

# My Mother's Mural

## POETRY

**Raquel Pihlstrom**, Grade 9, Lake Oswego High School,  
Lake Oswego, OR. Marcy Huss, *Educator*; Region-at-Large,  
*Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **New York Life Award**

my mother is an artist.  
she paints murals  
of topaz koi ponds  
on her bald head,  
curling their fins  
around her skull like  
a chiffon headscarf,  
painting over the cracks  
until  
the paint peels away.

and when the paint peels away,  
she cuts up medical bills  
and forms collages  
on her chest,  
morphing scars into  
tall mountain ranges  
that loom over  
her caved-in stomach,  
plastering on paper  
until  
the paper falls away.

and when the paper falls away,  
she sculpts birds out of earth,  
her hands muddy and scabbed  
as she flies on their backs,  
letting the sky fill her lungs  
and the wind whip her head  
back and forth  
until  
the earth crumbles away.

and when the earth crumbles away,  
my mother lays in a  
hospital bed,  
her yellow canvas edges  
curling  
behind thick panes  
of glass.

i tap my finger  
against the window,  
but the woman in the painting  
doesn't stir.

my mother is dying now.  
cancer has taken over  
her body,  
has settled deep  
within her lungs and bones.  
the doctor says  
she has one week  
to live.  
i hold her frail hands in mine  
and wonder,  
how can a four-year-old  
say goodbye?

after ten years,  
i still don't know the answer.

my mother was an artist.  
she painted murals  
of topaz koi ponds  
on her bald head,  
curled their fins  
around her skull like  
a chiffon headscarf,  
painted over the cracks  
until

everything  
peeled  
away. ■