*When I was younger, I was adamant that no two foods on my plate touch. As a result, I often used a second plate to prevent such an atrocity. In many ways, I learned to separate different things this way from my older brothers, Nate and Rob. Growing up, I idolized both of them. Nate was a performer, and I insisted on arriving early to his shows to secure front row seats, refusing to budge during intermission for fear of missing anything. Rob was a three-sport athlete, and I attended his games religiously, waving worn-out foam cougar paws and cheering until my voice was hoarse. My brothers were my role models. However, while each was talented, neither was interested in the other’s passion. To me, they represented two contrasting ideals of what I could become: artist or athlete. I believed I had to choose.*

*And for a long time, I chose athlete. I played soccer, basketball, and lacrosse and viewed myself exclusively as an athlete, believing the arts were not for me. I conveniently overlooked that since the age of five, I had been composing stories for my family for Christmas, gifts that were as much for me as them, as I loved writing. So when in tenth grade, I had the option of taking a creative writing class, I was faced with a question: could I be an athlete and a writer? After much debate, I enrolled in the class, feeling both apprehensive and excited. When I arrived on the first day of school, my teacher, Ms. Jenkins, asked us to write down our expectations for the class. After a few minutes, eraser shavings stubbornly sunbathing on my now-smudged paper, I finally wrote, “I do not expect to become a published writer from this class. I just want this to be a place where I can write freely.”*

*Although the purpose of the class never changed for me, on the third “submission day,” – our time to submit writing to upcoming contests and literary magazines – I faced a predicament. For the first two submission days, I had passed the time editing earlier pieces, eventually (pretty quickly) resorting to screen snake when hopelessness made the words look like hieroglyphics. I must not have been as subtle as I thought, as on the third of these days, Ms. Jenkins approached me. After shifting from excuse to excuse as to why I did not submit my writing, I finally recognized the real reason I had withheld my work: I was scared. I did not want to be different, and I did not want to challenge not only others’ perceptions of me, but also my own. I yielded to Ms. Jenkin’s pleas and sent one of my pieces to an upcoming contest.*

*By the time the letter came, I had already forgotten about the contest. When the flimsy white envelope arrived in the mail, I was shocked and ecstatic to learn that I had received 2nd place in a nationwide writing competition. The next morning, however, I discovered Ms. Jenkins would make an announcement to the whole school exposing me as a poet. I decided to own this identity and embrace my friends’ jokes and playful digs, and over time, they have learned to accept and respect this part of me. I have since seen more boys at my school identifying themselves as writers or artists.*

*I no longer see myself as an athlete and a poet independently, but rather I see these two aspects forming a single inseparable identity – me. Despite their apparent differences, these two disciplines are quite similar, as each requires creativity and devotion. I am still a poet when I am lacing up my cleats for soccer practice and still an athlete when I am building metaphors in the back of my mind – and I have realized ice cream and gummy bears taste pretty good together.*