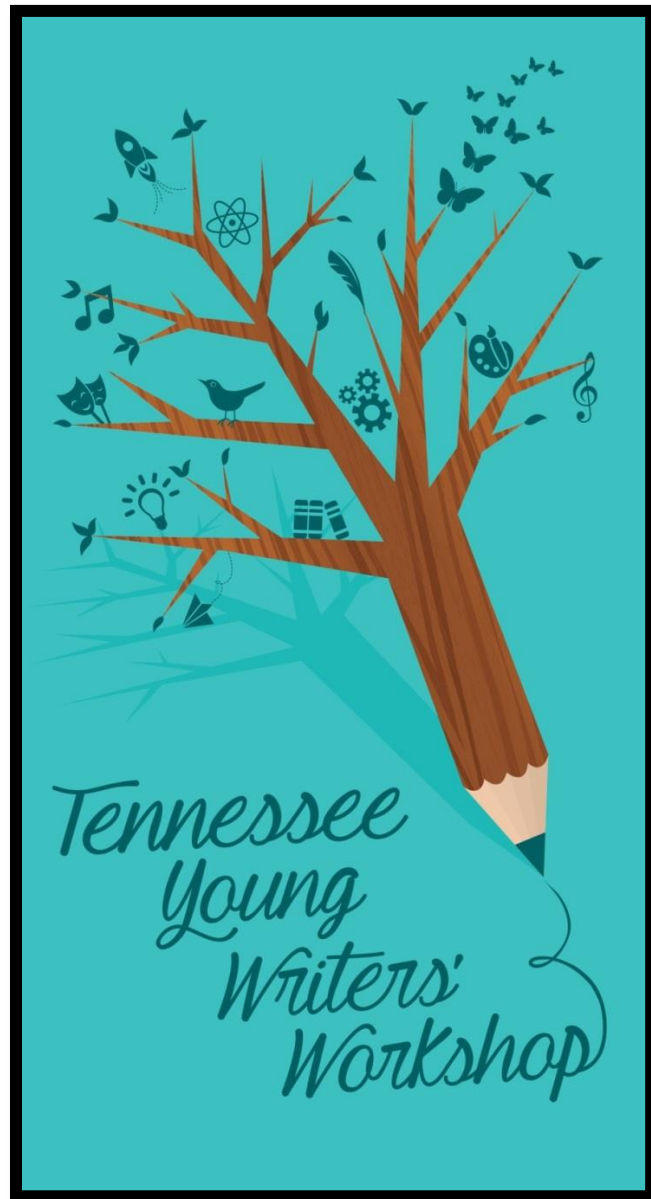


2016



**Tennessee Young Writers' Workshop
&
Appalachian Young Writers' Workshop**

Student Anthology

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Excerpt from “Dragon Man”
By Jade Walker, 10th Grade, Brentwood

Thick smells of crawfish etouffee and beignets flooded his senses, the spices creating sparks behind his eyelids, sugar and fried bread greasy enough to make his skin bead with sweat. Gumbo always made his tongue delightfully numb, and the sensation would always make him smile. While remembering the silky-smoother satisfaction of pressing the pads of his thumbs against the underside of a crab and curling his nails into its meat, unsalted, naturally flavorful organs, the similarities between his own organs and jambalaya struck him. The taste wasn't the same, but the thickness and scorching head of the liquid, fresh out of the pot, fresh from his pulled apart skin. Those were alike.

The reliving of scents and the taste of his home came to an abrupt halt. It wasn't too bad, though. From the very bottom of his throat, a grunt surfaced. His tongue found its way back to his lip, absentmindedly dragging across a cupid's bow coated in an unsightly layer of vermilion.

“Look at me, you bastard!”

The noise felt like kitten's claws scratching against his eardrums.

“I am.”

“You're not!”

The most poignant taste he could remember was the most simple.

Red beans and rice.

DREA

BY ALEXIS ENDERLE, 8TH GRADE, BRENTWOOD

I was fourteen when she died. A burning sensation stretching from my elbow to my fingertips woke me up that night. After I opened my eyes, I screamed at what I saw. A fire raged through Eliza and I's room and engulfed my arm. Blue, orange, and golden flames stretched to the ceiling. Our previously white curtains were reduced to a pile of ashes on the floor. The flames scorched my arms and legs as I ran out the door and down the stairs. I stopped in my tracks as I heard Eliza's inhuman scream echo around me. I left my sister, one of my closest friends, to be devoured by the flames. A chandelier fell to my feet, breaking me from my daze. My father pulled me around the pile of glass and burning wood and out of our house. We ran as fast as our burnt feet could carry us, my mother joining us on the way. We turned around and watched the Daimont Manor burn. My heart still beat repeatedly in my chest as the shock of what just occurred settled in. After the fire ceased, the manor was reduced to ash and rubble, and I couldn't cry anymore, we went to the wreckage to try and salvage anything from the wreckage we could find. I sobbed uncontrollably when I found Eliza's silver locket in the ashes and clasped it around my neck.

I stared at the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. Eliza is gone and I started the fire with my magic which caused her to scream an inhuman scream which still echoes in my ears three days later. After the bleak burial, I climbed a tree and watched the sun set on the horizon. The sky a shade of midnight blue looked so peaceful in this time of torture. I heard the leaves rustle; my best friend and the youngest member of Archane's royal family, Edric, sat next to me amongst the branches.

"Eliza's dead." He stated.

"Yes. What's your point?" I questioned.

"It's a shame. She died young." His words, completely void of any sympathy.

“Do you care? DO YOU EVEN CARE ELIZA IS GONE AND NEVER COMING BACK! My sister is never coming back. “I climbed down the tree and stormed off in tears.

Excerpt from Prologue
Paige Supeck, 9th Grade, Oliver Springs

The color was dull. He'd described it as something unimaginable, but it was actually dull. There were a lot of dull things nowadays. His life was dull.

As a matter of fact, sometimes he wondered why he even quit his job to become a journalist. Sure, he got to see the world, but going two hundred miles every day really dragged him down. So, to even out the boring and what he wanted to see, he always exaggerated, like he did with the color.

Her dress wasn't the fire-like red that he could always remember writing about. It was a pastel pink, making her look like an angel. When he said that, he meant a literal angel, with light shining around it and small metallic jewels reflecting said light, not because of her beauty. He'd actually never seen her face. She was always facing the opposite direction, playing the piano. He never wanted to see her face because he knew he'd exaggerate about how it looked, too.

"The usual?" a waitress asked in a quiet and low tone, which made him shake his head and stand. "Well, then, have a good night."

The columns weren't how he'd always write about them. They weren't grand, made of marble and yellowed with age. They were made of plastic and imitated of those used in Greek and Roman architecture. The floors weren't the sheer stone like he'd promised those who would visit. No, they were worn clay slabs that were cloudy with scuffs and cracks. It wasn't something you'd see in paradise, it was something you'd find after slipping the hotel boss a little extra cash because you'd heard of from a military buddy who spent most of his nights away from his wife here.

That was how he managed to find this place, in all reality. Mark had let something slip out of his mouth, and that was the beginning of it. Cabaret Cafe was the place that had turn the small spark he had for wanting to be a reporter into a flame. That flame was about to burn out, though. This wasn't what he expected.

He stalked his way up to the sixth floor, the grey walls and stairs passing like shadows in a crowd. He'd once described them as silver lined and plated with gold molding. Instead, they were just dull and grey, just like the storm clouds rolling in from the east. Rain was hitting the wall-length window, causing a repetitive tapping that was similar to the second hand on a clock. He stopped for a moment to admire the view before finally making it to his room.

He lazily ran the key card against the door lock, and let it fall from his hand to hang from the lanyard around his neck once he heard the all too familiar beep of the door, followed by the click of the door unlocking. When he opened his door, he found his room not how he left it. Instead of in shambles and complete chaos, it was neat and tidy, unlike him. His clothes were folded on the bed near the door, the bed he slept in was made, and the blinds were open. But, that wasn't what caught him off guard. In fact, he was glad someone did this. However, outside, the sky had shifted to a dark grey color, with a single opening in the clouds. The light from that opening was brightening an unnatural amount of area, considering it couldn't have been bigger than his room. At least twenty blocks were lit up near the center of the city.

He edged closer to the window, and pushed the blinds out of his way. He pushed himself close to the glass, trying his hardest to get a look at the opening. Something was... off. As a matter of fact, something was really off because he could have sworn someone was standing in the middle of the opening. No, he knew someone was. He drew in a quick breath, noticing that there was now the smell of kitchen bleach lingering, just slightly noticeable.

He would say that nothing was adding up, but then he remembered all of the things he saw while he was working with the military. He remembered the test tubes. They weren't dull. They were filled with vivid blue liquids that seemed to glow. The glass was at least two inches thick. The things inside of them were all deformed, having extra limbs, distorted bodies covered in scales, and more than likely born directly from test tubes. Everything

constantly smelled like chemicals, harsh cleaners meant to clean rust and blood and strains of viruses that could wipe out the planet.

He placed his hand against the glass, and pushed some of his weight against it to lean more on the glass. His dog tags hit against the glass, causing a small ping to ring out. But instead of stopping, it just kept going in the same high-pitched tone. He pushed slightly away from the window, and examined the dog tags. He forgot he even had them on.

Leslie

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No Preference

By the time he was done reminiscing about his past, the window cracked. He jerked his hand away immediately. Fear began to flood his body as blood began to drip down his palm. He looked back to the sky, seeing that the form was now larger and the opening was growing too. The humming from the dog tags still hadn't stopped. He wondered what was happening.

A shot rang out and the window shattered to a billion pieces, some sticking to his skin. He winced in pain, and swiftly turned to see just what had happened. There, a man stood in his doorway, dressed in all black with a sniper rifle cradled in his arms, and still looking through the sight.

"Hope you're ready for a fight, son. Journalism just won't pay the bills." The man's voice was rough, like he smoked 50 or more cigarettes, and drank straight coffee grounds. "Get your guns, soldier."

He didn't hesitate.

Dreamless Excerpt
Sabrina Lessly, 10th Grade, Brentwood

My heart is the first to reawaken. I can feel it, tired and sluggish, slowly resuming its steady beat. My lungs come next, taking in the frigid air with hesitance. Gradually, they remember themselves, and breathing becomes easier. Then comes my consciousness, the electrical impulses within my mind that I can control, so few in number yet so crucial to my existence as it stands.

I open my eyes to the heavily muted light. The cold still holds its purchase on my limbs; looking at the small timer above my head confirms that I am early again. My breaths plume across the small space and condense on the frosted glass. I watch them with intensity. There is nothing else to see.

As feeling at last settles into my fingers and toes, the timer beeps, and the glass slides upwards and away. When I was younger, I squinted, but now the bright lights do not bother me as I step into the featureless hallway. Behind me, the glass slides back into place. Then the pod rotates one-hundred and eighty degrees, becoming indistinguishable from the wall.

To either side of me stand the others. I do not know what they look like. I am not supposed to care. As one, we turn right ninety degrees and begin walking. All I know of the person in front of me is their looming height and their long, dark hair. I have never seen their face. I have never heard their name. I don't want to learn either. I don't want to know if there are thoughts inside their brain, if they are anything like mine.

That is against the rules. That is wrong.

We enter what is called the "Mess Hall". Exactly what a "mess" is or why this hall is dedicated to it, I am uncertain. We stop, rotate another ninety degrees, and sit at our respective stools. I rest my forearms on the counter in front of me and listen as the others do the same. I do not look at them. I do not. Want. To.

A hatch opens in the wall. The plate slides out, pushed by an unseen force. On it is a fork and a cube of sustenance. The fork glints in the fluorescent light and feels cool and rigid in the fingers of my right hand. The sustenance is also shiny, gray, and cool, but

it shudders when moved and feels slippery on my tongue, as though it possesses a sentience I am unable to fully detect or understand. Whether the tastelessness makes this prospect more or less disturbing is not easily discernable.

I am thinking about the person again, the one now seated to my left. I should not be doing this, as I have not been instructed as such, but I am thinking about them anyway. Their hair reflects the lights, just like everything in the Facility, but it appears darker and softer than anything else. I wonder if it feels like my hair. I wonder what my hair feels like. I cannot recall the last time I checked.

Voices would be much easier to compare. I could never forget the sound of my voice. Perhaps I am supposed to, but I have not been instructed as such. I *have* been told that I will never hear it again.

I want to.

I want to look at the others. I want to talk to them. I want to have a “conversation”. But I cannot. It would be wrong. It would fail. I would be punished again.

Untitled

Lizzy Roth, 9th Grade, Murfreesboro

Men and women in suits filed into the room. Not one of them made a sound, even stifling their breathing for fear of creating a disturbance in the fragile balance between them. Footfalls were silenced, coughs held in their respective throats. As these distinguished individuals, who were fearful of their own breaths, took their seats, the silence was punctured by the opening of suitcases and the rustling of papers. It was all quite precautionary, they all knew why they were there, but none of them wanted to come to terms with it. Small talk began the longer they sat in silence, and all participating in this meeting were deeply uncomfortable with the subject at hand.

Hushed tones filled the crowded room. No one wanted to be the first to speak. "I'm sure you all know why we're here." A voice carried above the crowd, earning silence in response. "The recent—events—have caused panic among the people, and we are needed to do our jobs." Another voice joined in, challenging the otherwise silent majority. "And what jobs are those? To lie to the public? Silencing their well-placed concerns will get us nothing in the end. We need to be prepared for the worst, and to do that, we need their help." The room erupted then, into a chorus of opposing sides. The original voice spoke out, throwing the room once again into an uneasy quiet. "If we are to not agree, let us take a vote. Those who wish to tell the public, go to the left, those who wish to keep them safe, go to the right." Immediately, the room was divided, with the scraping of chairs there were divisions of all but one to the left or right. This lone figure that was left huddled in a chair. The others watched, awaiting a decision. Finally, the figure stood. "Who are we to make the choice? Us few men and women, we should not decide the fate of our country. Those who want to know should know, and those who don't, will never be told. A fellow member spoke up from the left side of the room. "How will we keep the information away from those who do not wish to know? Others are bound to slip and let the secret out." Another spoke from the right. "That is why we must not tell them. It's too dangerous!" The huddled

figure spoke out once more, voice raised against the protests from both sides, “Yes, all of you present good faults in my plan. However, I still stand with the belief that they should decide. We do not know what they wish to do with this information. Even if the majority decided to tell them, there would still be few who were left in doubt and unrest. I will not make a choice to tell them or not, and as the room is evenly divided without my vote, you are in need of the Supreme Ruler to make the decision for you. I wish you luck. If you come to a decision, be hasty in realizing it to the public, they will not wait for long.” And with that, the figure left the room, leaving the rest of The Consultants with a terrible choice to make.

Meanwhile, in the public, in the streets, a sort of electricity charged the air. People knew that a decision was being made, and press swarmed the streets, blocking traffic and others who just wanted to get on with their daily lives. A major fraction of the population had watched The Consultants go into that building just that morning, and, although no one knew what it was about, they had all heard rumors, whispering in the streets that put a nagging thought in the back of their minds. Just a little nagging thought that maybe, maybe this meeting wasn't as routine as they made it seem. Maybe there was something brewing under the surface. Then, when they thought The Consultants had been discussing a minor matter after all, when they were all at their homes resting from battling the press off the streets, a news cast broke the silence.

Eventually, the decision had been made to tell the public. Many that day were thrown into a war between themselves. The city was mainly thrown into disarray, with dangerous people roaming the streets. Skeptics mainly remained in their homes, or, in general, people who just wanted to have a normal evening, instead had to hide from looting and chaos. However, in the end, The Consultants held together in a stronger mind, they left the room feeling as if they had made the right choice. The voices of the public rang strong throughout the system, however corrupt it might have seemed. They now had the knowledge that had been kept from them, and knowledge is the supreme judgement of power.

Untitled
By Riley Verner, 7th Grade, Nashville

I started growing a tail in math class. Luckily, I sat in the back corner of the room where I was easy to miss. It started as a weird tingling. And then, the tingling became pins and needles. But after a few seconds it stopped.

Good, I thought. Finally, I can concentrate.

We were in the middle of taking a twenty-paged tested-- about algebra. The horror, right? Anyway, I was nearing the end when something brushed against my leg.

Looking down, I only saw my backpack and a forgotten paper airplane. I dismissed the distraction and turned back to the classroom's clock. It was almost three.

Come on, Rebecca. You can't afford another F.

It happened two more times. At first, I shook my head to clear it. The test was getting to me. Every scratch of pencil and squeak of an eraser diverged my attention.

The last time something brushed against my leg, I snapped. "Stop!" It came out louder than what I'd intended.

Half the class looked up and snickered. Muttering insults out of the corners of their mouths. Miss Seamagin, an old grey-haired lady with no humor, peered at me from over her square glasses.

"Miss Rebecca," her voice was brittle like cracking yellow paper. She stood and folded her newspaper on her desk looking mildly annoyed. Seriously, how ancient was she? Her mouth was set in a straight line. "Do you have something to share with the class?"

My face burned. Twenty pairs of eyes were on me. I could hear every breath and soft giggle in the room. "No."

“Pardon me? I can’t hear you, dear.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “No.”

“Good. Time is up, class! Turn in your tests, and you're dismissed!”

I lingered, chewing on the end of my hoodie drawstring. Soon the whole class was gone, including the teacher.

I didn’t mind. Thanks goodness math was the last class of the day. All I needed to do was catch the bus and suffer through studying, and I’d be able to chill. Just like any normal day at the end of the school year.

But the day never thought of being normal.

I was packing up my stuff when something gold and brown streaked across my peripheral vision, swiping across my leg.

“Hey!” I must’ve looked pretty stupid, chasing my tail like a dog.

When I managed to catch it, it twitched in my hand. Like a snake, it wrapped around my arm. It looked like a golden fur-covered tube with a brown paint brush end. I followed the gold flexible tube to its source. And its source happened to be my bottom. I tugged at the thing. My butt throbbed a little.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no...

I raced into the restroom and looked in the mirror.

I looked the norm- pitiful and sleep deprived- except for the long brush tipped thing sprouting from my behind. It wasn't a flexible tube.

It was a tail.

Tears of Blood

by Brianne Tankesely, 9th Grade, Signal Mountain

It was 2050.

Adrenaline courses through our veins night and day. There are puddles of blood everywhere you look. Stern expressions are plastered on our faces but only to mask the fear beneath. Our uniforms are tainted with dark blood stains. Drill sergeants bellow out commands. The world is coming to complete desolation around my feet. The ringing of my ears won't come to a stop and there is a deafening tone around me. There are no light patches in this world, just darkness. A world empty of privileges. Waking up not knowing if you are the one who is going to be the next one dead.

“On your feet men!” Came a harsh voice. “Is Atticus Runnels here?”

“Yes, Sir!” I said in a drowsy voice.

“Are you drunk, sergeant?”

“Yes, sir. If you could kindly stop shouting, please.”

“Take a walk, soldier!!”

“Yes sir!” I stumble over my comrades to get out into the field. Waking up from a hangover in a middle of the war is a regret. Although last night was my initiation into this section so they got me drunk. Damn. I take out my canteen to pour water on my face when I see a black dot in the sky. It's still blurry, but my drowsiness is wearing off. My ears pick up the thrumming of helicopter blades. I rushed back to the base.

“Captain, permission to speak?” I ask hastily.

“Runnels!! You're supposed to be taking laps. I don't tolerate disrespect. You're new here boy, but you do as you are told without any question!” He shouted.

“Sir, I just spotted a helicopter! Sir!” I yell.

Right as I give the warning, a bomb about twenty yards out was heard, and we all fall from the impact of the rubble to the ground.

“Get down!” the captain demands. Another bomb went off. We are behind the barricades now.

“You five men head out and open fire at the sky.” He shouts. “The rest of you fall back.”

I am one of the five. We know what we are going into. The fear of death crept through my body, and I shiver. We are given orders to follow. I load my gun and start shooting at the sky. It takes me five shots, but finally it goes spiraling down. We all run for cover. I glance over my shoulder, and one of the soldiers is injured. I run back hearing the captain shouting out for me to take cover and that it is an order. A grenade is thrown near me. I was flung three yards away from the guy. It took me a while to get my bearings. I got to my feet and stumbled over to the downed soldier. I slung him over my shoulder. It’s hard to see through the dust, but we make it safely. I feel for a pulse. A bullet wound to his chest makes his skin pellucid. The veins are turning black and spreading.*

“What the hell was that Runnels!!” I hear a booming voice behind me.

I made an incision and tried to get the bullet out. I fail. I yelled for a nurse, and they take him the field hospital

“Sorry, Sir.” I say out of breath. I sat down feeling defeated.

“You did good” A hand is offered. I take it. He pulls me up. “Guys here call me Snakes.”

“They call me Fangs.”.

The Story of Me: The Nobody **By Emma Dallas, 10th Grade, Gainesboro**

Prologue:

My name is Alexa Louise Turner, and today marks the middle of the school year. Whoop whoop! I mean, don't get me wrong; I love the school part of it, but the social part of it, not so much. I'm the ghost of the school. In the first half of the school year, four people sat on me at lunch. There's one good reason to go to school; I get to see the one person who thinks I'm someone, my best friend Francesca. She's been my best friend ever since my dad and I moved here to Ohio from Texas five months ago. My dad made us move and my mom and sister stayed in Texas, after he and my mom got a divorce. I really miss my sister, she said she would have come with us but she didn't want to leave our mom alone and I wanted to go with my dad. She and I were like sisters by blood, friends by heart. She was always there for me. Anyway, after we moved, I felt like a nobody and that's when Frankie showed up. We met at lunch. I was sitting alone so she came over and sat with me. We became friends that day.

There's a dance coming up at school, I still don't know if I want to go. "Here's the thing," I keep telling myself "if someone asks me to go with them I will, if no one asks me I won't go." I hope no one asks me. If someone does, I hope it's Sam Gert. He is so hot with his light brown hair, brown eyes, his smile, and his laugh. Of course, he doesn't notice me. I get that because he is the best player on the soccer team, plus he has a girlfriend. You never know what could happen though, there is still half of the school year left. Again, whoop whoop!

UNTITLED

BY RILEY NEIL, 10TH GRADE, SPRINGDALE, AR

Nat got her first tattoo at 26 in a bathtub by Harvey drawing on her hipbone with a needle.

She was half drunk and clutching the shower curtain as she screamed into Harvey's shoulder. Her pale skin turned an infected red color around the cut while Harvey just laughed as he was more than just half drunk. Nat had her arms around Harvey's neck-keeping them slightly steady-as Ed had puked into the toilet next to them while Gabby danced up on the sink humming to the Arianna Grande blasting downstairs.

Harvey had been focused, however. his dark brows crinkled in as he still somehow had a steady grip on the needle as he acted as Nat's freckled skin was his own personal canvas. He painted like he did everything: naturally beautiful. His hair was in a messy mop like it had been in the first year of uni. He defined every art student stereotype with his ink-stained fingers and the constant slightly amused smirk. His hand had burned against Nat's skin as Nat had breathed slowly to not mess anything up.

Nat burned and caused an ache of pain to coat the top of Nat's teeth. Her back had been freezing against the tub and front burned from Harvey's bare skin under his ripped flannel. She had hissed out into the air as tears built up in her eyes that she blocked by squeezing them shut. It had stung when Ed cleared out and Gabby had passed out in the sink and Harvey breathed into her neck with a quiet looks sick, babe.

Babe had echoed in Nat's head until Harvey had declared he was done. Blood running down the drain and Nat's back and arms completely numb when Harvey had crawled into the tub next to her. Harvey had smelled like the drugs they did at 26 and Melanie's perfume when he turned on the faucet above them to have the water wash away the blood. The water had soaked

through both of their clothes and made Nat's teeth chatter as she looked over at Harvey. The flannel stuck to his arms like it one of his new tattoos and the water droplets got caught into his eyelashes as he had laughed right into Nat's neck-making the water suddenly turn to acid.

"You are the best, Evans." Harvey had run his hands through Nat's hair like he was her older brother or maybe they were teammates on a baseball team. Nat wished that he had tattooed those words to her body. Nat wished she could tattoo every word Harvey whispered to her at times like these to her body. "Melanie would never let me do that to her."

It had stung back then, too. Being compared to Melanie so casually with the shower water becoming colder with every passing second. Because she would never commit to anything you did that would actually last forever, she wanted to say but instead she opened his mouth to get it filled with water.

She sputtered it out with an easy, "Because she obviously isn't as dumb as me."

Harvey had laughed in agreement and then finally had turned off the water. It got silent quickly as Harvey had let his eyes drop down to Nat's hipbone again and then let his fingers dance over it. It caused Nat to let a hiss but she didn't stop Harvey. Her skin crawled slowly all the way through his body and looped around her heart. She tasted blood when Harvey's fingers curled around her hip so easily like they were just any boy and girl fooling around at a party.

Nat had banged her head against the tile. "What are you doing?"

Harvey's fingers had dropped instantly. He backed away quickly like a child being caught drawing on the walls. His face pale and eyes dark and Nat wished her head wasn't aching so badly and

that there weren't so many black spots in her eyes so she could see Harvey clearly.

She wanted to apologize because Nat doesn't snap at Harvey. She plays pool with him when he is upset and brings him a coffee after classes sometimes. She naps on his couch and eats his leftover food. And is a good friend. Melanie snaps at Harvey because as the girlfriend that is what she does. What she can do because Harvey isn't going to run off no matter what. Melanie is already his. Nat isn't-that.

Harvey stood up and got out of the bathtub. His wet clothes and stringy hair making him look like the little kid Nat sees in picture frames and in Ian's' stories. He looked nervous with shaking fingers and ducked forward shoulders. Like he was the first day Nat had met Ed's dorm mate so many years ago. A quiet art student that was art himself.

"It's late." He said quickly. Nat wanted to wrap him in a towel. "I'm sorry for...the bleeding and everything."

And everything. Like touching you even when I know it's more than that for you. Nat bit down on her lip before smiling that easy It's totally whatever smile. She wondered how pathetic she looked crammed in a bathtub looking up at her best friend like a lovesick fool. Shivering teeth and bloody skin to prove it.

"Yeah, it's-good. Fine actually. I like it."

Harvey had rolled his dark eyes. Back to themselves easily. "You haven't even seen it."

Nat had beamed, cheeks bright red under the low lights and smoke-filled room. "Don't need to."

Harvey had given her that look. The one that makes Nat question it all sometimes. The one that Harvey gives her messily at their best

and worst times. The one that she spills about over wine to her girlfriends when they ask about that one handsome boy who is always around. The one that makes her swear that Harvey's driver's license is a misprint as there is no way his eyes are just brown. No, his eyes when he looks at her are like this are a dirty gold that makes her understand the gold rush. The look that makes Nat want to ask questions and give anything Harvey wanted to him. Harvey had snapped his head to the ceiling a moment later; back to casual with his fingers playing with the hair on the back of his neck.

"You're such an idiot. Keep it wrapped up and ice it." Harvey had grabbed Gabby by the waist out of the sink as Nat had laughed at the two of them as he had stumbled out the door with a middle finger as a goodbye.

Sometime later Nat had stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair sticking to the sides of her face like it did when she was a kid and spent the day in the pool. Mascara dripped down the two piece dress she wore tonight that now bunches around her body like a maternity swimsuit. Her lips and cheeks too red like she is posing as Snow White or maybe just drank fruit punch. She stared at the scar right on her hipbone where her dress spilt. Red and agitated like a bite as she made out the word that Harvey wrote into his skin.

Art. It was simple, real, and bleeding right onto her skin. The three-letter word filled Nat's whole body with hot blood. She sunk back down into the tub and likes to think she dreamed of art that night. Messy paint scars down her body all painted by a golden eyed boy.

+

4 years later.

“You two are honestly worse than my Mum.” Nat points a straw right in Gabby’s face which is scrunched up like Nat smells or something. Nat takes a long sip of her beer. “I’m completely fine.”

“You are drinking at ten in the morning on a Tuesday. I would not call that fine.” Gabby snaps back with that roll of his eyes that she has mastered teaching drama students for years now. She puts her shoulders up on the table. “Admit it. You are lonely.”

“Gabs.” Ian hisses and looks up from his menu. As if Nat hasn’t been used to Gabby’s bluntness for years now. His long curls pulled back by a beanie this morning as the two newlyweds had stumbled in the diner together with tired eyes and puffy lips.

“But seriously when was the last time you even went out with a guy?”

Nat takes another chug of her beer and thinks about last night. Last night when fingers had painted her skin on the white sheets with the sunset tint making everything a gold color. His golden eyes blending in and squinting up at her like they were testing a new art form. She remembers the music they had turned on and how it was stupidly too romantic for them. How she had laughed and curled her fingers into the mattress. Soft and rough all at once in a haze that should have stopped years ago but never did. She remembers the laughter afterwards, stupid jokes in between kissing, and how Harvey had kissed her tattoo before leaving with a salute and wink.

“I’m focusing on my career.” Nat says quickly wishing the waitress would bring out his pancakes or Gabby’s coffee so she would stop with the questions. The same questions her Mum and her brother asked her months ago when she had choked out the same thing. “Ed even found me a steady gig to start doing.”

Gabby looks like she wants to say something but Ian is probably stepping on her foot because that is one of the rules of their

friendship. They don't talk about Ian's stupid shirts. They don't talk about Ed's daddy weight he has been getting. They don't mention Nat's failing career of being a singer songwriter.

"That's good." Ian smiles that dimpled smile as he plays with his rings nervously on his fingers because Ian has never been good at giving false hope.

Gabby steals Nat's beer for a long drink. "Yeah, guys love a girl on stage."

Nat sighs and runs a hand through her hair which is mostly brown now. At 30 you don't care much to freshen up your roots she has learned. "How many times have I told you? I'm not looking for a man to..."

"To what?" Harvey appears shoving his way into the booth next to Nat. Late with a business suit on to prove why. His leg knocks into Nat's bellow the table and it doesn't hurt but it stings in Nat's brain like it always does. He smells like his fancy cologne that sticks to Nat's pillows after he leaves.

Gabby stabs a fork into her eggs. "-Date, Marry, anything at this point."

Ian waves over the waitress with their pancakes. Nat jerks upward with another glare towards Gabby. And Harvey he just freezes for a moment. His eyes narrowing like he still that street kid that can throw a punch, his jaw tight and for the moment Nat wants to kick him to snap out of it. To sink down in the booth because reactions like that were never supposed to happen.

But then Harvey is back to smiling lazily. He pulls up his sleeves so it looks more like it was when they were younger and getting breakfast after studying all night. He leans over and takes a long drink of Ian's coffee before saying,

“I know a guy.”

It's simple and Gabby lights up at it. Nat stares down at her pancakes and feels her stomach yo-yo up and down her chest because Harvey is supposed to change the subject. He is supposed to teasingly lick syrup off his fork and wink at her. That is how it goes every Tuesday. That is how it is.

“He's a coworker of Melanie's.” Harvey says as he reads the menu and Nat wants to tell him to stop joking to stop...talking. She wants to snap that he is going to the bathroom but Ian and Gabby are both staring at Harvey like he telling some urban legend. Nat grunts to hold back screaming. “He sometimes asks about you when we go out to dinner and I mention you. Stalks your Instagram account and everything. He isn't bad looking either-a baseball looking type.”

Nat wants to snap in Gabby and Ian's faces that this probably isn't even real. That Harvey is just talking so they can laugh about it later when Harvey is kissing at her neck. But then something in Nat's brain tells her that maybe Harvey is being real. Maybe this is his way of letting go. That Nat should move on with a stupid first date with this pitcher looking guy and forget all about this stupid charade they have been playing for way too long.

But Nat can play too.

“Baseball, you say? Do you have his number?”

Nat takes a bite of her pancakes. Harvey's mouth twitches.

“Yeah. I can send it to you after this.”

Nat hates him, most of the time, she decides.

“I actually want it now.” She says it between his teeth and he swears Gabby about sends her a thumbs up as Harvey slides his phone over. Unbothered. Cool. Collected. So typical Harvey.

Nat puts the number into her phone slowly. Everybody watches the whole time and it makes her skin burn because none of this should be happening. So slowly she says,

“How is Melanie anyway, Harv?”

-breaking one of their few rules. Because you don't bring up Harvey and Melanie up ever. Nat knew that because she was the one to make that rule years ago when Harvey had about drunk himself to death at a bar. When he had tossed off his wedding ring off in the back alley and Nat had spent the rest of the night finding it for him despite the pounding of her heart.

But her skin is hot and tight right now and she wants to throw Harvey off. Wants to see Harvey's eyes widen and mouth blubber out like this. Wants to see him like she does when they are alone. Under the sheets with Harvey staring at her like he is learning something new every moment. The intake of breath always so shocked like they hadn't been kissing in secret for three years.

Harvey isn't giving her that look, though. That look that Harvey had given him so long ago in that shower one of wonder and amusement is no longer there. No, Harvey looks furious. His eyes a solid brown without any gold in them and his mouth tightly shut. Nat smiles though because Harvey has never really scared her. Not when he is still knocking on the door to her flat the next night with that sinful smile and I brought Thai food.

“Uh-maybe we should...” Ian stutters out quickly his eyes large on Harvey as Harvey jerks his head around with a simple toss of his hand.

“No, it’s fine. We’re fine.” Harvey says easily showing that he really is a salesman (a steady job he had to take after years of being an artist didn’t get Melanie the house they always wanted) with squinted eyes and hand gestures. “I mean...we have started to go to therapy.”

Gabby reaches over to knock Harvey’s shoulder and Ian claps his hands like Harvey just read a poem. Nat takes another swing of her drink because the first advice a therapist would probably say if they knew anything would be to stop seeing that blonde friend of yours on the side. She is the sort of temptation you don’t need in your life.

Harvey says that with a slight smile. A blush to his cheeks that used to come with talking about Melanie. And now-now it is what causes Nat to stand up suddenly from the table. Her heart pounding like it shouldn’t.

“I need to-use the toilet.” She says quickly hoping her cheeks aren’t that red that always got her in trouble in high school. Her fingers sweating as she makes her way across the busy diner that bangs against her head and Gabby may have been right about day drinking.

She isn’t even staring in the mirror for more than a minute before Harvey is crashing into the bathroom after her. He grabs Nat’s hipbones, his thumb tracing over that bloody tattoo, before Nat is shoving him off.

“No. Not right now.” Her voice so low she almost growls it. “You’re not allowed to be in here anyway.”

Harvey raises his eyebrows to her in the mirror that shows they stopped playing by the rules a long time ago. And at that look makes her hands shake more.

She hates this. She hates when it had to become such an affair. She likes it when it feels like it had always been with stupid jokes and laid back touches. Because she never wanted to be the person on the side. She never wanted to fall in love with her best mate who is married. She never wanted to hook up in a public bathroom at 30.

Because no little girl ever imagines themselves as the villain.

Harvey stares at her with an impatient sigh. "Nat, what is it? Out there-I mean-I didn't mean anything by it."

"Mean what? That you are trying to fix your marriage with your wife? You want to set me up with some guy who stalks my Instagram? That you and Melanie are fine?" Nat spits it out quickly. Her entire face burning now. "I-don't know what you mean anymore."

Harvey runs his hands through his hair like he always does when he is stressed. Whenever he messes up a color on a painting. Whenever Melanie calls him late at night and he goes out to the balcony to answer it. The first time he had kissed Nat while Fifa was paused on the T.V and he pulled away so harshly it almost gave Nat whiplash.

"I-I mean that things are complicated, alright? I mean of course they are but you are still my best mate. My corner. The only person who gets me better than I get myself and I-I can't just give that up."

Nat bites harshly on her lips and turns on the faucet. She focuses on the water and then says it quietly.

"I'm in love with you."

Nat has said it before. Usually so lost in Harvey that he can just smile at her or kiss her harder. One time in the morning when Harvey was running out of the flat and Harvey had just froze and looked sick. Another few drunk at a party with her lips close to

Harvey's collarbones. Harvey has never done much about it. He usually just kisses Nat a little harder with his fingers deep in her hair. One time when Nat said it over him with her hand somewhere in Harvey's hair and Harvey had let out a cry so painful Nat had jerked away back into the pillows.

Right now she says it as the water goes cold around her hands. Harvey's eyes tracing her in the broken mirror of the diner. A Please Wash your hands sign their only witness. Harvey's fingers running through his hair and Nat's eyes blurring over until everything in the room slightly runs together.

Nat was never supposed to be complicated. This was never supposed to be complicated. It was supposed to be secret tattoos in somebody's shower and making out to old classic music that Nat turns on. It was supposed to be road trips out into the country with sleeping in the car only breathing in each other and the open window air. It was supposed to be a short thing. A mistake. A dream that was never supposed to actually happen. Because it was those things at times. It was easy and distracting and not a break down in a diner bathroom about marriage therapy.

It was never supposed to be an I love you sort of thing.

And that is exactly the point.

"Go home to your wife." Nat says it without a shake in her voice. She reaches for a paper towel breaking eye contact with Harvey.

"Nat, c'mon..."

"Do you love her?" Nat says it like a magician would say a spell. It echoes around the stalls and comes back to hit Harvey in the chest which makes him go completely still.

"Yeah." He clears his throat. "Yes, I do. You know that."

Nat doesn't let his words affect her this time. She breathes through her nose and throws away the paper towel as her hands are red from drying them so hard. Her lungs grow and shrink with every look at him.

"Then go home to her, Harvey." Her voice cracks this time. "Go home and fix it and I will-I'll call the guy and put on heels again and we will learn to be happy."

Harvey stares at her like one would a beautiful storm that is too scared to look at the aftermath. His eyes are golden again.

"I can't..."

"You will." Nat screams at him this time. Her fingers shaking as she reaches out to grab his shoulders. His suit feeling familiar under them. Blue crashes with gold and it looks all too much like Heaven. "We will learn to be happy."

His eyes search hers. "I already am."

Nat hates him, all the time, she has decided.

"No, you aren't. This isn't-this isn't anything anymore, alright?" Nat is crying now. A child scared to let go of her favorite toy. "I'm going to go L.A anyway. For a solid gig this time."

Harvey shakes his head and looks just like that lanky teenage boy that used to drive her crazy. His head falling towards hers and resting on her collarbone and it's a beat of silence. A beat of silence before he is telling her to stay. Telling her no. Whispering how sorry he is that it ever became this.

A beat of silence before Nat is whispering. "Promise me you will find happiness with her. With yourself."

Because Nat can picture it. Picture the way he will learn to hold Melanie's hand again. How he will learn to fall for the golden girl once again. She can picture cookouts with Gabby and Ian. Red checkered tablecloths and Instagram posts of the Mason jars filled with lemonade. She can picture herself, too. Long skirts and longer hair pieces. Finding herself in bars somewhere far away forgetting the boy who had written her story for far too long. Forgetting this bathroom and his eyes and remembering herself.

Harvey jerks his head up. Golden tears down his cheeks that turn into a red with the pouted downturn of his lip. His hair is that messy mop that Nat smiles at. A broken, sob that fills the bathroom around them. He nods his head, though, slowly as if she is speaking broken English.

"Happiness." He whispers before he is kissing her in a way that feels like goodbye.

Because Harvey has always kissed like art, too. He is sometimes Zeus with the way the air turns thick around them. He then is Poseidon when he leans in and takes Nat's breathe away with his arms closing her in and lips cold against her neck. He is Hades when he kisses her and shows what burning alive feels like.

But he is never human. He can't be. Not when he makes Nat feel like this.

And now he is gentle. A whisper. A demigod that is letting go of his power.

It's the finale to their little Greek Tragedy.

And then he is gone. Gone like just the legends are. Gone like he was just a story all along, too.

Nat breathes around the bathroom. She breathes for the first time in years.

Untitled

By Claire Webb, 8th Grade, Signal Mountain

She closes her golden wings and dives. For one moment she's suspended in air, peace washing over her. She exhaled and feels herself plummet, stomach dropping, she lets herself fall. Wind rushes by as gravity pulls her down. She closes her eyes in release.

My eyes snap open. I fell asleep in class, again. I blink and try to focus on Ms. Hall's words.

"Melinda," Her tone tells me this isn't the first time she said my name.

"I'm sorry Ms. Hall." I say, thoughts can't help, but wander back to the girl with golden wings. It had felt like we were one. I had felt that same serenity come over me and despite my horrid fear of heights, I hadn't cared.

"Melinda, would you like me to repeat the question?" I come back into focus. Some of the kids laugh, but Ms. Hall quiets them with a sharp gaze. I nod, embarrassment making my cheeks blaze. I force all thoughts from of the golden winged girl from my mind. The fact that the exact same thing had happened earlier this week, gone from my thoughts before I could even recognize them.

Untitled

By Julia Lessly, 7th Grade, Brentwood

int. jessie's kitchen/living space - noon

JESSIE is making a pie in the kitchen, while mary is sitting watching football on tv.

jessie

we should probably be working on something important, mary

mary

yeap

JESSIE

i heard there's a new case. about some woman who went missing.

MARY

yeap

JESSIE

she's been gone for two weeks.

MARY

yeap

JESSIE stops working on making the pie, and walks over to mary.

JESSIE

i heard she was really important or something and it would really be very beneficial for both of us if we found her.

MARY

yeap

JESSIE sits on the end of the couch next to mary, looking her in the

eye.

JESSIE

are you even listening to me?

MARY

yeap

JESSIE

then what did i just say

JESSIE crosses her arms.

MARY

umm, something about some lady going away or something.

JESSIE

and she was really important! and it would pay really well if we could find her

MARY

ughhhhh

JESSIE

come on. let's get to the station.

MARY

nooooooooo

JESSIE

are you implying you don't care about a very important woman going missing, and the world being quit of another intelligent, kind, person?

JESSIE waves her arms in the air, and stares down mary like she's a worm that made her way into her perfect sandwich.mary groans,

and turns away from JESSIE lazily.

JESSIE

are you seriously doing this right now

MARY

what if i am what are you going to do about my perpetual laziness
somehow, JESSIE's glare becomes even more fierce. mary can't see
her staring daggers, but her hunter-gatherer instincts certainly can
feel her stare.

JESSIE

then i'll just have to pick you up.

JESSIE moves closer to mary, preparing to pick her up/give her a
piggy back ride.

MARY

ok fine i'm getting up

JESSIE

good

JESSIE gets up from the couch, and walks back to the kitchen. she
puts up the ingredients, that were barely touched anyway, and
returns to mary. mary attempts to get herself off of the couch
normally, but her laziness level is too strong. she rolls herself over,
making her way to the side of the couch. JESSIE looks on with mild
disappointment.

JESSIE

ok seriously just get up already

MARY

this is a lot harder than it looks you just wouldn't understand.

JESSIE

yeah whatever

mary eventually flops onto the carpet, and drags herself to a sitting position against the couch. JESSIE's mild disappointment has developed to full-on embarrassment. mary looks up at her, somewhat mesmerized that she can even feel any other emotion other than happiness, disappointment, or anger. JESSIE catches her kinda staring.

JESSIE

what are you looking at let's go

MARY

for some reason you're incredibly attractive right now

JESSIE goes red.

JESSIE

oh my god just get your fucking shoes on

mary nods, smiling smugly as she puts on her ragged converse sneakers. mission accomplished.

Int. jessie's car -noon

JESSIE and mary get into the car, JESSIE driving and mary riding passenger. they both close their car doors, and mary gets situated in her seat while JESSIE starts up the car. she puts the key in the ignition, and turns. the car won't start.

JESSIE

come on car don't you want to start

JESSIE turns the key a few more times, becoming flustered.

MARY

are we going to have to walk again because you know how

against walking 27 miles i am

JESSIE

shut up i'm trying to be a car whisperer

MARY

what the fuck is a car whisperer

JESSIE

what did i just say

after a few more turns, the car finally starts up.

JESSIE

thank god

MARY

thank the car

JESSIE

thank you god and car

mary kinda sorta laughs, and JESSIE smiles. they sit there, thriving in a short moment of mutual understanding before JESSIE pulls out of her drive way. after a few minutes, mary reaches for the radio, but realizes there is none

MARY

why does your car not have a radio what the heck

JESSIE

it's to protect it from criminals, no one wants a car with no radio

MARY

i'm not sure that makes sense

JESSIE

well it does to me

the rest of the car ride is silent. mary looks out the window at passing cars. she sees a little girl in another car at a stoplight and they make eye contact. the little girl waves, and mary waves back, smiling. the little girl's parents see her waving to a police car with a totally random person inside and quickly tell her to stop. they roll up the window and mary is left sitting there with her hand up, still smiling. mary quickly puts her hand down and absorbs her smile before JESSIE could notice. they continue down the road.

FADE OUT

Blame Game

By Marlena Jones, 8th Grade, Clarksville

I've tried to write this poem so many times

I've tried

and tried

and tried

But these words keep slipping through my hands

and through the cracks on my keyboard

traveling somewhere I can't reach

Is that your fault or mine?

I replay the things you say

the things you do

pressing rewind in my mind

looking for something new

Every door held open

every smile and wave

You're becoming a habit

a part of my OCD

a little bit of crazy

I've tried to write this story so many times

I've tried

and tried

and tried

But you keep slipping through my hands

and out of my life

traveling somewhere I can't reach

Is this your fault or mine?

It might be mine

The Hero and His Quest
Keegan McCarthy, 9th Grade, Ooltelwah

A little birdie once told me a story,
Of a hero and his quest.
With nothing but a wooden sword,
A heart within his chest,
And unmatched bravery,
He left his familiar home to make new.
The boy was sad and weak,
But the rhythm of his footsteps,
And the pattern of his heartbeat
Kept him going, and going, and going.
For the King had lost
Every one of his men
In the battle for eternal power
That came time and time again.
And this hero
Could see the blood-soaked skies,
Tainted by war and death
That corrupted the entire kingdom.
And this hero
Could hear the withering echoes
Of raging battle cries and screams of grief
That flew with the traveling wind.
And this hero
Could smell the plague and decay
And the graves that were not planned to dig,
Furnaces for all the loyal and once-prized soldiers.
And he was determined to reach the throne,
And throw himself upon the King's feet,
Kissing them and mourning the losses,
While telling the story of what has been.
And this caring King,
With as much pride as he could muster,
Threw himself upon the feet of this hero,
And he sobbed to the skies,

And he sobbed to the echoes,
And he sobbed to the plague and decay.
And this hero,
Was granted a crown and the throne.
And now, this little birdie has come to me.
It has showed me the skies and the screams,
And what is to be,
Because I am the next hero,
And this is my quest.
Except I don't have a sword,
And a heart in my chest,
Because the King that I warn,
With feet that I kiss,
Tosses me away with unbearable shame,
And all I'll ever ask
Is for this little birdie
To tell them and show them
Every single thing
That it so willingly told me.
But this little birdie stays quiet,
So faintly repeating the story
Of the hero and his quest
That it is inaudible.
This little birdie talks to me and only me,
Warns the hero and begins his quest,
But for some strange reason
Will not warn the king,
And did not warn all of his mighty men.
And now I see the blood-soaked skies,
Crimson cotton balls pressed against my forearm.
And now I hear the echoes.
Breathless screams into my pillow.
And now I smell the plague and decay,
The healing scars a reminder every day.
But I cannot follow
The rhythm of my footsteps
The pattern of my heartbeat,

Because my King
Does not do too much worrying about his kingdom.
This little birdie speaks to me,
Warns the hero and begins his quest,
But does not allow my liberation from this madness,
For I am the savior of my King and his kingdom.
This little birdie speaks to me,
But strangely no one else,
Even though someone as small as I,
Without a wooden sword,
Or a heart within his chest,
Or unmatched bravery,
Cannot kiss the King's feet enough,
Because my King
Does not do too much worrying about his kingdom.
Please, Little Birdie,
Talk to them and not me.
These voices, these sights,
These horrible things that I see.
Little Birdie,
Warn them of what is to be.
Make them the savior of my King and his kingdom,
Warn the hero and begin his quest,
But please, Little Birdie,
Talk to them and not me,
Allow my liberation from this madness.
Little Birdie,
Why can't you see
That I am no hero,
And this is not my quest.

Essential Story
by Octavia Duke, 11th Grade, Mt. Pleasant

Clumsy crimson silence
Clumsy tears pushed back
Frail, older
Memorized crimson
Blue magnet, sudden silence
Small, frail, clumsy
Always falling, pushed back tears
Older than perceived
Memorized crimson
Blue eyed magnet
Bottled emotions
Sudden explosion
Then, a pause
Silence
Clumsy tears
Frail crimson
Blue silence
Silence

Terracotta

by Benjamin Ledford, 9th Grade, Signal Mountain

I imagine my legs dangling
on the edge; sitting
Gazing at the horizon with my best friend
Legs dangling like wind chimes do from a tin awning
from the rock edge of my own personal cliff
Red rocks poking at my underside
All I can do is think.
It's as if with each geode poke
the Earth is urging me to join the party at the bottom
Though,
my friend doesn't like parties
and the go-ers don't like him.
The elements push the whisper of the whirring wind past my ear
As if God was telling me "go."
But my mind is flooded with the murky water of doubt
and pools into a lake of stagnant afterthought.

I can recall my legs dangling
like clay pots to a tin roof
Gravity tugs me by the limbs; dragging me down
But spiteful optimism keeps me high
like helium balloons that my inner toddler let free
as a present to the all innocuous God
and a donation to my happy lil ignorance.

My anxiety a chain; dangling from my legs
stereotypically, despicably
suffocating the neck of my potential
Keeping captive my desperate gut feeling
that urges me to go talk to that girl
I'm sorry, I just can't tell her
how she's perfect in the way she exists
and how her ballpoint brush moves so eloquently
across that word worthy paper canvas

I can't tell you why but I can tell you this:
the rusty steel hurts like a damn b*tch
and barks so loud for a tone-deaf dog.

Untitled

By Jane Dodge, 8th Grade, Germantown

We lived in the same house.
We lived in the same town.
For as long as I remember.

People have come.
People have gone.
Yet here we lie searching for more.

To say we never left is false
To say we were never there is true.
We were transparent.

People came.
People went.
Yet there we lie searching for more.

Untitled

By Sophia Smallman, 8th Grade, Murfreesboro

Heart of the Night Sky

My porous skin soaks up rays of light

Borrowed from the fiery soul of day.

When the skies are ebony canvases

Dappled by splatters of heavenly shine,

My face looks down on the creatures of earth below,

Crawling around in their misery

Or bathing in my reflected rays

That lack the warmth of day.

Each day I have more to offer,

A little more of myself to show;

My grin grows night by night

Until it's full of rock solid amusement.

But despite my cold exterior,

Beneath my solid, stony skin,

Beats the Heart of the night sky.

My Youth is a Plum Tree
Paige Champlin, 8th Grade, Germantown

the roots of my soul planted themselves, isolated and indifferent in
hopes of someday growing tall.

my rings can be counted by year, for nature knows no monogamy,

yet i know that the number of those saturn circles will one day
cease to multiply.

the spring fruit of my laughter is plump and purple and heavy
hanging on the branches,

and the stoic momma cat whose home is in the hole at the bottom of
the stump finds joy

in hearing the whimsical chime and rustle of the leaves as each fat
fruit falls

to the mercy of the shaded soil.

Synechdoches

By Erika Skelton, 9th Grade, Brentwood

SMOKE

Rings float towards the moon and the stars
Legs dangle off a flat roof
Fingers hold loosely onto tightly wrapped paper
Lungs suck in smoke
A throat breathes it out
Lips smile faintly
Eyes close.

FIRE

A wrist flicks, flipping meat into the air
A tongue tastes a memorized sauce
Feet fidget
Legs remain still
Controlled fire licks.

WATER

Paranoia looms over bleached hair
Legs tremble across linoleum floors
A palm pushes up a tap's handle
Fingers grasp a glass underneath the stream of water
A throat swallows over and over
A breath exhales with a tremor
Shadows begin to creep away.

Past Tense

By Erika Skelton, 9th grade, Brentwood, TN

Past Tense

I hate you like the panels sagging from the ceiling

I hate you like the pencil sharpener constantly spinning around its intruder

I hate you like the remnants of permanent marker on a white board

I hate you like the swiveling chair that refuses to move, much less spin

I hate you like the hole left behind by a nail shoved by an unwanted force

I hate you like upside down outlets,

Like fire alarms,

Annoying and broken and always trying to complete their jobs.

I hate you like unexpected ramps in the floor

I hate you like the step that's smaller than the rest

I hate you like the air conditioner: loud, aggressive, and constant

I hate you like a constant

The one thing you always were

Were

I hate you like the bowels of a computer—

Were-ing.

The Gift

by Lily K. Bond, 12th Grade, Middlesboro, KY

Ada's old wrinkled hands fly,
holding onto needle and thread.

Two pieces of cloth become one
and a pattern begins to reveal itself.

Coral colors bordered with a mauve strip
make the edge of the quilt.

Pastels and floral patterns in groups of nine,
the expanse of its twin sized body.

Beautifully hued blocks held together
by skillful stitches and white thread.

The elderly woman's love not always expressed
with words but her care and detail.

Little by little,
the blocks of cloth form a blanket of soft and colorful cotton.
Ada inspects the gift, checking the seams and trimming stray
threads.

And once she's sure it's finished, she sews a tag onto it, proudly
stating it was made with love.

Then Ada takes up a pen and writes the name of who will receive
the quilt.

Even though her arthritis riddled hands ache from holding both
needle and pen, she folds up the blanket and lays it aside.

Smiling to herself, she hopes her great-granddaughter will love the
gift as much as Ada loves her.

Poems

Chase Collingsworth, 12th Grade, Sneedville

Brother

Dear brother, dear brother,
I thought you'd hear my calls,
Yet they echoed for nights,
And they echoed for days,
Until they finally faded away.

Dear brother, dear brother,
Did you not see my journey?
Oh, I walked every street,
Oh, I talked to everyone I would meet,
And, oh, I stalked through every dark alley,
Just so I could find you.

Dear brother, dear brother,
You didn't take it all.
It was in the walls,
Thinking it could hide from me,
In the very place I call home.

Oh brother, oh brother,
This won't be the end.
You've gone from me,
And with you your warnings,
So now I hope you're praying,
That going down your road won't be my end.

Heretic

O shining Glory, my God so bright,

Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
Please give me your love,
If I have to stay in this broken place,
For more than today.

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
I have been here so long,
That I don't know when will be my final day.
Please give me your love,
I don't want to stay.

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I ask of you today,
Was I not the worker you wanted,
The student you desired?
Why do I not deserve the love I require?

O shining Glory, my God so bright,
Every day we live before you,
Under the glow of your guiding light.
O Lord of Glory, I beg of you,
Please show mercy upon me.
There's so much to be given by you,
So please.

Even some rotten fruit would do.

O God,
Please.

Rebel

Doors are broken,
And windows are busted.
Boards are a good defense,
With shadows dancing behind them,
Forsaking light to stay hidden.
The fires may have gone out,
But I can still smell the smoke.

Crowds scatter,
People moving like bugs.
Friends watch the time,
Leaving when they need to,
Instead of when they want to.
The streets may be quiet now,
But I can still hear the echoes.

Playgrounds stay quiet,
Even when it is time to play.
Games are fun,
But they are hard to play,
When the children stay silent all day.
The wounds may have closed,
But I can still see the scars.

Smiles don't come out in color,

Faded so much they look wrong.
Voices come out,
But they sound like static,
Shaking and breaking behind apologies.
The peace may claim to be real,
But I can still see the truth.

Judging

By Joseph Dinwiddie, 12th grade, Talbott

You sit there judging me for something I can't control
you holier than thaw ass
I didn't pick this life, but I damn sure ain't gone give it up.
I live in hell every day cause of people like you
putting' me down.

But I'll be damned before I let people like you win
this war will never end as long as I live.
You may not be the only one but nether am I.
You put us on meds saying it's for the best.
I say you can go to hell you ain't no hero.

I say I've never meet a weaker man
I sat my goals to go way above what you ever expect.
You call yourself a teacher, but your nothing, but a fake
Today I look back, and laugh at how stupid you where
I've made it to college today asshole.
Fate seems to on my side, and even when it isn't I still win.

Gave up on society's views on me a lifetime ago
I don't need them any ways.
I'm tired of the way you look at me
as I where broken.

No need for any of your condescending tone with me
We both know what you really are coward,
but you seem to haven't seen that I'm
the devil in your dream's.

When you judge me you're just pointing at yourself,
and that's why I'll always win, and you will never break me

The Key

By Kat Mahoney, 9th grade, Nashville, TN

I brushed my hair back with the palm of my hand as I yawned. I had been walking for roughly twenty minutes, and the sun was just beginning to rise. I held my shoes in my hand at my side. My toes were enjoying the dew covered grass. With each step I took, the edge of the woods was that much closer. I had my eyes fixated on a small bridge, no more than five feet long and only wide enough for one person, just visible from my current position.

As I approached the bridge, a figure stepped out from the shadows. She smiled when I stopped at the other side of the stream. "You look beautiful as always, Emma." I said. She laughed and took a step forward, outstretching her closed fist.

"You're late, as always." She glanced at my feet, bare and covered in wet grass. "Yet you still couldn't find the time to put your shoes on."

"Why am I here?" I bent down to put on my sneakers.

"See for yourself." When I straightened up I held out my hand, palm up. She took another step forward and opened her hand above mine. When she lowered her arm, I looked at the object she had placed in my hand.

"A key?" There was a small silver and green key in my palm. The metal was cold to the touch, despite being kept in her hand for so long.

"It's been so long since I've watched the sun rise, Tyler. I've missed the colors." She was staring at the sky through the leaves.

"I didn't want to see it. I would rather be asleep." Almost as if to emphasize that fact, I yawned.

"I can tell. Your hair is all over the place and your shirt is backwards. You'd hate to die on this adventure and be stuck looking like that for eternity."

"Die? Where exactly are we going?" She turned around and began walking deeper into the woods. I followed her, staying roughly three feet behind.

“We’re going to rob the Elven Prince.” I sped up to walk beside her as a dragon roared overhead. This was the beginning of a long day.

Trying

By Mackenzie Mancini, 9th Grade, Cleveland

The immaculate hospital floor laughs bitterly at me as it passes under my anxious, pacing feet. It sneers and mocks my savage perturbation, for it has witnessed it all previously. It has observed each precise heartbreak, tear, lamentation, and inconvenience this hospital has orchestrated.

Now here I am, walking back and forth, head cradled in palm, eyebrows knitted together, stomach up my throat as the cruel ground chortles along, achieving pleasure from the crumbs of my pain, a speck compared to the broken pieces that have been allocated here by others with torment much more demanding than my own.

Sadistic floor. I break contact with it, servicing the wall for its replacement, my body disintegrating into a chair.

“What time do you think they’ll bother to show?” I mumble into Louis’ chest, resting my head there.

“Maybe by 5:30 a.m.,” my husband replies.

I heave out a heavy sigh. “About right.”

“I was kidding, Eleanor; maybe about an hour or so.”

The door omits a creek, and we both rise as if we were in the midst of engaging in some immoral pursuit. Holding hands and exchanging glances, we compose ourselves as the doctor strides across the room ever-so casually and sits down. He raises his eyebrows at us, but remains wordless, a bland, unamused look plastered across his broad features.

“Mr. and Mrs. Thompson”--he clears his throat, it undoubtedly as dry as he is--“the test results came back, and it appears we have reached a conclusion. By the looks of it, it seems you cannot bear children. Now, I know--”

His voice drains out right there, all traces of words thereafter meaningless and irrelevant. Nothing he is saying accommodates message; the single message of importance has already been stated: I cannot birth children. Not now, not ever.

All at once, I am stricken with dizziness. Flooding waves of emotion overtake me inside of their brutal sea of the wreckage that is employed when one discovers or is delivered news of unpleasant circumstances. The newfound facts rush into me as any other knife would feel as it extracts the wind from my body.

You'll never be able to provide. You're never going to be good enough. You'll never make a difference. You let everyone down.

The thoughts don't cease, no matter how thoroughly I plead with them to dismiss. My breathing rushes out, turning more and more rigid at each dead end of a statement. I sense my body dropping from consciousness as if I'm about to pass out. I want to faint, to be dismissed from this world into another dimension where darkness greets me and dislodges the pain, even if only for a temporary interval.

I'm not acknowledged by the elements of alternate universes; I do not blackout.

Instead, I sob, long, hard and with vicious heaves that deprive my lungs of air. I'm vaguely aware of a gentle hand against the skin the my back and the consoling words of those around me, yet I ignore them; they bare as much significance as my life does from hereafter, which that, I am afraid, is miniscule.

Louis' neon aqua eyes shine off a glistening sparkle in the darkness inside the four pale, white walls of our detached bedroom. They're pooling the depths of my own, tacitly whispering everything that does not play out on his lips, piercing through the firm wall of my composure in forage for emotions, feelings, secrets and everything else I venture so deeply to conceal.

I suppose it's only fair enough; I'm combing through his eyes in pursuit of the same. What thoughts, affections and discontent scenarios lie beneath the impenetrable persona of the man with glowing ocean orbs? What rests past the fireworks of unspoken dialogue betwixt us? Years of marriage permits me to decipher an answer.

A screech goes off lightly in the distance, a missile of color endeavoring on its path towards the sky. My venture is getting closer to the answer I'm sure to find. The room is suddenly warmer; I'm tense for what I do not yet know and what I am not entirely positive I have wish to find out--but it's too late to retreat now.

BOOM. A rainbow of fiery colors burst to pieces in the night sky. There it is: the answer, the completely unravelment I have been in-depthly anticipating.

I feel vulnerable, indecent and in debt, like I'm altogether detached in every way permissible. It's a moment of downright relent that neither of us can afford when I discern the disappointment and neglect he buries inside the pile of thoughts that must remain just that--but don't.

I'm about to bolt, about to discard of the entanglement of sheets and duvets so steadfast he won't even have time to blink. My fingers graze over the colorless, flower embroidered fabric of the bed when-- Fingers. Against mine. I feel their heat over my skin, but why? I feel the edges of a folded paper. I glance downwards at it.

An image paints itself over the canvas of my mind. In a divergent dimension, a parallel reality, an alternate lifetime, a basket drifts underneath my fingertips, opening to reveal a shred of crinkled paper: a note.

I strive to obscure my smile. I accord my greatest effort to jam the blissful reaction I want to give in a box, hiring a nonchalant replacement, yet I'm too preoccupied to know if I'm triumphant in the act and too devoted to wholesomely care.

I unravel it, reading the dancing blue ink as if it's something I've devoted my entire life for. Of course, it's a quote.

"Sometimes you just have to try even if you know it won't work"
(Diaz).

My eyes remain focused on the paper even after I've completed the read; I'm not prepared to look up.

This is what he wants: to try. This is the pilgrimage I endeavor on. This is the passage he wills to proceed on. I can't. Still, I must try--for Louis. This is how to compensate for the disaster I have ignited.

I inhale, move the paper below my line of eyesight, and in reply, allot a curt nod: yes.

We attempt. Nothing happens. And again. No miracle of birth occurs. Louis is swelling to be increasingly disheartened despite the solace facade he conducts. Who is to blame him? The only thing I birth is depression, pity and despondency. Never a child; always a failure--until him.

The subtle baby bump barely peeks out from the seam of my t-shirt. I twinkle down at it. A baby. My baby. *Our* baby, Louis' and mine. Our own little miracle below the surface of my skin, waiting patiently to emerge into the radiant world, to shift his imprint into the soft, pliable earth, to forge his own unique tales of destiny, fate, and difference. *My* baby; *our* baby. I blink and regain concentration on my prior task.

Months pass in which the precious pregnancy period progresses. Copious nights occur in which sleep is replaced with eager dialogue of baby names, parenting and what sensations we'll undergo as our little kid stumbles his way through life. As my stomach swells, as does my heart with pride. It's a heavenly experience as I finally get to see my newly-born baby for the first time. Euphoria leaks from my eyes, washing all crumbs of torture and torment.

“I did it,” I breathe, my words scratchy and merely a degree above inaudible.

Louis nods beside me, holding my hand, refreshing me with his presence. Water droplets are crawling down his cheeks.

“Yes.” His voice is equally as tattered. “You did.”

“What’s his name?” our slender nurse with curly blonde hair inquires politely.

Louis and I exchange an implicit glance of assurance in which I motion for him to retain the honor of responding, tasting the name on his tongue, rehearsing it for a change, getting accustomed to the feel.

“Matthew.”

The girl smiles. “Any particular reason?”

Another undeclared statement amidst us. He gestures to me this time.

“It means ‘gift from God’.”

Another courteous grin. “How fitting.”

We both smile softly. She has no idea.

My relationship with Louis grows stronger as Matt does each and every day. We see our baby materialize into a caring, sharp and passionate man, and our hearts swell with content. As he ages, he engages in homemade soccer matches with his father. I sit on the pouch and cheer for them. At age four, we sign him up for a little league. His team is deemed “The Tornado Attackers.” It’s his first game, and Louis and I are perched on the bleachers keenly anticipating the initiation.

Louis lightly chuckles and nudges my arm. I look at him.

“Peek over at Matt,” he hints.

I comply and straightaway join in on his laugh; Matthew is hovering in his position on the field, knelt down to extract a flower from the grass.

“Oh, dear.” I shake my head. “Have to love that guy.”

A whistle blows, and attention shifts to the center of the field. A muscular coach in an overpowering red sport’s shirt stands in the middle of two children--a girl and a boy--with a soccer ball held over his head.

“We’re going to drop the ball now,” he loudly declares in a deep voice, carrying out the task promptly afterward.

The boys and girls stumble across the massive field like little ants, their tiny legs scurrying on in hopes of capturing the ball. I scan back over to my own midget ant, who hasn’t moved an inch. I’m too deep in amusement to advise him to do otherwise. Evidently, Louis is as well. No words are spoken.

The flower eventually detaches. The broad flash of jubilation on Matthew’s face when it does is priceless. He darts towards us straightaway. One glimpse at my husband informs me he is as baffled as I. We are soon to be enlightened.

“For you mommy!” he cheers, his ocean aqua eyes (no doubt inherited from his father) glistening beautifully in the sun with an inspirational vitality I cannot adequately describe.

I accept it and say the only thing I can think of: “Thank you, sweetheart!”

“Now get out there and ace it, bud!” His dad.

A terse nod. He’s off.

“I was perfect, daddy!” he gushes as we tuck him into his sleek, black bed.

“I’m glad you liked it, buddy.”

“Liked it? I LOVED IT!”

I peck his cheek. “Glad you loved it.”

“Will you guys be there for the next one too?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.”

I clasp his compact hand in my own. Louis leans in for his kiss.

“You know it, champ. Get some rest now.”

We usher ourselves out, listening opposite the door until we discern soft snores drifting their way into the night sky.

“Eleanor.”

It's a growl, a fierce attack.

“Eleanor.”

Fury. A curse upon his dry, spiteful lips. His huge, broad hand smacks over my jaw. I want to shrill, to bold, to abandon everything right here and now. I don't, for I know what consequences await me if I were to carry out on such unruly escapades.

My eyes meet with his; he teaches me how to be entirely paralyzed while in control of every muscle. His smirking features are jagged, tense and accusing. My lungs forget to function.

“Eleanor.”

My eyes snap shut. The damage is done now: three strikes, and I'm out. I suck in, preparing for the inevitable. The mental countdown commences:

One. Two. Thr--

Gruesome strangled breaths of isolated origin heedlessly drive their way through lifeless lungs. My eyes slam open. My vision is clotted by a smoky haze. My body has switched into emergency self-destruct mode. Everything is collapsing.

What is going on?

For a few atrocious minutes, I am deserted in the unknown. At last, Louis materializes into my perimeter of detection, the ruthless fog drifting away. I can function; death mode has shut down.

“Ei?”

It's Louis; I don't cringe.

“Darling, it was a dream,” he soothes. “It's finished now. Nothing can hurt you. It wasn't real.”

He pulls me onto his chest. His plush softness transmits serene waves throughout my body, his own unique talent for being able to tranquilize me with his body heat exclusively.

“It was real. I was there. “

He kisses my cheek. A nod.

“Let's go, sweetheart. Forget about it. I have something planned for you.”

He stands from the bed, extending a hand to assist me in doing the same. My eyebrows raise in curiosity.

“What?”

I don't move.

“You'll see.”

The line is accompanied by a sly smile I cannot contemplate opposing: I seize his hand. Squarely thereafter, I'm on a barefoot stroll in pajamas with my deranged husband on an extempore escapade toward an alchemistic destination.

It does almost pitch black. The rough crackling of mangled twigs against my feet pierces the night air, provoking me to sense as if I have just broken an unarticulated but none-the-less customary law

of the forest, repelling me its trust. I ungrasp Lou's hand to shake off my sweaty one, skittish for what I cannot pinpoint. He detects this uncomfortable change in my state.

“We’re almost there. I promise.”

And we are, for I begin to perceive little flickering specks of light radiating through slivers of openings between cozy tree leaves and rough, firm trunks and branches. I fancy they’re for us.

Louis confirms the suspicion: "That light is for us."

Upon arrival, we're embraced with colorful strings luminous bulbs attentively hung between loops and intersections of trees with a gutted out area in the heart, layered perfectly with a homely, edge-frayed baby blue blanket and a woven strawberry basket to serve as the pinnacle.

My mouth drops upon sight; the scene's composition is sure to have gobbled at least two hours of time.

“You like?” was the conservative inquiry.

I dismissed it. “How long did this cost you?”

“Nevermind that,” he waved off. “Are you pleased?”

“Am I *pleased*? Am I *pleased*? I am sorry, sir, but I am far beyond this “pleased” you speak of.”

“You--?”

I kiss him there--barefoot, pajama-wearing, and light-surrounded. My lips clash with his unanticipating ones. The newfound heat of moment envelopes us into a secluded hideout we unlock the key to. Everything we do is invisible.

Nobody breaks the kiss; our lips merely disjoin naturally. All the same, they are still united in mind.

“*Pleased*,” I mumble, encasing us both inside the tattered blanket. “Please.”

The night lazily rises to day. It's as if its wish to end aligns with ours for it to--nonexistent. While we're counting stars, exchanging dreams, wishes, and memories, sleep is unthought of. In our private alcove, the euphoria of youth is revived and revamped, the volume ten times higher in a deeper, enhanced and intent way. The world's tribulation is forgotten, and I have already transferred to permanent life here in my mind. Alas, darkness drains to a close and fantomas realities of absolute dream entrapment parch upon the morning sun's arrival. Before complete diffusion of camp, Louis whispers in my ear, cool breath lingering above my cheek.

"I have something to tell you."

My reaction is hyper. "What? What is it?"

His voice hardens with detachment; his expression retains a stony edge. "This first."

Another note; another quote. A clutch it, broad smile immensely increasing with each second of time.

"I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind."

"What's this mean?"

My words have sank with burden and unclarity. He deflects my aim for eye contact, his masquerade slanting tender and void.

"I'm leaving."

Knives. Stabbing, drawing my blood as paint slayed on a canvas of skin: sharp, deep, infinite. Letters spelling my thoughts decline to be withdrawn.

"For war. They needed me--I was called. There's nothing I can do."

It's not a wonder; he's been a soldier post-marriage and marriage alike. The turmoil is the revival. Like someone just clicked a button on a website: refresh. Like that tap just bombed the perfect island

of our intimate province with the flare of fiasco and all razor-sharped paraphernalia that serves as its accomptant.

The fire of the outburst licks my insides, littering them with perennial martyrdom. There is no panacea for these kinds of scars, emotional bruises left behind, so I don't endeavor to douche the flames with the liquid of my tears. Not this time at least. This time the only moment I harvest is a meek nod for a numb essence.

"I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind."

I creek through the door of Matthew's room. Sun squints through his scarlet curtains, reflecting off pale, white walls. He looks so placid, so breezy, so natural and promising. I crawl in, half-beside him, petting his jovial little cheek with my hand.

How am I supposed to do this, telling him about his father? Like, by the way, your dad is going to war and won't be back for months? He doesn't even know what war is; Lou hasn't served since he was born. I can't enable it to shatter him like it does to me. I won't--

"Mmm..." he mumbles in his sleep.

I stop. My fingers comb over his hair, lightly transcending down to trace over the curves of his beige eyebrows. I pinpoint a lavender bruise taking over a prevalent portion of his forehead I hadn't noticed before. It concerns me, and I make a mental note to investigate it later.

"My baby," I murmur quietly enough to where we are the only ones who can hear it. "You're the only one that doesn't leave mommy. Good boy, you are, getting all muscular and handsome. Soon enough, you'll be all grown up, moving away and forgetting all about..."

The hushed sobs return.

Time passes like glaciers. Men are torn from families. People are torn apart. Emotion's murders are eternally on duty to wreak havoc. After a matter of time, it's only a matter of how big the bruise is, how distressing the scar. It's everyone's guesswork what wound will be the one to take a life, how many bruises one can suffer.

Bruises: they have never pained me so much as they do now. Matt kept getting them so much...too much...there was a problem...a doctor... I can see them now--the walls, the floor, the doctors, the test, the day--as they rise to the surface, often as they do, haunting me forever, leaving a scar that shall last way past the end of time.

“Back again.” the floor taunts.

I step over it, ignoring the contaminated remarks of that which has seen more. Whatever is to happen, I am to be strong today. It's not an option; it's for Matthew. I must save him from whatever may come, good or bad--or lethal.

“Hemophilia,” the diagnosis imprinted into my child as I encase my toddler tight and stroke his cheek, resting his head against the nape of my neck.

“What's that, doctor?” the innocent question, ignorant of the medical term's meaning.

Placid features answer me, eyes contorted with sorrow, sympathy and pity. My lips dry. My heart beats out of time. My body waves with heated chills.

“A condition where the blood doesn't clot normally...incurable....treatments...nothing's for certain...”

I catch only phrases. Consciousness drifts in and out. I'm not somber, not shattered, not even present. I'm adrift now, forgotten in a world where bruises dot the skies, filthy laundry is an air freshener, and giving up is a regular practice.

“I’m home!”

I dump the dishes and rush toward the door, cleansing father of his coat as he plops onto the drink-stained sofa, per usual.

“How was your day, daddy?” I ask tentatively, speedily fetching a drink from the kitchen.

He ignores the statement, and I am glad for the dismissal of my mistake.

I place the drink in his hand and hover idly, praying he tell me the next task I shall do before time hollows and instances turn haywire. He takes a sip. His face freezes in an expression foreign to my knowledge.

“Now, Eleanor Louise, you know I expect my tea unsweetened.”

“Yes, daddy, I just thought--”

His voice booms, “THOUGHT WHAT?”

I cringe, knowing better than to speak.

“THOUGHT YOU COULD ESCAPE, ELEANOR? THOUGHT YOU COULD MESS EVERYTHING UP, ELEANOR? THOUGHT--”

Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor. Three strikes; I’m out.

It happens swiftly, and then I’m flung about the room as the piles of used clothes are. He’s done, and I can break now. Once more, I’m thankful: it’s much worse when the episodes are long-lasting.

He stumbles off into a room, and I slip outside, pulling on a cardinal cardigan I snatch on the getaway. The coat is light and shields little from the gnawing cold, but at least it matches my flaming bruise quite nicely.

I’ll return to the house of course--father would be the first to find me if I didn’t--but I’m just repowering now, venturing to a place where I can recharge, be still while the world around me flashes by.

I'm at the house now. We left the hospital as soon as I could reteach myself how to pronounce the word *goodbye*. The lights are dim; it's just eyes, me and Matthew's. I wasn't about to let either of us sleep alone.

In complete black, Matt reminds me of his father; his placid blue eyes gleam with the same kindness, eagerness and softness that manage to soothe me. It transports his father right into the room with us even when circumstances deny us his repossession. "I may be thousands of miles away, but you're still the first thing on my mind," reigns substantial to this day.

"Mommy?" he peeps, fearful to unlatch the silence.

I reply, "Sweetheart?"

"What's wrong with me, mommy?"

"Well, umm..." I scuffle to glue the shattered and frayed edges of my voice back in unison. "You're sick, darling."

He giggles. "I don't *feel* sick."

"It's not like that, baby. This sick, it's... It's worse."

"How?"

"Well," I echo again. "Well, it's complicated, love."

"Will I die, mommy?"

The soberness in the letters demolishes me anew. Rives flow onto pillow fabric It's my sincere wish he cannot foresee them. I administer the only acknowledgement I can withstand:

"Go to sleep, darling."

Thank goodness he executes.

Bruises: they have never pained me so much as they do now.

Time slices like knives. Sons are torn from mothers. People tear apart. Havoc is eternally on duty to swallow emotion. After a matter of time, it's a forgotten matter of how big the bruise is, how distressing the scar. It's nobody's speculation what wound will be the one to take a life, how many bruises one can obtain, because the outcome has much less to do with the bruise than it does the concluding screeching fallout and the deafening silence of the aftermath.

Autumn's intense pigments have freshly faded into the pure white of the winter. It's a Saturday, and Matthew's fifth birthday is quickening its steps. Despite the frigid weather, Matt is ever transfixed on kicking his soccer ball all the way through the snowy season. And who am I to rob him that pleasure? So I grant it, casting my biggest regret into play.

It's so incidental, instantaneous. It's brisk, thunderous energy all exalted at one sharp point on a monitor before collapsing flat in the time it takes to blink--except nobody has time to blink. It has blinded all its victims pre-explosion, rewarded on each slaughter or injury, and it doesn't purely butcher; it massacres.

A ball. A street. A boy walking. A car. *BOOM*. A body.

Pieces of information shoot at me like bullets. They *are* bullets, sturdy, compact pelts of inalterable composition, blowing the wind from me in one turn.

An ambulance. Sirens. Shrieks. Barring. Every muffled sound bawling for my attention suffocating me. Everywhere. Blood. Everywhere. Blazing crimson. Sickening. Catastrophic. Lethal.

“MOMMY!!!”

My name. I barrel to it, to him, to Matthew.

Limbs. Everywhere. Limp limbs. Hands. Bandages. Lethal. Blood. Matthew.

I fling him to my chest. Doors slam. Movement. Dizzy. Deadly.
Matthew.

“MOMMY, MAKE IT STOP!!!”

Blood. Tears. Oceans. Wrapped in blood. Matthew.

“I can’t.”

My voice is frail, thin, inaudible.

“I can’t--I love you.”

He’s roaring. Fighting. Kicking. Self-destructing in the core my lap.
Everything stains red. So. Much. Blood. Pure chaos.

Dead silence.

This is Eleanor’s story. I reappeared from war after being notified
of my son's passing to locate Eleanor lying motionless on a bed of
snow in the woods.

Eleanor was a fighter. She was the world’s star in lieu of the
darkness that surrounded her. What you don’t know is just that:
darkness surrounded her.

When I met El, I was making my way back from a hunt. She was
sitting on a log, trembling like a leap, but stilled when I laid a hand
to her back. She said a deer made them all, the dark cobalt
markings on her face and back. I played the role she wanted me
to, nodding my head, no elaboration performed--but I formed an
intuition the moment she flinched when I took her hand. There were
no bruises on her hand. When we dismissed, I forced her to meet
me there. I never knew for positive why she showed. As long as she
did, though, that’s all that mattered.

I remember the hour she didn’t come. Misery and anguish clouded
the day, then the week, then she came, and it was as bad as if she
hadn’t.

"My dad," she muttered, voice gone, floating with the wind.

He abandoned her. She was starving. For a whole week. And she could never return. It was too much. There was no time for questions; the only thing she had time left for was to slip me a note with her secret address, warn me to never speak of it, and disappear behind the withered trees, leaves, and branches.

Baskets: I'd sneak them on her back porch. Whatever I killed that day--fish, deer, squirrel, a strawberry I glided out of the kitchen--it all accommodated to the accumulation for El. I'd distribute it and hope she got it. Furthermore, I'd started tucking notes for her: quotes to inspire her, to give her hope when her supply drew fruitless.

Dropping off one of my signature basket assemblies, we collided once. Her eyes contorted with fear, recognition, then panic. Clamorous noises arouse from the house's paper-thin walls.

"Eleanor? Come here right this second, young lady!"

Snappy words of grumpy origin. El turned. A moment of hesitancy-- I clutched her hand.

Dust filled the eyes once hazel. Chipped, brittle nails dominated where polish should have colored. Cracked sullen lips transfixed in an unwavering line. Ratted strands of Auburn hair that might have never seen a brush post-stone age. Innocent vulnerability--

"Run away with me."

The words tumbled from my lips before they retained meaning. There was no time for meaning; there was only time for yes or no.

"Yes."

She reported later to me about what happened, where she was, and what she'd been enduring. A guardian was apparently shoved upon her because of the fact she was a dependent in law. Each day consisted of strenuous labor and taxing consequences if not quip to par. Food was a non-reality apart from the undisclosed

baskets. As were showers, medicine, and non-artificial care. The lady was a mask for onlookers to believe Eleanor was accounted for.

I did the only thing I knew: I let her shower, use my medicine, and eat anything in the kitchen. Eventually, circumstances sorted themselves out.

Years later, she was still handicapped by the past. The last thing she'd do was reveal it. When she was told she couldn't fall pregnant, it was a knife from her past revived to haunt her. All the internal disasters sparked by late nights wasted inside her house unbottled from the past, flinging glass everywhere, stabbing where seen fit. Next, war driving me away from her, unable to shield her from seas across, to compact my love for her on a ship and sail it, despite trying. At last, to see all her bruises advertised upon the billboard of her son, to see her pain in his, ending in his own death.

Now she's gone--an accident. On her way to woods, something happened. A deer of something? It was inaccessible. All she wanted was to go be there in peace, to release her grief--and now she's gone. Ingrained in the comfort of the trees, a carving in my loves' places:

RIP

Eleanor and Matthew Thompson

For trying.

I live every day like the present is a gift. Not because I have to, but because it is. Eleanor knew that. She was dead long before she took her last breath, but she lived like she wasn't. She was not going to let death in. Not then, not ever.

As I grow old. I keep that with me. I keep *her* with me. She may never be more than just a headstone to every passerby astray, but I know better than that; I know who she really was. She was a fighter; she tried—and endured—through the most agonizing plight. She's my inspiration; she's the reason I try, even if I know it won't work.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the faculty and staff of the 2016 Tennessee Young Writers' Workshop and Appalachian Young Writers' Workshop.

Tennessee Young Writers Workshop faculty and staff: Langston Wilkins, *Director*; Mike Dobrzelecki, *Assistant Director and Screenwriting Faculty*; Dylan Philips, *Spoken Word Faculty*; Christina Stoddard, *Poetry Faculty*; Kristin O'Donnell Tubb, *Fiction Faculty*; Wendy Dinwiddie, *Counselor*; Spencer Cantrell, *Counselor*; Ellie Clayton, *Counselor*; Lauren Moore, *Counselor*.

Appalachian Young Writers Workshop faculty and staff: Langston Wilkins, *Co-Director*; Darnell Arnoult, *Co-Director*; Mike Dobrzelecki, *Assistant Director*; Robert Gipe, *Fiction Faculty*; Jesse Graves, *Poetry Faculty*; Belinda Smith, *Songwriting Faculty*; Christopher Martin, *Creative Non-fiction Faculty*; Wendy Dinwiddie, *Counselor*; Brittany Gray, *Counselor*; Brittany Skidmore, *Counselor*; Joseph Ellison, *Counselor*.

Thank you to the financial supporters of these programs. Without your generosity many of these students would not be able to attend the workshops. Your gifts have an impact on each of these students during the workshop and beyond. Thank you!

The writing included in this anthology is the result of one week at the Young Writers' Workshops and may therefore still be works in progress or excerpts.

The Young Writers' Workshops are seven-day residential writing workshop providing 7th-12th graders the opportunity to explore the craft of creative writing, learning from the region's foremost writers.

The TYWW is a program of Humanities Tennessee. The AYWW is a collaboration between Humanities Tennessee and Lincoln Memorial University. For more information visit www.HumanitiesTennessee.org