kids out of that room for a few moments, which was like a funeral visitation with its tearful guests, doleful Christian worship songs, and a harp player who meant well but whose serenading I found maudlin. The macaroni and cheese helped to satiate an unfillable hollowness. It was the kids' favorite food, and I felt I could sit there eating and eating and eating and never get full.

The night the nurses told us they didn't know how much longer Rhonda would be lucid, Nate brought the kids in one by one to say goodbye to her. The rest of us, family and friends, sat in the hallway waiting, pulling a child into our lap during each unemotional exit.

It had all felt like a performance to me, like a scene from a script that reads, "Family says goodbye, after a final 'I love you.' They each exit stage left to join loved ones."

Afterwards, Nate stated that it had been awkward; the kids didn't understand or know what to say, and Rhonda was in and out of consciousness, saying only "I love you" many times over. I wonder if this was one of the scary moments for Caleb, sitting with her, trying to find forever farewell language as a nine year old.

The day before my 12th birthday, my mom passed away, the essay continues. I change it to "tenth." His older sister hadn't even turned twelve yet. *My dad gathered my siblings in his room and told us how our mom had died in her sleep. Everyone cried*

except for me. I cared about her and loved her so much but just could not bring myself to cry. I was in shock.

I am struck by his need to remind the reader that, despite not being able to cry, he loved her. Tears are not obedient, I want to tell him. They are, in fact, frustratingly obstinate. For months, tears would not come, and it began to feel like they were collecting in some deep recess of my body, certain to explode if I didn't give them an escape. It was only after two or three drinks they appeared unbidden in a violent eruption of emotion that racked my body until I felt exorcised. I remember one night on vacation after several margaritas when my husband held me in a hotel room while I wept. I told him it felt like my sister's spirit hovering in the room. I sensed her wrapping herself around me, which was somehow both comforting and excruciating. When I opened my eyes, it was my husband, silent and steadfast, as the episode flowed through me.

In these moments, the same sentiment would play in my mind: *I can't feel any of this enough. It does not bring her back. It fixes nothing.* The tears would eventually subside in sputtering breaths, leaving behind an ashfall of exhaustion.

No wonder Caleb couldn't bring himself to cry.

*

The essay wraps up with an anecdote about the soccer game that Caleb and his siblings were scheduled to play the day after his mom had died. *I scored six goals against the opposing team and everyone was so excited that they cried and my entire team hugged me at the end. It was my birthday too, so after the game, my team and my family all celebrated and we had cupcakes and it was an amazing moment.*

I attended this game in a daze, feeling relief that my niece and nephews were able to channel their energy elsewhere. I remember struggling to make sense of sitting at a YMCA soccer field with all these very alive people, watching the flushed faces of children flash past me, when I'd sat next to my sister's body the day prior. I do not remember my nephew scoring any goals or celebrating over cupcakes. I again marvel at the brain's ability to compartmentalize events. My nephew could relive the joyful moments amidst the pain that hovered over his childhood, and I could not seem to stop reliving the pain because it haunts me.

The closing paragraph of Caleb's essay turns a corner, and I read it multiple times. *Looking back at it,* he writes, *I miss my mom so much, and I never got to see how she truly was as a person. I was not a very emotional person back then, and I am not necessarily now, but this memory engraved in my head still comes up from time to time in my brain.*

It's not just me—this essay exists because Caleb is haunted too.

In that moment after my mom died, he continues, *I had turned my sadness and anger to perform a miracle of scoring six soccer goals.... I sometimes look back at it and compare it to current challenges that I go through. I have overcome many challenges such*

as school and work by simply retelling myself this memory I had as a child. I have faced much harder challenges than this, and I have overcome them.

As I read this final paragraph, I am sitting with my husband in kitchen. I tell him Caleb is doing the same thing I've done since Rhonda died—trying to carve out the happy ending. The number of times I've tried to turn her death into six soccer goals.

*

After sending me this college essay, Caleb texted to tell me he had found the first iteration he drafted in the 5th grade less than a year after his mom died. In the text were images of two handwritten sheets of paper. I open them now to compare the two essays and see how different they read. In the older piece, I notice Rhonda is still called 'my mom,' not 'birth mom.' The section that stands out to me most is in the middle of the first page when the story of his mom's death becomes intertwined with the narrative of his own will to recover from it.

His words are elegiac, earnestly digging into the depth of a ten-year-old boy's struggle to cope. There is nothing artificial, just the honest inner workings of his young mind: *When my mom died, I felt like I could cry a hurricane. I spread out my anger around my family and it didn't help anything. I didn't know whether to be sad, or just to ignore it. This is when I discovered determination. I learned that loss was a very great thing. I also learned to never always mourn about sad things or you become very boring. Although we should never always mourn over things, we should never forget or ignore them.*

Caleb's words in the college version of his essay play in my head: *I was not a very emotional person back then, and I am not necessarily now.* I think back to those moments with him as an infant and toddler, when giant tears would roll down his cheeks at hurt feelings, frustration at a sibling, or separation anxiety from his mom. I can still hear his high-pitched whimper. I remember how Rhonda held him to her cheek. I suppose there is a belief out there that a marker of age is that we grow out of certain emotions.

I want both Caleb's fifth grade and seventeen-year-old self to know that I don't think mourning is ever boring. I wish he had felt like he could cry a hurricane and not drown.

I go back to my computer and insert a comment beside the last paragraph. I tell Caleb that between me and Ruthanne and his grandparents, we'd love to share his mom with him when he's ready. And then I ask him if this is the true ending of the essay.

I don't know if any kid can turn their sadness and anger into anything but sadness and anger, I write.

In some ways I realize I do have an agenda with my edits. Helping Caleb make sense of this complex story is the privilege Rhonda granted me as her sister and his aunt.

One of her final appeals to me and Ruthanne in the days before she died was that we don't leave her kids. Her tone had been weak but urgent. I have struggled with what this means. How do I hold these kids tightly but loosely with the recognition that I am not their parent and certainly not Rhonda?

Something prompted Caleb to write about her death. First as an adolescent and now as an almost-adult. A year ago, he texted to ask me and Ruthanne if we knew what sort of music his birth mom liked. Did we *know!* Music was her great love. Ruthanne and I compiled a playlist for him with some of her favorite artists, from James Taylor to George Michael. Maybe part of not leaving them is being a person he trusts to make a playlist and edit the story *because* I am partial.

I continue writing, my heart pounding with an awareness of the power of language and storytelling and the responsibility I possess in helping to frame it. *I don't know if this essay is about you scoring soccer goals. I think it might be about you continuing to live after the hardest experience a kid could possibly experience.* I go on to tell him that the act of writing about his essay and going back in time to confront painful memories is evidence of how he is constantly being changed by the loss of his mom.

As I type, I do not sense my sister's presence hovering as viscerally as when I am numbed by alcohol and sorrow. Instead, I feel her protective urgency and love for these four kids. I feel all the pain and the privilege of being here to share that part of her with him. I hope he does too.