This lovely magazine, managed by a sluggish Senior and upheld by its exceptional Junior staff, holds wisdom. We recommend you sit down before reading any further. Because without being seated, this whirlwind of words might blow through your mind with the full force of a category five hurricane and knock you face down onto the ground. So sit down, sit back, and let the words instead wash over you, pour through your mind, and leave you with new eyes. I present to you, The Muse.

Your humble Editor,

Emily Lynne Bolvig
MUSE STAFF:

Emily Lynne Bolvig: Editor-in-Chief
Simona Shirley: Literary Editor
Massey Jordan: Art Editor
Sophie Truppner: Assistant Art Editor
Kimsey Stewart: Assistant Literary Editor
Lena Pelham: Publicity Editor
Lauren Elgin
Max Gault
Ethan Harradine
Caroline Pope
Isabella Narducci

Muse Adviser
Denise Trimm

LAYOUT DESIGN BY MULTI-MEDIA CLASS:

Jake Barton
Kathryn Davis
Matthew Fleckling
Max Gault
William Nabors
Carley Nadler
Coe Wilson
Harrison White

Layout Design Adviser
T Gary Weatherly

Muse is the publication of the Muse Literary Staff of Mountain Brook High School. ©2017
Emily Lynne Bolvig: Commander in Chief
Commander of the only fascist dictatorship in the English department.

Simona Shirley: Literary Editor
Simona Shirley is a half-Romanian strawberry-blonde with a hippie interest for everything organic. She enjoys the creative outlet that The Muse provides and loves working with her incredibly talented Muse Staff.

Kimsey Stewart: Assistant Literary Editor
Kimsey Jamison Stewart has been ruining jokes by not getting them since 2001.

Massey Jordan: Art Editor
I’ve been writing, drawing, and acting forever. The MUSE has been a great outlet for me to express all my interests into one class! I have a greyhound, Laci, and two cats, Katniss and Hamilton (yes, I know, I’m a nerd). I have an unhealthy obsession with musical theatre, Harry Potter, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Anyway, that’s about all there is to know about me!

Sophie Truppner: Assistant Art Editor
Sophie Truppner could not think up of a good bio so she decided not to write one.

Lena Pelham: Publicity Editor
Well hey there friends. I’m Lena Pelham. I like writing, drawing, drawing what I write, and knowing that I’m right.

Ethan Harradine
This is Ethan’s first year writing for the Muse Staff. He enjoys playing guitar, fishing, and soccer. He enjoys to write about spoders and water in both his poems and short stories.

Max Gault

Lauren Elgin
As a veteran of the Muse staff, I have endured the most. Out of the multiple types of writing, I enjoy poetry: dark poetry and sweet poetry alike. This year has been a ride.

Caroline Pope
Hello, I am Caroline Pope. I enjoy tickling the ivories as well as eating marshmallows. I am the world renowned artist of Mrs. Trimm’s board of the white color.

Isabella Narducci
Ever since I was little I knew I wanted to be a writer and I’m grateful I got to share my ideas and experiences with others like me. I made a lot of friends and can’t wait to see how my work can improve over the years.
## Table of Contents

### Literary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanging Threads - Ethan Harradine</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Girl from Arlington Street - Massey Jordan</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swipes - Massey Jordan</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesick - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfit - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Love - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheater - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Tattoo - Simona Shirley</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ivory Escape - Caroline Pope</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himself - Ethan Harradine</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How God ends Us. - Emily Bolvig</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eerie - Emily Bolvig</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Seem a Little Lost, Penny</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Theory - Emily Bolvig</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Once Were - Cullen (Clay) Harkins</td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow Down - Lauren Elgin</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Kiss in Space - Lauren Elgin</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merging of Minds - Culver Benedict</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitman-esque - Cullen (Clay) Harkins</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room 702 - Cole Hamilton</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still Mourning - Sarah Kate Anderson</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching - Sophie Truppner</td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rain Drop - Sophie Truppner</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Prayer for the Lost - Cullen (Clay) Harkins</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbidden Blood - Hannah Strickland</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning with Others - Simona Shirley</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astronautical Love - Simona Shirley</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake Eyes - Simona Shirley</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Song - Simona Shirley</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Funny Old Gun - Franklin Lamar</td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Dreamers Die? - Cullen (Clay) Harkins</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Issues - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons I Stayed - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroy the Idea - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction, Part II - Kimsey Stewart</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Think Architecturally - Ethan Harradine 65
Sailing Around the Room - Emily Bolvig 67
1929. - Emily Bolvig 67
Wildflowers in Summer - Cullen (Clay) Harkins 67
Dim Light - Lauren Elgin 69
We all Wait - Lauren Elgin 70
All Things - Cullen (Clay) Harkins 70
Not Easy for Me - Lauren Elgin 71
Let’s Eat - Lauren Elgin 72
Times Square - Massey Jordan 73
The Professor and the Boy - Grace Cope 75
Rose Colored Glasses - Caroline Howell 76
Eden to Travelers - A Short Story - Cullen (Clay) Harkins 77
Consuming Lines - Lena Pelham 80

Southern Gothic Section: 81
A Simple Southern Family - Callie Coker 82
Keep Your Eyes Open - Hannah Bartels 84
Enclosed Future - Hudson Dorough 86
The Lost Ones - Isabella Narducci 87

Narrative Section: 90
Mounds of Love - Simona Shirley 92
Goodbye Allie - Alexis Kennedy 94
Breakfast Run - Jack Wilson 96
Angelic Happiness - Carolanne Berte 97
Room 307 - Caroline Khon 99
Tag! You’re it - Candler Brown 101

Alabama Writers Section: 103
Metamorphosis - Simona Shirley 104
(inspired - Their Eyes Were Watching God - Zora Neale Hurston)
The Affliction - Emily Bolvig 105
(inspired · Stomping the Blues · Albert Murray)
This House · Ethan Harradine 106
(inspired · All Over but the Shoutin’ · Rick Bragg)
The Night · Sophie Truppner 108
(inspired · In Cold Blood · Truman Capote)
Counting Cracks · Max Gault 109
(inspired · Their Eyes Were Watching God · Zora Neale Hurston)

## ART WORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Type</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Elana Hites</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Macey Miller</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Cole Hamilton</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Elana Hites</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Elana Hites</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print</td>
<td>Kate Seibels</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting/Collage</td>
<td>Anne Heaton Sanders</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Simona Shirley</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Macey Miller</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Elana Hites</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Emilyn Hamn</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Molly O’Neill</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Cole Hamilton</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing/Painting</td>
<td>Massey Jordan</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Elana Hites</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Molly O’Neill</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Mary Coleman Coats</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Mary Arden Pennington</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>Emily Bolvig</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Mary Coleman Coats</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Madelyn Boodoian</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Molly O’Neill</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hanging Threads
Ethan Harradine

Let me take you to my land, a land where a river cuts into giants, wraps around their legs and leaves their feet battered and bare. A place where the mountains whisper down to the winding river, yearning to meet again. The place where the crow and eagle can sit in silence without haste.

Old cork runs through the creases and calluses bulging out of my ragged hand. The line creates a cycle of loops and hangs in the air for only a few seconds, but with every cast the line transforms into thread, sewing the scars in my heart into tiny seams. The water hugs my knees and ankles drowning my regrets, reminding me I’m not alone in this. The soft spring wind slowly crawls up my neck, over a sharp jaw, until it’s upon my lips and I taste the warmth on the end of my tongue. The sweet smell of flowers lingers in my nose until I exhale, awakening old memories of perfume.

I lay the fly down behind a boulder throwing an eddie that looks rather promising. My left hand, knowing its job, begins stripping line which makes the flies’ bucktail dance, and the chartreuse belly catch the light. But as quickly as the flies’ dancing began, it stops and its life fades away with nothing to show as I rip him out of the water putting the fly back into the same cycle.

The fly sneaks into the water beneath a hanging tree branch projecting a foreboding shadow onto the water. He swims and dives freely even though he is connected by a thin thread to a puppeteer, and though the fly does not realize it, he must play his part, for his fate lies in the hands of the one controlling the string. The fly dances deeper and deeper and deeper until he does not realize how he ended up so deep just by dancing. He feels stuck and trapped but somehow manages to find his way out and back into the cycle.

I make my way down the river through some rough patches, a few slow parts, and a couple of curves with nothing. Nothing is a word I know well. Fly Fishing is a crazy thing; you spend more time doing work, keeping the fly in the air, shooting line, and counting out the rhythm of strokes than you do with your fly swimming. And very rarely by some miracle of a chance, butterflies beating their wings and all the threads hanging together does your fly dance in the face of a beast from below.

My brain sleeps but my hands and arms work anyways, shooting the fly into a shallow area where the fish don’t particularly sit. My fly dances. My mind drifts off down the river to what will be fished tomorrow. My fly dances. I begin sinking into the silt on the river bed so I shuffle to the side where there’s a small amount of gravel. My fly dances. I shift my thoughts back to bringing the fly out of the water, but I don’t. My fly no longer dances.

The line begins sliding from the eyelets of the rod. I press the line between my fingertips and the cork. I flick my wrist, setting the hook. The fish pulls and darts, but despite all her efforts she can’t break the line. She jumps and throws herself with grace in an attempt to free the hook from her mouth. As she nears me she grows tired until
eventually she can’t fight any longer. I sink my hand into the water and pick her by the belly. She is a beauty with a pink stripe running horizontally down her side and many dots lining her back. But she is small, a pound at most, so I let her go, knowing somewhere down the river I will find a keeper.
The trees cracked in the gale outside while Mama perched on the edge of her shabby handmade bed. Her wide, frightened eyes watched the raindrops race down the window, the city lights behind them far away and out of focus.

Her small ankles were crossed and her knuckles were white as she clutched at the rose-colored bed-spread, the ghost of her breath sliding into the air as she breathed out. I sat in the musty corner, keeping my eyes glued on her while I kept quiet and played with my little toy trucks, as she told me to do. I didn’t dare disturb her quiet with my timid sound-effects to go along with my tiny cars. So I kept them in my head, going through the motions as I anticipated the sound of the front door creaking open and of Papa’s disgruntled footsteps.

Glowing headlights shone through the windows and I winced as I saw Mama’s back straighten. Her feet hit the ground with a thump and I watched her race downstairs, her chest heaving.

I stayed put.

I listened intently, my eyes glancing up and gluing to the door. The hissing of my parents’ voices drifted up through the floorboard, burning into my ears like hot, melting candle wax. Pursing my lips, I looked back down at my toy cars, letting the image of them fog my worries and fill my childish imagination.

I saw them, rolling down a quiet and peaceful British road, their thick wheels churning the gravel into a chunky, chalky stew. They rumbled along side by side, the bigger car’s shadow cast on the left side so that it didn’t block the smaller car’s view. In the moonlight above them, two slick, black, metal-winged creatures slipped through the air like slinky cats, shielding my cars from the sparkling starlight. In one fluid motion, the winged creatures opened their black ribcages, dropping from their sleek bodies two orbs of death.

The orbs floated down at first. As they neared the treeline, the rays of light from the sky flashed from their metal surfaces onto the crisp yellow of my cars. The bombs sped up, and as they came closer and closer, the drivers of my cars looked up and, puzzled, focused their eyes on the red symbol that sucked on the bomb’s metallic flesh like big, German parasites. In the drivers’ last few seconds, they voiced my own thoughts and cursed the name of Adolf Hitler…. Before the bombs were upon them and they were blown from existence.

Pulling myself from imagination’s threshold, I looked at my toy cars and scolded myself for thinking that way.

But back then, I didn’t yet know that that was how everybody thought during a time of war. It was inevitable.
A swell of depression covering my body like water on cloth made my head droop lower. For almost a minute I sat, pondering, until:

“Thomas, dear!” I snapped my head up, my ears ringing with the sound of my cars being blown to smithereens. Immediately reacting to Mama’s voice, I scooted forward, using my overly large and clumsy feet to heave myself up.

I approached the wooden door. Placing my tiny, steady-as-a-rock hand on the handrail, I treaded down the steps patiently, like an old man greeting Death like a long-missed friend.

How right I was to compare it to Death.

Mama’s shivering frame came into view at the base of the steps, her skinny ankles and trembling fingers causing my young mind to question what was happening.

“Mama?” I asked, wanting to know what was causing her to worry so much. At the sound of my small, high-pitched voice she let out a sigh, the tears collecting in the corners of her mouth causing her throat to close.

Keeping my curious eyes on her outstretched arms, I took another step and slowly strolled down the stairs. Papa suddenly appeared behind Mama, his large and burly build a startling contrast compared to her.

“Thomas,” he rumbled, cigar smoke rolling off his tongue. The scent of burnt cinnamon enveloped me, and I tried not to recoil. “Thomas, come to your mother.”

I looked up at him, avoiding his rock-hard eyes. Instead, I focused on his soft, downy beard that whisped from his chin, and it made me remember that he wasn’t all bark and bite.

After inching towards them, I finally felt the quivering touch of Mama’s grasp on my small shoulders as she tugged me into the kitchen. The light was nearly blinding after hours of sitting in Mama and Papa’s dark room, waiting.

Mama and Papa pulled out three chairs at the kitchen table. The wooden legs squeaked at the hardwood floors like someone had just forcefully dragged their fingernails across a chalkboard. I didn’t flinch.

Mama’s wide, teary brown eyes were glued to me as she lowered herself into a chair, her long white fingers twisting the tear-stained handkerchief in her hand.

She opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out was, “Thom-dear-I...I-I can’t…” A ferocious sob racked her body and her shoulders were thrown forward as she buried her head into her hands, the skin on her face darkening to a deep, crimson red. I looked away from her, my face expressionless.

“Papa?” I asked.

Papa scooted his chair closer, leaning forward and looking me in the eye. “Thomas,” he began, the huff of his smoky breath filling my nostrils. “Thomas, don’t be afraid.”

I nodded slowly, feeling the tips of my straight brown bangs bouncing off my forehead.
Papa’s gaze stayed locked on me as he continued. “Don’t be afraid, because there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Papa...”

“Thomas.”

“....Yes, Papa.”

He nodded stiffly. “Good boy. Now, I don’t want you to ask questions. Do as you’re told and everything will be alright.”

I stared at him.

“Tomorrow you’ll be going to a place called Arlington Street,” he stated. I wanted to jump to my feet and exclaim, “Why, Papa?! Why? Why do I have to go... Why?” But instead I sucked on my bottom lip and maintained a straight face.

Papa could see the wheels turning in my head- I could see it in his eyes. He leaned forward in his chair. I started, afraid he was going to punish me for questioning him, but I was taken aback to feel his course, muscular arms gather me up and tug me onto his lap. His large, warm hand held my head close to his heart so that I heard it’s steady thump, thump, thump...

He kept me close for another few seconds, before he buried his nose in my staticy hair and mumbled, “My left pocket, Bella.”

Mama, upon hearing her name, sniffed once more into her handkerchief before reaching over slowly and sliding her hand into Papa’s coat pocket. As her hand closed on the contents, I heard the sharp crunch of rumpled paper and lifted my head a few centimeters to get a better look. The paper was crisp and white, the limited fold on it’s surface telling me that Papa had received it quite recently.

Passing it to me, Mama opened her mouth to say something but stopped herself. She turned away, tears falling from her pointed chin onto the strings of long brown hair that rested on her collar bone.

“Thomas, you’re a seven year old boy,” he said. “Read it yourself.” Despite the crude manner of this statement, he said it softly and quite fatherly, willing me to reach out and take the paper in my hands.

The paper was awfully cold, and I held it in my clenched palm to warm it before carefully unfolding it, my eyebrows furrowed in curiosity. Willing my eyes to meet the black, inky lines on the page, I began to read.

I could feel Mama and Papa’s eyes on me as my heart thumped faster and faster, the words I was reading not quite registering at the shock. My chest started to heave as my eyes flitted over the sentences.

I tore my gaze from the page, looking up at Mama and Papa. “I’m going... without you?”

Mama sobbed again. Papa reached out and clutched at my shoulder, giving me a slight shake. “The train leaves at seven fifteen. You’ll be going with another group of kids to
the London countryside- where you’ll be safe.”

I nodded slowly, not wanting to understand... but the problem was, I did understand.
“IT’s because of the bombs,” I stated.
Papa nodded.
I narrowed my eyes. “IT’s always because of the bombs.”
I shifted my weight uncomfortably as the train rattled and shook on the rickety tracks. I sunk into my seat, pressing my shoulder into the cold steel wall to try and blend out of sight. The voices of other young, excited children filled the air and I couldn’t help but wonder, Why are you all so happy? We’re being shipped away, not going on vacation....

I fiddled with the ticket clutched in my dry hand, and I attempted to block out the sight of children sharing lollypops and tipping their hats jokingly. So the train rumbled on, the window fogging up with steam every so often.

“Stop at Arlington Station!”

I jerked awake, and rubbed my sleepy eyes as the train conductor wobbled past me, the stench of whisky rolling off of him as he repeated the announcement over again. Reluctantly slipping my shoes on, I slid off the squishy leather bench and lugged my suitcase into the aisle, staring indifferently at the endless rows of boys and girls.

The feeling of cold, fresh air filled my lungs as I hopped off the last step onto the platform. The conductor waved me off, rumbling something about, “Pesky kids and their endless needs.”

Only then did I realize I didn’t know where to go.
I recalled Papa telling me, as I was dropped off at the station, “When you arrive find a cab. Tell them your name and give them your paper, they will take you to Arlington Street.”

I rocked on the balls of my feet, searching among the billowing smoke and bustling people to glimpse a way out. Finally a gap between two large families emerged, and I jogged forward, pushing my way through and out of Arlington Station.

I nearly fell off the curb when I rushed out the door. The street was barely trickling with people, and the only buildings I could see were the post office and a local dentist, R.R Martin, as the sign read.

The sky was as cloudy as possible, and the smell of rain was slowly seeping into the town. I stood stock still, as if I expected for a cab to simply roll up and invite me in, which, back then, I did.

Finally the cogs in my brain started whirring, and I realized that it may take a little effort on my part. I opened my mouth and shouted, “Cab! Cab, please, I-I need a cab!”

Instead of a cab I received some odd looks from a group of women passing by on the sidewalk. I cocked my head to the side, wondering what I did wrong... I’d never needed to call a cab before.
I wrinkled my nose at the load of people that suddenly spilled out of the station, and as I turned around my eyes widened as I saw that they weren’t just people... they were soldiers.

I awkwardly shuffled out of the way, studying their delight at the sight of the sun and the way their mouths broke into wide, laughing smiles as they felt a stray raindrop fall on their noses. Many of them were walking side by side, almost leaning onto each other as if they were friends who were inseparable, but had been separated too much.

My eyes fell back onto the sidewalk as a few of them passed by. I waited patiently for them to stride away, but I soon became conscious that one of them had stayed behind. He stood by me, his weight thrown onto one side of his body and his knee supporting one of his heavy duffle bags. He was whistling a loud, patriotic tune that filled the quiet streets and his left foot was tapping along, perfectly on beat.

I was too awkward to scoot away, and the soldier didn’t even seem to notice me. He was too tall, and I was too short, I guess.

“Bye, Smith!” shouted another soldier across the street. My soldier looked up, grinning crookedly at his friend.

“So long, Mallory!” he bellowed back. As he looked up, I noticed that he was quite young- only 19 or 20, at the most. After that, I couldn’t help but stare, thinking, How in the world could a child fight in a war?....

As my soldier, Smith, waved goodbye to the big, hefty Mallory, a cab turned the corner. I opened my mouth in excitement, until-

“Oy, taxi!”

Smith beat me to it. The cab pulled up, it’s smooth black surface spotless compared to the dusty, worn-out cabs of London.

Smith opened the back door, heaving his duffel bags and himself inside. His knees were squashed up all the way to his chest due to the minimal size of the car.

The window to his door was open when the driver said, “Ah, young Christian Smith, home at last. Oh, your family will be thrilled!”

Christian Smith chuckled. “Actually, Tommy, they don’t even know I’m on leave. It’s my sister’s birthday, I thought I’d surprise her.”

Tommy the driver laughed. “Ah, yes, Alice is in for quite a surprise. I actually stopped by there just this morning to wish her a happy 17th. So, Arlington Street, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir.”

Christian Smith rolled up the window. I was nearly frozen as I listened, but when I heard the driver say Arlington Street, I erupted from my trance and nervously approached the car door. Just before the driver hit the gas, I rapped my knuckles shyly on the window. The wheels screeched to a halt, and the driver looked around, annoyed. Christian Smith rolled down the window, and I was surprised but relieved when I saw he had a knowing smile playing on his lips.

“Excuse me, sir,” I muttered. “I-I’m going to Arlington Street as well. May I ride?”

Tommy the driver smirked and rolled his eyes, giving me a couple of minutes to heave my bags and myself in before he took off. I sat in silence for almost a minute, too shy to say anything.

“So,” Christian said. “I suspect you’re from London?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He smiled, leaning to the left as he said, “Ah, I knew the Robertsons were expecting a foster kid. Glad you can join the Arlington family, kiddo.”

I smiled, looking at him. He looked as you’d expect, from what you know about his personality so far. He was tall and slim, maybe on the borders of lanky. He had somewhat broad shoulders that supported his long, narrow face and upturned nose, which looked as if it had gotten a little sunburned. The army helmet had been removed to reveal wavy blonde hair, almost blinding to look directly at.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Thomas Bale, sir.”

“Bale? Are you related to Joshua Bale and the Wellington Bales?”

I shook my head.

He shrugged. “Ah, well. Good folks, anyway.”

After a couple of minutes, I began to feel quite comfortable in his presence. He didn’t seem to care or mind that I was a little bit awkward, or barely had a family of my own. It was nice, for once, to not have to say anything at all.

The car ride lasted only 10 minutes from the station, and by then the sun had broken free of the clouds’ prison and illuminated the sky in dazzling yellow light. The cab stopped abruptly in the middle of the street, the driver turning around and saying, “The Smiths and the Robertsons.”

Christian smiled, thanked Tommy, handed him a wad of cash, and stepped out.

Heading to the house on the left side of the street, he called out to me, “The house directly opposite to mine is where you’re going, kid. Nice to meet ya, Thomas!”

He saluted me, and turned on his heel, approaching his driveway.

I looked at my own destination as the cab rumbled away.

The house was big, square, and white, the black shutters perfectly aligned by the windows. Despite the cookie-cutter style and typical gardening, I noticed with curiosity that the door was painted bright, bright red.

Ready to take the biggest step of my life, I prepared myself to knock on the door, and- The door swung open, the edge of it barely missing my shocked body as I rocketed back three feet, scared to death. A huge, overweight woman loomed in the passageway, her thick head sporting two of the largest braids I’d ever seen.

“Ah, Thomas!” she bellowed, her deep voice rumbling from her throat, her many
chins wobbling. I lowered myself further to the ground at her outstretched arms and thick Italian accent. “How good that you’ve arrived, my child!”

The large woman bounded forward, shoving my suitcase to the side and wrapping me up in her fleshy arms. For an instant, I thought my pancreas had suffered permanent damage. I breathed a sigh of relief as she let me go. She wrapped her sausage-like fingers around my face, squishing my cheeks as she mumbled, quite loudly, “Too thin. You need meat.”

As if she had immediately forgotten me, she threw my bag over her great shoulder and lumbered off into the house, singing some sort of song in Italian.

I took a moment to register what had just happened. So, that was my new mom. That was Mrs. Robertson. That was who was in charge of my care.

My shoulders slumped. God, I missed Mama and Papa. Speaking of Papa, I thought. Who is that woman’s husband?

“Oh, I see Gertrude has introduced you to the house.”

I raised my eyes. In the doorway stood the short, thin frame of a man, a long cigar hanging from his mouth as he grinned politely. “Young Thomas Bale,” he said warmly. “I’m Jon Robertson.”

He extended a friendly hand, and I reluctantly extended mine as well. As we let go of each other, my new father said, “I’ll go prepare your room, son. Please, come in and make yourself at home.”

Mr. Robertson looked at me a second more, then turned and bee-bopped inside. I began to follow him, but something made me stop and look across the street.

The sunlight washed over every house roof, sparkling in the glass windows and illuminating the brittle trees that bent in the breeze. Sweet-scented flowers budded at my feet, making the loud aura of the Robertsons fade away so that all I heard was a buzz of sunlight and the rustling of leaves.

The corners of my mouth curled up in a sleepy grin at the peaceful street, the clucking of chickens in a small barn next door and the distant rattle of a chainsaw swimming in the air.

But the quiet seemed... I don’t know, a little too quiet. And then I realized why: Christian Smith stood in the exact same place I had left him. His bags were still clenched in his strong hands and his head was turned up, as if he were pouring over the windows, searching for a face to appear. I watched intently.

Then, the sunshine-yellow door to the Smith’s humble home popped open, and out stepped a young woman, in her slender, white hands a pale pink watering can. She closed the door behind her, but she didn’t seemed to have noticed the soldier in her yard. As she stepped off the porch, she closed her sparkling eyes and let the warmth of the sun engulf her, the gentle breeze billowing her yellow skirt around her calves.

When I saw her, she made an immediate impression on me, long and slim with gentle brown hair like feathers and soft curves. I grew breathless at the sight of her... my
heart skipped a beat. The delicate step of her fragile feet landed soundlessly on the pavement, like a hare falling on a bed of powdery snow, and her eyes, though far away, shone like a thousand stars coiled into two green pools of light.

She tilted her head and bent over, watering the patch of violets that clung together in a tiny hand-made pot. I still hadn’t seen her face, and I felt surprised to find myself itching to see what it looked like. I hadn’t ever seen the girls at my elementary school exactly like I saw this young woman.

As she raised up, her eye twitched and she caught the figure of the young man in the yard. She turned to meet his eyes- and the watering can clattered to the ground. The girl’s hands flew to her mouth and she stood stock still, her skinny ankles trembling. Her face was turning red as sobs began to rack her body, and when she pulled her hands away, I was able to see she was smiling with relief and the utmost happiness. “Chris,” she breathed, and she walked to him unevenly, as if she couldn’t really believe he was standing in front of her.

“Hey there, Alli,” he said, grinning crookedly at her, though tears were falling from his eyes as he spoke. “Miss me?”

She laughed through her tears. The sound made me remember the church bells in London.

They stared at each other for a minute longer... then she threw her arms around his neck and cried into his shoulder, her eyes looking up at Heaven as if saying, “Thank you, Lord.”

I looked at them, suppressing a smile at the sight of the reunion. So that must be Alice. His sister.

Despite the happiness of the reunion, I couldn’t help but keep looking at the girl, Alice, clinging onto her brother for dear life. It was her birthday, but all she seemed to care about was that her brother was alive, safe, and home. I suppose this is what made Alice intriguing, in an odd way. A normal, everyday guy walking down the street would see her, and simply keep walking. But I... I found her so gorgeous, despite her now-visible plain face, olive-green eyes and flattened nose. There was something that moved in her eyes, not shadows but lights that made even a simple house-chore such as watering the plants seem so alive.

I didn’t know then, but she’d be the reason I’d live to return to London.

By the time I saw Alice again, I had spent three weeks at the Robertson’s house. Yes, Gertrude was loud, and yes, Jon kept to himself, but it was quite an interesting experience. The days were peaceful and uninterrupted, unlike the busy and stressful rampages of the London streets, where I had to worry about holding onto Mama’s cold hand to cross the street or who would steal my lunch money at school. I quite enjoyed it. Gertrude and Jon left me to my own devices, which I liked then... but now, I would do anything to change that.

Once in a while, a car would rumble past or a midday jogger would run by and yell
out, “Cheerio!” while I sat out in the front yard, playing silently with my old toy trucks, but other than that, the cloudless sky and the silent houses were the only company I got.

Well, beside Christian Smith.

Yes, he’d come sit with me out in the yard, sometimes in silence or sometimes telling me some cool knife trick or prank he learned in his barracks while in the war. I’d rarely say a word, I’d just listen, but I really loved having him with me. He was a nice, slightly goofy person. Yeah, he had a big mouth. He was quite a daredevil, and it was funny when a group of girls would pass by and he’d wave. They’d giggle and wave flirtatiously back, waggling their fingers and he flipping his wavy blond hair.

This particular day, Christian hadn’t made his daily visit yet. It was nearly two in the afternoon, and I was beginning to think he wasn’t coming. Shrugging off the disappointment, I began to gather my things when I heard Christian’s voice say, “C’mon, Alice, it’ll be fun!”

“Christian, I already said I’m coming.”

“I know, just making sure.”

I looked up, excitement rushing through my blood like adrenaline. Alice was walking by Christian’s side, her face smiling as they both headed over to me.

As they approached, Christian plopped down on the grass beside me and said, “What ya doin’ today, kiddo?”

I smiled.

“Just playing. And thinking.”

“Mmmm, I see,” answered Christian. He looked at Alice, who had knelt on the grass next to me.

She smiled and said, “Thomas, so nice to meet you. I’m glad Arlington Street was able to give you a home.”

I was rendered speechless. God, there was just something about her...

“Oh... thanks.”

She grinned in response.

The three of us sat, me with my legs criss-cross-applesauce, Christian whistling “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” and Alice staring serenely ahead. I was well aware I was staring at Alice, but no matter how many times I told myself to look away, I couldn’t bare to. Her thin ankles were crossed and her fingers were laid gently on the grass. Her thumb played absentmindedly with the broken wheel of my little toy plane.

Gathering my senses and tearing my gaze away from her, I looked to the sky, and as I felt the cold metal of my toy car next to me I remembered the night I found out I was coming to Arlington. I remembered seeing the planes in the sky and the Nazi bombs eliminating my cars. Curiosity getting the better of me, I turned to Christian and asked, “Christian, why are the Nazis bombing my home?”

Christian’s whistling stopped abruptly and a look of rock-hard seriousness crossed his face. Leaning forward, he looked at Alice, who had grown as solemn as he had.

“Thomas,” he said putting a firm hand on my shoulder and giving me a shake.
“Don’t ask that. You don’t want to kno-”

“No.”

It was Alice who had spoken. “No, Christian, he deserves to know.”

Christian didn’t look happy.

“Al- he’s seven years old, he-”

“His parents had to ship him away, Chris. Do you expect him to want to remain ignorant his whole life?”

Christian was looking at her with fuming eyes. He was biting the inside of his cheek, I realized.

Finally, he heaved himself to his feet, looking at his sister, to me, then back to his sister, and saying, “Fine. But I’m not going to stand around and watch.”

He stalked away, leaving me and Alice looking at each other, me at a loss for words.

“Don’t worry about him, Thomas,” she cooed. “He’s just been through alot. He doesn’t want you to have to grow up too fast, like he did. He didn’t have a choice... you do.”

I nodded, part of me agreeing with Christian.

But then... “Alice, tell me the truth about the bombs.”

She smiled. “Okay, Thomas. Well, it all starts with a man named Hitler....”

By nine o’clock I was tucked away in my bed, Alice’s words ringing in my head. Mama and Papa could be dead, I thought. I was wrong- it’s not always because of the bombs. It’s always because of Hitler.

“What’s that tree?” I asked, pointing up at the short, flowery trunk.

“That’s a dogwood,” said Alice, walking with her hands clasped firmly behind her back.

“No, silly, that’s a mayapple.”

Christian’s retort was responded to with a smack over the head.

Their laughter in the background, I focused solely on the trees that surrounded the gravel path we were on. There were so many... I began to wonder if they could shelter the woodland animals from the bombs.

Christian was whistling a jazz song, snapping his fingers to the beat. The World War II army pin jangled on his shirt as he swayed along. I watched Alice beside him, swinging her hips and snapping along as well, tossing her head back and forth sillily with her brother. The two were happy to spend some quality time together, I realized, considering they were always with me. I turned away, not wanting to intrude, but I couldn’t help but join in when Christian gave Alice a big twirl, who then pulled me in the group and they began to sing, wildly off pitch but having fun either way. I danced, laughing, but I didn’t sing along.

Alice taught me how to do the Charleston, a popular dance from the twenties. I can still remember Mama and Papa doing it in the living room before the war started.

The three of us were having such a good time we almost didn’t hear the sirens blaring across the sky. We stopped abruptly, looking up as if to see planes directly overhead.
In an instant, Alice had me by the shoulders and was shoving me forwards, screaming, “Run, run!”
Christian brought up the tail, moving us on faster as we all sprinted for our lives back to Arlington Street. The moment’s elation vanished, replaced with the numbing feeling of pure terror.
I dared to look up one time as we sprinted- and found myself seeing the most terrifying sight I could imagine. Three Nazi planes glinted over the horizon, their wings slicing through air like knives through flesh.
I let out a blood-curtling scream, and Christian, running faster, picked me up and cradled me in his arms as he bolted, Alice by his side, towards home. As the houses grew nearer in sight, I heard a faint call of, “Help...”
I screamed, “STOP!” but Christian had already halted to see a middle-aged woman running behind us, clutching her straw hat to her head, and he exclaimed, “Ms. Pillsbury...”
In an instant, he had thrown me into Alice’s arms and yelled, “Alice, whatever you do, keep running. Don’t look back, don’t think, just GO!”
He shoved us forward, and I heard Alice scream his name as he ran back to help the woman, but Alice and I were forced to run on without him.
The buzz of the planes was getting closer as my sobs grew louder. Alice and I could see the houses of Arlington Street straight ahead. We were almost, almost there-
The first bomb hit the ground a couple of miles away. Alice threw her body over mine as debris blew everywhere, causing her stride to falter a little. Fortunately she was able to get going again, shielding my head with her scratched arms.
“It’s okay, Thomas, it’ll be okay...”
That’s when the smell of burning flesh found us.
Alice’s stomach convulsed as she gagged, digging her palm into her nose. Unable to hold it back, I screamed.
Alice was only a few feet away from the street’s shelter. Four steps, three steps, two steps, one step....
We were safe.

The bombs rattled the shelter as I sat, curled up in Alice’s trembling arms.
Her nose was buried in my hair, and she was praying.
I was praying, too.
Christian hadn’t arrived to the shelter. We didn’t know if he had found another shelter, gotten himself and Ms. Pillsbury out of bombing range, or...
No. No, I told myself not to think like that.
But I couldn’t ignore the awful feeling in my gut.

Gertrude and Jon both had their arms wrapped around me and Alice. For once,
Gertrude’s size made me feel safe.

Christian still isn’t here.

The air-raid ended at four in the afternoon. Alice and I, the last ones to emerge, held on to each other’s hands. We looked around at the rubble that used to be our houses. At least I had another home in London. Alice searched through the rubble for two hours. She refused to let me pitch in.

“No,” she said. “I don’t want you cutting yourself on sharp edges.”

She didn’t follow her own wish for me, because when I looked at her I saw scarlet pooling around her wrists.

“He’s not here,” she whispered.

Of course he’s not going to be here, Alice, I thought. He’s never going to be here.

Looking back on it now, maybe I should’ve helped her. Maybe we would’ve found the body.

But maybe it’s good I didn’t. Maybe I spared her the pain of seeing his body so mutilated she would only be able to recognize him by his clothes.

Whatever the alternate ending could have been, the decision of not helping her look has haunted me all these years.

The spring following the bombing of Arlington, I was sent back to London. The city was intact, and the Battle of Britain was officially over. Mama and Papa were waiting.

I stood outside the door of the newly-built Robertson’s house, my bags in my hands and my green overalls rolled up at the ankles. Gertrude’s hammy arms were squeezing me so tight I thought I’d die, but as she pulled away I felt a tang a sadness... I’d miss my foster mother.

Jon was calm, giving me a firm handshake as he walked me to the driveway, saying, “Son, work on that grip of yours. You won’t become a man until you learn how to shake like one.”

As the cab driver hauled my bags into the trunk, I felt a cool hand brush my shoulder. I turned around and-

“Hi, Alice.”

“Hi, Thomas.”

We looked at each other, wanting to say something more, but not finding the words. After a minute, I looked at the beautiful girl in front of me, said, “Thank you, Alice,” and got in the car.

I never saw the girl from Arlington Street again.
Painting by
Emily Bolvig
The computer mouse buzzed beneath Tala’s fingertips and displayed its little red light, scratching across the desk as she carefully moved it to and fro. Tala followed its movements on the screen with narrowed eyes, her subtly winged eyeliner as sharp as her thoughts. She scrutinized the image in front of her, using the mouse to fill in the drawing with clean black swipes.

Swipes. What a delicate word. When someone describes something as a swipe, most people’s minds whirr with images of soft swishes through the air, or the gentle tread of a foot in shallow water. But Tala’s mind thought of something else—her mind jumped to bloody images of slashes, whip slashes cracking against the tanned, bare back of a sixteen year old girl. She heard in her mind’s ear the sound of the girl’s teeth grinding together in pain, suppressing the screams in fear of more swipes. So many swipes.

Tala shook her head, a single strand of blue-black hair falling over her ear and escaping the tight bun the rest of her hair held on the back of her head. Her finger, still on the mouse as it curved and made its mark on the screen, tapped away nervously as the memories flooded back to her. Focus on the drawing. Focus on the drawing.

The computer screen kept her focused. She kept swiping, swiping, swiping, until the lashed back of the dress she was designing was complete. She exhaled, running a hand over her forehead before leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. She felt the weight of her gold earrings in her ears, was suddenly very conscious of the tightness of her pencil skirt, and knew—just knew—she could never go back to Pakistan after this.

If the dress sold, she’d get calls from home. Her brother, his booming, angry voice yelling at her through the line rapidly about how she was dishonoring her family, how she shouldn’t bring attention to what she’d done. But then again, Tala knew it wasn’t really about what she’d done. It was about what they’d done.

The dress was a symbol of her pain, of her hope. Of her fear, of her bravery. Of her hate, of her love. All she’d wanted to do that night, on her sixteenth birthday, was be a normal girl. Well, a normal American girl. She wanted to wear a skirt shorter than her ankles, wanted to untie the scarf that hid her long silky hair, wanted to celebrate that night with her friends. But even after she’d done all those things, and she’d thought she’d gotten away with it, she’d been found out.

They’d come barging in with heavy guns and thick camouflage uniforms, a color that Tala deemed unflattering on anybody. They’d seen her, and they’d seen Ajah, wearing those skirts that showed their knees and calves. Wearing their hair down and bare.

The men had called them disgraces. Stupid, disobedient girls. So they’d seized them, Tala’s young face streaked with tears and Ajah screaming, begging for mercy. It wasn’t two minutes later when the first whip strike hit the girls’ bare backs.

Tala stared at the screen for another good five minutes. The muffled sounds of Times Square filled the empty, white room of Tala’s office. She wished she could step outside,
walk around the city, get some fresh air. But she needed to make a decision.

The dress tells my story, she thought. The slashes across the back... that’s what it’s all about. Ajah’s story deserves to be told, my story deserves to be told. I have to do this.

Tala, her arms shivering with goosebumps, reached out tentatively, breathed in one last time, and clicked ‘send’. Her supervisor would receive the submission within minutes, the decision would be made within hours, and the dress would be sold worldwide within days. Her family in Pakistan would find out within days.

Tala couldn’t help but smile. After two years in the U.S., she’d finally learned something: It was her life, and if she wanted to wear a freakin’ short skirt, she could wear a freakin’ short skirt.
Homesick

Kimsey Stewart

Some days, I find myself sick to the stomach for home. I find myself breaking at the seams missing places and people and things that once I couldn’t wait to get away from.

Some days I find myself unable to sleep because I can hear it calling. I can hear the cicadas, the lightning bugs, the homemade sweet tea and the sticky, oppressive heat calling me to come home. Telling me I miss all the dirt and sweat and mosquitos for a reason.

Some days I feel it burning in my chest like those summer night bonfires. The sweat dripping down our foreheads into our eyes but we didn’t care. We’d throw our heads back and laugh until it hurt. Fall asleep under a starry night sky with nothing but the humidity as a blanket.

Photograph by
Cole Hamilton
Unfit
Kimsey Stewart

You do not have to wear your father’s anger
three sizes too big
It does not fit you
hangs loosely around the elbows
makes your waist seem the size of the earth
I know it smells like him
like the tickle fights
the raspberries blown on stomachs
the over the top dreams
I know you are trying to tell yourself
the im sorrys
and the i-promise-i-am-trying-to-change
make up for the missed birthdays
and the empty seat at school plays
I know you want it to seem as though everything is fine
But honey
your father does not wear your abandonment
do not try
to make it seem he does
What is the best advice you can give to young disabled girls struggling to love themselves?

The harder you try
The more you force yourself
Into this uncomfortable mold
Of this emotion you don’t know how to feel
The farther you will get
From loving yourself.
The loving yourself will not come all at once.
It will come slow
Drip like tree sap.
You will not even realize it is happening
Until it has already happened.

Drawing by Elana Hites
your voice sends a familiar shiver down my spine
rattling my bones
i look up and sure enough it is you
you with the icy blue eyes
you with the stubbly black facial hair
that used to prickle against my skin when you’d whisper in my ear
you who made an event
out of your fist
meeting my jaw
you who smelled like cinnamon and safety
like the first man i ever loved
like you were the only good decision i could’ve made
how was i supposed to know
the devil only goes out when he is dressed like an angel

and a million thoughts are running through my head as you stand there in front of me like a wall
why are you here
why are you here i don’t want you here
tossing out my name like a prayer
you don’t get to know my name anymore
i have spent the past three years washing myself clean of every trace of you.
you don’t get to walk back in here and act like it’s all okay.
like i wasn’t in love with you
like you didn’t know
like you didn’t tell me you loved me with the feeling of the back of your hand still stinging my cheek
and then pack your things and leave
leave me with nothing but the taste of spoiled milk in my mouth
the bruises on my shoulders
the overwhelming feeling that i’d lost a game i didn’t even
know i was playing
Blue Tattoo
Simona Shirley

Blue, like his veins
That trickle underneath,
A triangle of piercing dots that stain his pale white skin

Lines, jagged lines,
He tries to sand away,
A drunken haze of prickly pens that burrow deep within

Ink, ink that never wanes,
Through burns and cuts and sand,
An everlasting memory that should have gone away

Eyes, prying eyes,
They wander to his hand
Where there they judge and form the stories of a different man

He, he is good,
But they don’t seem to care,
For while I see a blue tattoo they see a mark of fear
The Ivory Escape

Caroline Pope

Screams echo throughout the home as the three girls pull each other’s hair. It’s ten o’clock and these devils were supposed to be asleep three hours ago. I had long since decided that the rascals—to put it nicely—are probably nocturnal. Despite my ultimatums and endless pleas that they return to their room, they wouldn’t budge. I’m pretty sure I could tell them World War III had begun and they still wouldn’t listen to me.

I’m done. I have tried every possible way to get them to sleep, and I’m done. I sink down on the plush white couch and try to hold back my tears. They brim the surface, threatening to spill over like a forceful river advancing towards a rotting dam. As my eyes continue to burn and my throat tightens up, I notice the all too familiar instrument from across the room. I must have missed it while chasing down one of the rotten scoundrels when she snatched the keys to my Honda. It seems to be covered by an aura of peacefulness, waiting to be played by anyone looking to escape reality. I give into its call and half-heartedly pull the black bench out from under the beautiful instrument.

I shakily breathe in, attempting to forget the past few hours and remember the beauty of the piece I was about to perform. The children’s laughter mocks me. The dogs are barking at the neighbors in the distance. Every distraction tempts me to not proceed, but as my fingers dance across the ivory keys, the entire house grows silent. The kids subdue their laughter as they shuffle into the room where I’m sitting on my bench, my sweet island escape from reality. The oldest twirls in small circles as the notes progress. For a few quiet moments, there is peace in the war zone. The piano is my white flag. My armistice. My truce. The only sound to be heard is “Les Avenues De Paris” resounding proudly throughout the room. Times seems to slow down as all I focus on is pressing each key with equal tenderness. I close my eyes and slowly let the smooth melody overtake me and carry me to a world where reality disappears. All too soon I hit the wrong key and it pierces the calm atmosphere. I am reluctantly dragged back into reality. The wondrous music ceases to exist. The room is dull and silent. And the screams fill my head once more.
Painting/Collage by Anne Heaton Sanders
Himself
Ethan Harradine

The dull grey cinder blocks in the restroom began to close in, his hands grasped the toilet bowl, head hanging over the water. He felt the muscles in his stomach tighten, his arms shivered, he saw stars; his stomach muscles finally curled sending up a putrid colored vomit.

“You’re not ready.”

“I am. I just need a second.”

“For what, to piss away your chance?”

“No I...”

“Stand up and look into the mirror.”

He managed to find his way onto his feet and looked past the deep blue eyes that were staring back into him. He had the same scars as the man in the mirror, scars that not only showed superficially but scars that ran deep into his pasts.

“Do you see a man in rags, or a man that doesn’t deserve to be here?”

He couldn’t manage an answer. He still saw within the old cuts, a poor boy who hung onto a mumbled promise from a mother that she’ll be back. He still clenched onto the last words of a father whose blood ran heavy with alcohol. He glanced at the names of lost family tattooed onto his forearm. Sadie Fields, Margaret Fields, Drake Fields Jr. His mind came back from the abstract and realized his whole life has been a fight. His eyes teared up.

“I don’t deserve anything, I have been though the everyday grind to get here.”

“Good, then you understand who you’re fighting.”

The man’s eyes veered off taking him back through dreams of good fortune and times of less sorrow. But he was he was abruptly brought back.

“Look at me,” the man’s eyes came back to the mirror. “I know pain, pain is everywhere, pain is out there, pain is in here, pain is in the past, but you can fight it back right now when you walk out there.”

He pushed back his tears and began to wrap his hands. His mind let go and his body took over. The boxer stepped into the ring.
How God Ends Us
Emily Bolvig

A great hand falls, cutting through space like a pale knife. One grand omnipotent swoop moving gigantically with soundless heavy tread, to end it, like the strides of a workhorse in a trainyard whose footsteps are silenced by the screams of a steam engine. She stomps.

A pair of cosmic sized eyebrows sneer down at the petite monstrosity below. It is the end for him. To think, he’d been created. To think, this is the last he’d see. He’d look up and see the great hand plummeting, or maybe he won’t, and there will be a flash and that’ll be the last of it. A life unremembered by time. Not even a blip.

He is one unit expended.

“Ew, gross,” Lizzie sticks out her tongue, gingerly wiping her fingers on a napkin. “I got fly guts all over my hand.”

Deus Ex Nobis. Fin.

Eerie
Emily Bolvig

Vesper Abaddon wears a football helmet to keep the ear-biting down to a minimum. He tends to kvetch about how hot it is in there, even though the ward is kept at an enforced 61 degrees. For years the thing has been welded shut around his head so that he can’t even see his own prized ears, much less bite off anyone else’s, lest for his semiannual haircut when the bucket is removed for thirty short minutes to cut his shaggy mane.

I cut his curly locks away with the sheers, Vesper shining at the sight of the ears he hadn’t seen since six months previous, yapping away about some woman who had pretty ears too, and squirming about in his five point restraints.

Be still, I told him, as he whipped around and his ear met my sheers with an intimate slice.
Sculpture By
Emily Bolvig
You Seem a Little Lost, Penny

Emily Bolvig

It had eyes like bright black marbles, like two tiny voids trapped inside of a glass orb. It had a flat, crescent horn that hooked at the top of it’s head. Blue skin wrinkled over its skull, and red flesh dangled from its beak. It had an alien shape.
I dashed inside.
Dad, I yelped, there’s a dinosaur bird in the yard!
He lifted a brow. A what? You sure? He giggled with skepticism. What an imaginative six year old I was.
Where? He asked. Are you sure it isn’t a chicken?
It’s in the yard! Come on you’ve gotta see.
He followed as I dashed across the porch to the side yard. There it was, the tuft of feathers, right where I’d left it. Dad’s mouth hung agape for a moment.
I don’t think that’s a chicken, my dad said slowly.

...-----...

I named her Penny.
She trotted across the little shed, her head bobbing with each step. It’d taken about an hour to pin her. She had a bulbous body, comprised mainly of polka dotted downy feathers on a set of squat legs.
Penny was a little far from home. Somehow she’d managed to make it all the way from Africa and wind up here, in my backyard, in central Alabama.
Penny the guinea fowl tilted her head at me as I sat across from her, catatonic, examining her every step. Her eyes stared back like bright black marbles.
You seem a little lost, I said to Penny.

...-----...

Penny was sent to the Birmingham Zoo. She got some friends after a while, and they were set loose on the grounds to poke around in herds. Yes, those little dinosaur birds you see? They were my doing.
Penny is probably dead by now. It’s been at least ten years, but I find myself poking around in South Africa one summer, and I’d thought I’d found her. She looks smaller, or maybe I’m just bigger.
What do you want? I demand when the bird won’t go about her business.
Her eyes are like bright black marbles.
You seem a little lost, says Penny.
Painting by
Simona Shirley
String Theory
Emily Bolvig

A does not equal A
A squared plus B squared
Makes squares and tetrahedrons morph like
Kaleidoscopes.
Pythagorean theorem crumpled shoved in a blender.
Set on Eviscerate.
Spiraling like
The Golden ratio
That disintegrates like ash statues,
Cut like a string theory.
Left to dangle there.

Running like numbers
Like 6.02 times ten to the twenty what now?
One plus one is one.
Like Division by zero
Parallelograms bend and break,
Snap like fingers.

Like Exponential decay
That irons cosine graphs wrinkle free, and
Takes empty sets and drains them.

Like 3.14159265258979
Digits slide away
Down slopes like derivatives
It takes two points to make a line.

Planets sling out of orbit,
Bump around like pinballs
To be slurped down hungry black holes,
Into the belly of an empty universe.

Numbers copulating.
Birthing irrational fractions from division lines.

Logic boils like long division.

Indivisible, you said.
Yet still, all this, from the subtraction
Of one.
We Once Were
By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

Nostalgia always leads to melancholy; the sting of final departure.
Wistfully, with a bittersweet gaze, reminisce.
Visiting Companions
   long gone.
Interjecting in conversations
   long gone.
Return to a secret hiding place
   long gone.
You don’t belong.
The opportunity of that moment
   is long gone.
Move on...
Slow Down

Lauren Elgin

Slow down
slow down
You skipped the part where you say,
"I love you"
You skipped the part where you say,
"I've always loved you"
You skipped the part where you say,
"I'll never stop loving you"
Slow down
slow down
Why are you still going?
You haven't called me beautiful and you haven't told me why
You haven't called me "Sunshine" yet you look me in the eye
There's sadness in your words and tone
my hopes begin decay
there is something you try to say
But still you keep delay
Slow down
slow down
I fail to understand
your mouth is moving
your eyes are blinking
but now i'm in Black Land
You said three words and then her name
and then it was the end
Slow down
slow down
And then it was the end
Drawing by
Elana Hites
A Kiss in Space

Lauren Elgin

The dream
The color
The attachment
There is a void until two beings and their lips align.
They do not touch despite desire
For when two beings collide,
Intimately and scientifically,
there should be a new beginning.
The dream will come true
The color will sprout
The attachment will become dependence
But so long as their lips do not touch
It feels desolate
Empty
Unfulfilled
Words are left unsaid
Bonds are left untied
And the two beings continue orbit
Spreading further and further apart
Stuck in a do or die itinerary created by God
Both are busy but anticipate the moment they align once more
This time a little closer to one another
A kiss in space
Painting by Emilyn Hamn
Merging of Minds

Culver Benedict

To see,
is to be blind.
the world is not known in sight,
but through touch and smell.
Our earth is a tangible thing,
but our minds are clairvoyant.
We, as humans, have a right,
a right that comes with a privilege.
We are obliged to discover and find.
In this world we are given the chance,
provided with the opportunities of knowledge.
To know, is to have.
The world knows little,
and with little it survives...
but that does not change our potential.
Together, united, we can accomplish
wonderful things.
Differences aside, our ambitions are similar.
The want to survive outlives all.
Humans are petty,
creatures of tendency and emotion.
To change would be to evolve,
and through evolution we thrive.
Apart we are simple,
nothing more than ourselves,
Together we are complex.
We must allow ourselves
to evolve,
do not fear change,
embrace the new.
Whitman-esque

By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

Throw thy humanity upon others
Cast your life upon your brothers and sisters
Embrace their passion as your own, just as they do yours
Connect your soul to theirs, your past and present and future to theirs
Pass on to them your senses and feelings as they pass theirs onto you
Share with your kin not only presence of body: but soul and mind, not only life but death and rebirth
Send thy humanity upon others, and they will surely receive and return theirs onto you
“I don’t think that Ohio State is going to do well this season; they lost to Virginia Tech this past week. I heard my mom came and watched it with you. LSU is supposed to be good, we’re already ranked tenth in the nation. I hope we can pull through,” I recite with a raspy voice, holding back tears, trying not to look at him when I spoke.

The machines seem to engulf him. He has been using them for what seems like an eternity. All I want is to have my grandfather back. I recall the Saturdays, sitting in the den, watching football, listening to stories, but that was two weeks ago.

I went back behind his bed by the window and started my math homework.

“2x+6=18...subtract the six, divide by two...” My eyes drift towards the city, everything kept going, the Earth moving, people coming home from work, as if others weren’t sick. I sat and thought as to why and how this was happening to me. He was healthy, this wasn’t supposed to happen. What have I done wrong?

The machines worked, making the same noises as if nothing was changing. The constant beeping and humming consumed me until I could think of nothing else. I was stuck in a hypnotic state where nothing could touch or hurt me. All my troubles seemed to wash away.

“Dylan, it’s time to head home; tell grandpa goodbye,” My mom said.

“Okay, one sec.” I looked back out the window, down at the people unaware of the fact that they were being watched, observed, loathed for what they had. I shuffled towards the bed, said a quick goodbye and wandered aimlessly out of the hospital. My motivation, hope, and drive had been left in room 702, never to be regained.

The sun had almost set, and what was left of it shone through the windows into a still house covered with chipped, white paint. The man sat alone in an almost vacant room with a drink in his hand and everything on his mind. His eyes glanced from the empty bassinet in the corner, to the television, to the clock, and he sighed heavily. The front door clicked and unlocked as the woman stepped inside with an ashamed look on her face and her eyes down. Her husband rolled his eyes as the smell of cigarettes filled the room. She had her foot on the creaking stairs when she paused and turned around into the room with him.

“I went to the doctor today,” she said, searching his face for any emotion.

“Oh?” He sipped at his drink and fixed his eyes on the television.

“Yeah, he gave me some medication.”

“Good.”

“How was your day?
“Eh.”
“What does that mean?”
“I don’t know.”
“Are you okay?”
“I’m fine.”
“Are you going to ask me if I’m okay?”
“Are you?”
“I’ve been better. Why won’t you talk to me?” she said, her voice becoming small. He dropped his gaze towards the floor and said nothing.
“If you don’t want to talk to me, then tell me. I’m tired of trying so hard and getting nothing in return.”
“I’m going through a lot.”
“So am I,” she sighed, walking over and sinking into the spot next to him.
They sat next to each other in awkward silence, except for the low background noise of football commentary coming from the television. The woman lifted her hand to her face and bit her nails, trying to work up the nerve to speak.
“I know people grieve in different ways, but-”
“I’m fine.”
“Maybe you should go back to work. I know it’s hard, but I’m exhausted trying to pick up the slack.”
“I’m sorry.”
She could tell he didn’t want to talk. He thought she took something away from him that they could never get back. She knew that it was her fault, but she still wanted him to pay attention to her after a bad day. He couldn’t see past the bad day he was having enough to notice that he wasn’t the only one hurting.
Neither said anything more; both had something more to say. She put her hand on the couch cushion next to him palm side up. He placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed lightly once before letting go. The woman rose, and her hip brushed against the cradle as she made her way outside, and once again everything was still, except for the empty crib rocking slightly in the corner.
Searching
Sophie Truppner

They scatter about
But never coming near

Separately searching
Just to know that someone is there

They look far and wide and close and near
Only to find that no one is near

Is there anyone there?

Has someone been searching
Far and wide?

Looking about
But never to find

Shooting for the moon
But landing among the stars

Only to find
That the stars are gone

Why isn’t anyone there?

Swimming across land
And flying through the sea

Scouring deep caverns
Through crystal enchanted caves

Am I the only one here?

Alass they sigh
Crumpled in defeat

Returning to that empty
Emotionless sky

They look up at the stars, the moon
And ask them
  Why am I always alone?
Rain Drop
Sophie Truppner

I fall, from where I do not know
I was born falling through the sky day and night

I do not look down for I am afraid of what will come
I see the beautiful sky until the stars take its place

I feel the wind and sun
Until I feel no more

But even when I cannot see
Even when I cannot feel

I fall forever more
Until finally I fall no more

A Prayer For The Lost
By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

Say a prayer for the lost. Say your grace so that it may show them through the frost and chill of where the lost reside. Be their guide to the warmth to where the lost wish that is their wanting home, but they continue to roam and wander in wherever the lost go.

Put aside a thought for those who may be lost, for you may be lost too. You may think, you may feel, that you are one of the few, but where is your order? Where is your map? Is it getting colder to you?

Are you sure of your location? Do you know your destination? Say a prayer for the lost who have traveled too far. Are you lost too? Do you even know where you are?
For ages, the vampires and the witches have experienced conflicting views. We have never gotten along as far as anyone can remember. Vampires were to slay witches upon contact, and witches were instructed to do the same, without exception. Normally, witches are peaceful, but not with vampires. We fear them, as their strength is much greater than ours. Today, most witches live in hiding in small villages where we can't be found by our enemies.

This feud was caused by a witch and a vampire who, centuries ago, fell in love. The witch met with him in secret because she was afraid of what others would think of her choice. The witch loved the vampire and betrayed her community in order to be with him. The other witches hunted down the two lovers and brought them back to their village. They killed the lovers to serve as a message to all the other witches. The vampires heard about the murder, and invaded the witches’ village, killing most of them in order to extract revenge for the vampire’s death. From that day forward, the vampires and the witches refused to trust each other. Ever since then, witches and vampires were sworn enemies.

I have never seen a vampire, nor do I want to. The elders have always said that they have terrible, ghastly faces, long claws, and sharp teeth. They suck on the blood of humans for food, and therefore should not be trusted. The only person who has seen a vampire in my community is Karenina, one of our elders. And all anyone knows about that is that she came back to the village one day with a vampire bite on her neck. She was in shock, and she couldn’t speak to us. Simone, the leader of the community back then, healed her wound with a spell, but Karenina never truly healed mentally. To this day, she still wakes from nightmares of that night. This story alone is enough to send shivers down my spine and make the hairs on my neck stand up. I can't imagine seeing a vampire, much less being bitten by one.

Because of the vampires, witches don't usually leave their communities. We’re too afraid of what might happen if the vampires are outside. Vampires cannot roam the daylight, otherwise their skin will be burned. A full moon has similar effects. The full moon is too bright for them to handle, and if the full moon shines on their skin, they will burn, too. Vampires can only come out at night unless they have a protection spell cast on them by a witch, which prevents them from being burned. This spell allows them to roam around whenever they want, no matter what time of day it is. And since no witches are allies with the vampires, no vampires can roam the day.

But tonight, I am heading into town with the other witches and my best friend, WaGatha. Adriana, our head leader has given us all forty copices, which are small silver coins, to buy things. We are only allowed out of the village area once a month on the full moon. The vampires will be burned if they try to go outside tonight, so there is no danger for us out there.
Agatha meets me by the entrance to our village, her forty copices in her bag. She smiles at me as I approach.

"I can't wait to go into the marketplace," she says, "I heard they were selling jewelry and dresses there this month. I really need a new dress. This one is so old, it's practically falling apart." I look at her tattered grey dress. She's right about one thing: it's very used and extremely worn. Most witches like to keep the things they have for a long time because they feel very connected with the physical essence of the object. There are several types of essences. There are the elements, which are earth, water, fire, and air, and there are also essences left behind when something has a spell cast over it. Most objects have an essence that we can feel, but once its essence has worn off, it doesn't feel as valuable.

"I suppose I'd like to get a new dress myself, but I'm not sure if I'm ready to leave this one behind. What I'd really love is to find a new piece of artwork to hang by my bed. I'm tired of looking at the old painting there right now."

"I'm sure you will be able to find a beautiful painting." I smile at her encouragement.

Adriana interrupts our conversation as she lights a candle and begins to speak.

"Good evening, everyone. I am thrilled that you are all participating in this month's journey to the marketplace." Adriana instructs Milissa, an older witch, to hand out candles to all the girls heading on the journey. "We will arrive early this evening and stay late into the night. It will still be safe to return tomorrow morning, as there will be no threats to us during the day."

"She means vampires." I hear a girl to my left whisper into her friend's ear. I glance at Agatha; she heard the girl, too.

"Now, you all know the rules. Only use the forty copices issued to you, and do not reveal your true nature to the humans. It is important to shelter them from our world in order to keep them safe." Milissa finishes handing out the candles and casts a spell to light them. She signals to Adriana that we are ready to begin the journey. Adriana nods with acknowledgement, "Let us begin the journey."

"Let us begin the journey." We all reply in unison. Adriana murmurs a spell to release the gate and allow us outside the village. I take a deep breath.

We begin to walk the long path to the marketplace. The journey takes almost two hours because our village is located inside a large forest. Personally, I enjoy walking through the forest, but we are seldom allowed to during the night in case a vampire has somehow found the entrance to our village. In order to prevent them from coming inside, we cast a spell over the entrance that makes it invisible to everyone but witches. Witches can usually sense when spells have been cast, so even if they are not from our village, they would still be able to find the entrance and would be welcome.

By the time we get there, the humans have set up all of their merchandise to sell. All of the girls split up to buy things from different merchants. Agatha walks to a woman selling dresses and jewelry, the exact things she wanted to buy. I walk towards a man who is selling soaps and herbs. As I get closer, I see that his face is ornamented with wrinkles. Dirt is smudged on his arms and his clothing, and he is whittling a wooden stick with a knife. He looks up at me and furrows his brow. He looks somewhat friendly, but when his dog begins
to growl at me, he quiets it and stands up with arrogance.

"Good evening, sir. I came to buy some things from you."

"What you want?" He scowls at me and folds his arms across his chest.

"Can I buy a bar soap for three copices?" I gesture to the bar of soap I want to buy.

"Five copices're what it's worth. I don't have interest 'n sellin' it for less."

"Not even four copices?" Pondering the suggestion, he replies.

"Four 'n a half copices. Take it or leave it."

"Four and a half copices, all yours." I hand him the money and he gives me the bar of soap to put in my bag. I notice that behind him, he has wild grown vervaine and breland, two herbs that are not common where the village is. These two herbs are great for using in spells, but can hardly ever be found. We mostly buy them from people who grow them.

"How did you come about these wild grown herbs? I'm never able to find them where I live."

"Where might that be?" I hesitate to answer. Breland and vervaine grow in marshy areas. Most areas around the marketplace have marshes, but we are never allowed to venture that far from the village.

"Around..." he looks at me with a cold stare as I try to change the subject, "Er, any chance I could buy them from you?"

"For twelve copices, you can have 'em both." Normally, twelve copices is way too much to spend on herbs, but at this point, I am itching to get away from this man.

"Deal." I rummage around my bag for the copices and he hands me the herbs in two small sacs. I try to take them from him but he grabs my arm before I can lay my hands on the herbs.

"I know what you are, miss, 'n I don't like the looks o' ya roamin' around this marketplace. I'll be watchin' you, so you best look out for yourself."

"Let go of me!" I try to struggle against his grip, but he is too strong.

"Don't come 'round here. Consider this your warning." He finally lets go of my arm and I rub my wrist in pain. He tosses me the bags of herbs and sits back down to whittle. I grab the bags and walk over to another merchant, glancing back at the man every few steps. He keeps a watchful eye on me as he slices the knife through the wood over and over again. All I can think about is how much he seems to want to slice the knife through my skin instead.

The next merchant I visit is an older woman. She has long gray hair that falls to her hips and her hands are decorated with beautiful henna tattoos.

"Hello, young child. You have come to buy, yes?"

"Yes," I reply, looking at her items she is offering for sale. She offers gemstones and small rock carvings. I pick up a carving that strongly resembles an owl.

"You like owl, yes?" the old woman inquires.

"Yes, it's very beautiful." I continue to admire the owl, "How many copices will you take for it?"

"Two copices." She holds out her hand and I place the two copices inside it. I pick up the owl and place it in my bag.
"Thank you." I notice the gemstones she is selling. Many of them are associated with healing spells, spells that are very handy to witches. A small, green gemstone catches my eye. I pick it up and recognize it as a gemstone that provides protection from supernatural creatures. Maybe if I buy some of them, Adriana will allow us to leave the village more often.

"How much are these gemstones worth?" She glances at the gemstone.

"I will sell you them for 3 copices each." There are only four gemstones, so I spend twelve copices.

"Thank you." She nods as I walk away. I try to put the woman out of my mind as I search for other things to buy. I buy a new dress, new socks, flowers, and a painting of a deer in the meadow. Before we are about to leave, I glance back at the merchant tent where the man was, but he is no longer there. Thank goodness. I think to myself.

We all regroup at the entrance to the marketplace and talk among ourselves until Adriana tells us to move along back into the forest. Along the way back, I explain to Agatha about the strange man.

"He sold me the herbs for way more than they were worth. And when he handed them to me, he grabbed my arm and said 'I know what you are'."

"Wait a minute, he said he knows what you are, not who you are?" Agatha asks. I nod in reply, "That's creepy... and he grabbed your hand, too?"

"Yeah, and I've never even seen him before. I could feel him watching me the whole time, but when we left, he wasn't there."

"Something about that isn't right. I don't like that."

"Me neither."

Suddenly, I see... something drop from the trees above us. Some of the girls up front begin to scream. Adriana gasps and tries to hold the girls back with her arms to protect them. I watch as Karenina walks forward to examine it. I push to the front of the crowd to see what's going on. I see the body of a man, with blood all over his face. A closer look reveals two marks on the side of his neck, fresh blood still trickling from the wound. The hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise as I put together what has happened.

This is a vampire's work. And the dead man lying on the ground is the man at the marketplace.
Drowning With Others
Simona Shirley

Weightlessly wading through life’s darkest depths,
Around them she swam swift as cheetah on land.
To warnings of turmoil and long sharks ahead,
They coughed in disdain and then onward they lead.

Diving down, downward, spinning with glee,
They serpentined ever so confidently.
On to the midnight, and then deeper still,
She followed her school mates, from sunlight to hell.

Breathing much quicker now, gasping for air,
Chest is expanding now, brimmed with despair.
But now only saltiness, clogging her lungs.
Why had she heeded them, what had she done?

Twilight approaches and swallows them up,
Engulfing the young ones whose scales once were tough.
They’ve ventured too far, all that’s left is abyss,
How could she know it would turn out like this?
“I just can’t take you along, Samantha. It’s not that simple,” Peter stretched his neck and looked at Samantha with tired eyes. She was being so difficult and he had just gotten back from no-gravity training. Keeping a beautiful woman around was hard work. Sometimes he wished he could just fly off to the Moon already and leave her bickering behind.

“I think you just don’t want me to come. You’re tired of me, aren’t you, Peter?” Samantha looked up at Peter with her pearly green puppy eyes and let out an exaggerated, high-pitched sigh.

Yes, that is also an accurate statement. Peter internally agreed but externally denied. “Of course not, my dear. I think you’re the prettiest girl in the whole galaxy”

“I think that I’m not enough for you, Peter. You don’t like me anymore” Samantha’s baby-voice continued. She sounded pathetic. Peter felt threatened. It felt like she was about to leave him behind, single and alone again. He had worked too hard to be with her.

“No, no, please honey. I do like you. I do” Peter felt desperate now. He couldn’t be a single astronaut. There had to be love awaiting him when he got back. Someone to embrace once he got back, someone familiar. And Samantha was beautiful. No matter how annoying she could be/was.

Meanwhile, during Peter’s angsty thought train, Samantha had coiled around him on the couch, basically sitting on his lap now with her arms around his neck. Her sultry voice was inches from his face. “I just don’t believe you, Peter. How could you make me believe, dear?”

Peter was just about on the brink of tears. Not that he would actually cry. He was too manly for that. Astronauts were manly. He had big bulky muscles and a tall, wide frame. His face hadn’t changed since he was three though, that cute little baby face of his. Samantha was making that baby face look even more helpless and childish than usual. He was sweating now.

“Ummm…” his eyes darted across the tile flooring. “I could get you another diamond necklace. Like the one I got y....”

“Darling, I don’t want more jewelry. It’s pretentious. Anyhow, I have a much better idea. Why don’t you take me on a kind of pre-honeymoon thing. It would be romantic” Peter looked surprised. He had never even thought about marrying Samantha. The word honeymoon took him aback, but he tried to remain calm.

“Oh, honey. That’ll do. Where would you like to go?”

Samantha sat back, her eyes twinkling as she looked him straight in the face. “It’s called a honeymoon for a reason, Peter.” He stared back at her, confused. She grinned, slyly, “The moon, of course!” she nearly yelled, pushing Peter further into the couch. His eyes widened and she beamed with delight. His feet were sweating profusely now. Somehow she always got her little way.
Snake Eyes

Simona Shirley

You gaze at the glass of the mirror and see
The faces of others you wish you could be
The glass is obscure and the image is blurred
Into the cave of the serpent you’re lured
Where there in the shattered glass you learn to think
They’re better and you’re not and further you sink

You’re pupils are glazed with false thoughts and desires
Your iris is full of its slithers and liars
Snakes in your eyes, poison you to the core
Your envy eyes cry till your sockets are sore

It circles your neck with its strangle so cold
It opens its fangs and it poisons your soul
For now all you want is that what you don’t have
But how to be happy when you’re in the snake’s grasp
A Song
Simona Shirley

Unleashing the wings with a breath,
I find a young sparrow beside me.
I cannot place cages around her;
She flutters from high to low quick.

And she is vibrant, traveling, forever.
With her chirping still swaying the grasses,
She perches on souls of the listeners
To soar through the pumps of their hearts.

My heart glowing with a rhythm,
I find myself flapping in beat
In a hall with my voice and the singers,
When I sense the bird brush past my shoulder

Sound, to observe a free bird.
That Funny Old Gun

By Franklin Lamar, adapted from an anonymous writer.

It was a funny old thing.

My grandfather gave it to me in his will. Said his father had given it to him nigh on 120 years ago. His father had gotten it, in turn, from his father. Nearly 200 years had passed since it entered the family.

It was a funny old thing.

It was made in a place called Russia. In those days, it was called the Soviet Union, but that was before even my grandfather’s time.

It was called a Mosin-Nagant, named for its two inventors, back before corporations did all the innovating. Adopted for service by the army of a mad monarch. Used to bring that same king down.

The furniture was made of wood, back before a decent piece of lumber cost more than year’s salary. The rest of the gun was nickel plated steel, pitted with age. The weapon was rusted, but I, like so many before me, kept the gun lovingly coated in a thin layer of antiquated petroleum based oils. Each point of contact in the mechanics was lubricated by now ancient greases, applied some time well in the past of the weapon.

It was a funny old thing, that gun.

I was surprised to find ammunition still available. An exemption to the lead and cordite bans had been made for old rounds of ammunition. “Curiosity and Relic,” it was called. The intention was for display. For museums.

I had no such intentions.

It wasn’t illegal to own a gun like this, but all the firing ranges in the city had long since banned such antiquated things as combustion powered firearms. Too much noise. Too much lead. Too much danger.

It sure was a funny old thing, this Mosin-Nagant.

I left the city behind, for the vast expanses of farmland outside the city limits. I wasn’t the only one to do this, of course. Even those with modern plasma casters and laser rifles got tired of the exorbitant fees of the government ranges.

The plasma casters could burn a hole in a centimeter of steel at two kilometers away. The laser rifles could shoot the wings off a dragonfly mid flight at half a kilometer. Their aims were guided by computers, compensated for the Coriolis effect and solar radiation.
I, on the other hand, shot at metal plates at 100 meters. The metallic *pings* of a successful shot mixed with the periodic thunderclaps of the explosion of 55 grains of cordite powder. In between shots, I cycled the bolt.

Click
Clack
Click
Clunk

Mechanical music not heard in centuries. Acrid smoke filled the air after each shot. The recoil bruised my shoulder, delivering a physical reminder of the advancements in weapon design.

Even so, there was an attachment I couldn’t quite place to this funny old gun.

It was a funny old thing, this gun.

A funny old thing.

We learned of the declaration of war by the screaming.

The development of the EM bubble marked a revolution in weapons design. Now, the electrically destructive effects of an electromagnetic pulse could be sustained and contained for as long as wanted. Cities and armies could be disabled for as long as wanted without the slightest in physical damage.

That was the intention, at least.

First came the end of the machines. The autonomous cars and planes crashed, of course. Then came the things we had taken for granted for so long. Neural implants stopped working. The blind lost their sight, the deaf their hearing. Pacemakers for so many of the elderly ceased. They would be dead within the week.

The plasma casters and laser rifles, too, ceased to function. Their capabilities had been reduced to expensive paperweights.

Not that funny old gun, though.

Nobody had ever really experimented with extended exposure to broad-spectrum high intensity EM waves and the brain. It turns out, when you push thousands of watts of power through the airwaves the human brain starts to run into some problems. Neurons begin to fire at random. At first, only the impaired faced real problems. Then the junkies, the drunks, the stupid. Eventually, though, the EM madness came for us all.

At first, it was inhibitions. The streets were filled with sex, looting, and other relatively good natured fun. Things would change, though, and eventually more and more lost control utterly, becoming slobbering savages hell bent on violence and the basest of desires.
When the EM bubbles hit, the people of the cities fought over what was left. All the weaponry and machinery had been disabled by the initial attacks. Bricks and bottles became the new weapons of choice, streets ruled by brutal, primal force. The proud people of what was once America had been reduced to fighting with sticks and stones.

Not me, though.

Not me and that funny old gun.

Not me and that funny old Mosin-Nagant.

Inside that bubble that Mosin and I dominated. Above all, I ruled, armed with my funny old gun. Bottle wielding madmen dropped at 100 meters by 200 year old bullets.

Click
Clack
Click
Clunk

A personal symphony of destruction.

A final requiem to civilization.

Even the stronger minded individuals eventually succumbed to the madness. I saw hundreds gouge out their own eyes in a desperate attempt to stop the hallucinations. I saw hundreds pierce their eardrums to stop the voices. Men killed in fights with walls. Cannibalism.

Hordes of screaming maniacs charged me and that funny old gun.

None ever got to me.

None ever got to me and that funny old gun.

I was not immune to the EM madness. I lost the ability to speak. I could barely walk. Yet my aim was true. I could still work that old gun.

Click
Clack
Click
Clunk

In my madness, that funny old gun spoke to me.

Words familiar and unfamiliar.

It told me of its first war. It told me of Austrians, of Germans. It told me of trenches and poison gas.
It told me of Tzars and Bolsheviks. Of princesses and peasants. It told me of White and Red, brother against brother far in the past.

It told me of a place called Finland. It told me of eternal winter. A man called the white death.

It told me of its second war. It told me of the deaths of millions. It told me of Nazis and Soviets. It told me of bravery. It told me of sacrifice.

It told me of the mountains of Korea.

It told me of the jungles of Vietnam.

It told me of places I did and did not know.

It told me of Karelia, where the blood froze into the ground.

It told me of Leningrad and Stalingrad. Cities torn to pieces not by EM bubbles but by men. By explosions and bullets. It told me of the deaths of thousands over an apartment building.

It told me of heroes. Simo Häyhä. Lyudmila Pavlichenko. Vasily Zaytsev.

Me.

It told me this was its third world war. It told me to return west. Return it home. To the place where it came.

That gun kept me strong. It protected me, so I protected it.

I walked west.

The doctors found me three kilometers outside the bubble. I was in a ditch on the side of one of the major highways.

I was the only one inside the bubble to make it out.

Me and that funny old gun.

The doctors found the gun beside me. The stock had been broken at the handle. The sights were bent to uselessness. The rifle was coated in blood and grime, evidence of its lethality. The doctors, naturally, were amazed. They had never seen such an old thing. Such a funny old thing.

It took the psychs and neurosurgeons months to fix me back up. I still have trouble speaking. I walk unsteadily. My body is covered in scars.

But I made it.

All thanks to that funny old gun.
Do Dreamers Die?

By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

When dreamers die, what happens to their dreams? Do they vanish like the tears of the mourners? Or do they take flight into another dreamer’s head? Or do they stay with the dreamer and carry on to enlighten the dead?

When dreamers die, for what do the mourners weep? Do they weep for the man, just flesh and bone? Or do they weep for the seeds of dreams left unsown?

When dreamers die, can they still change the world? Or by the time they leave, has their chance already passed? Would it be best if they shared dreams half dreamt, for fear of not cleaning a world that to them is unkempt? As opposed to not sharing at all, for the height of humanity just to fall.

When dreamers die, do they really pass on? Or do they leave their dreams to the world like a frog leaves its spawn? A part of oneself, left to be nurtured and grow.

When dreamers die, where do they go?
Attachment Issues
Kimsey Stewart

1. You tell me you and your girlfriend are fighting again and you think it is finally over this time. You tell me i’ve never looked more beautiful than under the pale moonlight. You put your face very close to mine and tell me that someday, i’ll make some man very happy.

2. You call your girlfriend mean names behind her back and tell me that you’re going to break up with her soon. You let your fingers loop with mine. You sit so close to me i am enveloped in your cologne.

3. You slip your arms around me from behind to startle me because you like to watch me squeal and squirm. i scream and swat at your arm but really i don’t mind. i can’t help noticing you don’t even look at me when your girlfriend is around.

4. You sat at the lunch table behind mine everyday. You held your girlfriend’s hand like you hadn’t tried to kiss me in the courtyard. Like you hadn’t let you hand linger on my waist when you’d brush against me. Like i had meant less than nothing to you.

Reasons I Stayed
Kimsey Stewart

“Why didn’t you leave him?” she asks.

“I loved him,” I reply.

“You were afraid of him,” she says. “You can’t love a man you are afraid of.”

I smile. “I guess I was still in love with the man I thought he was,” I say. I know that isn’t true.

I know that there were moments between the screaming rampages, the fighting and crying, when he was sweet to me. When he would wrap me up in his arms and tell me he loved me and I would believe him. I know that for every twelve nights I would cry myself to sleep in fear or anger or sadness over him there would be a thirteenth night filled with so much love and joy I would forget the pain.

“I just don’t understand how you fall in love with a man like that in the first place,” she says.

“I think that was the problem,” I say. “The man I fell in love with wasn’t who he was.”
Destroy the Idea

Kimsey Stewart

We need to destroy
The idea
That loving yourself
Is unimportant

Collage by
Molly O’Neill
Addiction, Part II
Kimsey Stewart

I watch you try to drown your sorrows in the sweet
taste of nicotine and whiskey

I wonder what that feels like
To be so hopelessly lost
So unwilling to ask for help
You look for solace in the bottom of the bottle
Drinking until you pass out
And do it all again the next day

Think Architecturally
Ethan Harradine

Think Architecturally
Many lines
all intertwined
Cinder blocks
standing longer than clocks
Overlapping beams
sewn into a seams
She’s square
but has her own flair
Structurally sound
With feet on the ground
And though she creaks
It’s her I seek
Sailing Around the Room.
Emily Bolvig

The planes are flying too low these days.
I can hear its engines sputtering, guzzling gas, sucking in air, and spitting it out.
It looks like a junebug on a string, spiraling sporadically like that.
The plane does a loop de loop.

“Jane sweetie what are you looking at?” my mom calls.
“The planes,” I sigh.
“But sweetie,” her voice crinkles. “We’re inside.”

1929.
Emily Bolvig

A pair of round spectacles hook around the ears of the man at the coffee shop table across from me. They hide beneath the brim of his derby hat and struggle not to watch the man plummeting from the 53rd floor.

Wildflowers in Summer
By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

A warm breeze gently rustles the overgrown grass in a wooded field
A pleasant aroma lazily drifts through the air
The sinking amber sky bows to its violet partner
In this hidden place I gaze at the treetops, philosophizing
Amongst the wildflowers in summer
Dim Light
Lauren Elgin

You were,
and still You are
and shall remain to be
stolen from me.
yet no fear.
You are happy.
she who has stolen You has not harmed You,
she has not deceived You,
she has not destroyed You.
but she has harmed me,
she has deceived me,
she has destroyed me.
her light is so dim that it cannot even flicker yet still it has succeeded to attract You.
so You are blinded.
not by self hatred,
not by misery,
not by doom,
not by bright light,
You are blinded by dim love.
You are blinded by dim light.
We all Wait

Lauren Elgin

We all wait
To see what we wish to see
To hear what we wish to hear
To feel what we wish to feel
We all wait
For the beginning of hope
For the ending of all sorrow
For the continuity of peace
We all wait
Because we are human
Because we are compelled to expect perfection
Because we are insensitive to the idea of "effort"
We all wait
To be what we wish to be
To know what we wish to know
To have what we wish to have
We all wait
Until we are too tired
Until we are ruined
Until we give up

All Things

By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

Every idea is important. Every idea has the chance to change the world. Every single idea has the potential to change every single life on this earth. By not acting on your ideas, you are depriving humanity as a whole of change. By not seizing every opportunity that comes your way, you are wasting your precious time here on this earth, rebelling against the cause you were sent to do. Every single human being is important because every single human being has the potential to create, influence others, or change the way life is viewed.

But some are slothful, not necessarily out of malice though. Some might not know they can change the world. Others, however choose to be forgotten, choose to be meaningless, choose to deny others of their potential. That is the most common tragedy, being inactive. Act on your ideas, even if you fail, you at least tried to make the world better. In the end, both you and humanity have lost nothing by your efforts. Potential is a trait that everybody possesses, and greatness is within grasp of everyone, but will you reach out for it?
Not Easy for Me

Lauren Elgin

People everywhere
Acting like it’s the bee’s knees
Well, it’s not easy for me
Walking through these trees

Dead trees
Live trees
Rotten trees
Growing trees

“It’s time to wake up”
She said
“Oh, but not yet”
I said

People everywhere
Telling me to “shut it down”
Put on the gown
Take that frown and put it upside down
And even if it means you’ll drown

Well, it’s not easy for me
Walking through this town

Dead town
Live town
Rotten town
Growing town

People everywhere
Moving along like it’s no big deal
Ignoring the problem as if it’s creating no appeal
Well, it’s not easy for me
I won’t treat it like it’s one big happy meal
Let’s Eat!
Lauren Elgin

Down the barrel
Sits a shotgun shell
Encasing the death penalty
Encasing the power
Encasing the glory and the endeavor

Forever and ever, right?
Wrong
What is it about this falseness of manner that sits in our hand like a piece of a puzzle
Waiting to be placed in its respected spot of the picture

Intricately cut pieces
All designed to fit together
Tightly organized
Never meant to break apart unless the maker wants to start over again
Start over from the beginning

To forget the image is to be ignorant
Let history repeat itself again!
Take the shotgun and take the puzzle piece
Put them where they go
Voila
Let’s eat.
My foot splashed in a thick puddle, the reflection of late-night Manhattan warping in the disturbed water. My hands were tightly wrapped in my dad’s old gloves, buried in my jacket pockets, searching for every little spark of warmth they could find. My teeth chattered.

The city was dead. Times Square was silent. The flashing billboards and bright lights were still on, stuck on the one picture they had been wearing when the city’s time had stopped so many years ago. My heart beat fast with the memory. Taxis honking endlessly, stopped in the built-up traffic, pedestrians slowing down and finally dropping to the ground once the gas has gotten into their systems. Eventually the honking stopped.

I was five years old, sitting in my living room in Westbrooke, Ohio, my big brown eyes glued to the television, watching the occurrence on national news. My grandmother tutted in the kitchen, her eyes filling with sadness. “What has our world come to, Joey?” she croaked, continuing with her washing of the dishes. She hoped I didn’t see the tears in her wise eyes.

Grandpa sat behind me, his feet up in the old, leather-scented recliner, flipping through the newspaper. His glasses sat on the edge of his bulky nose. “Never liked that city anyway,” he grumbled. “Too much going on. Now there’s nothing.”

I had never been to the city at that point, but had always heard about it, read about it, seen pictures of its glory days. When I finally went to what people now called “Dead City, USA,” I was thirteen. My mother was visiting me from Taiwan, and for my birthday she took me on a road trip there.

I had been devastated. Buildings galore abandoned, their stones falling out. The One World Trade Center had long since collapsed, and as I walked at it’s base, I saw the old tourist attraction, Ground Zero. Now, instead of two holes, there were three. When I saw the UN, half of it crumbled and the other half beaten and exposed to the elements, I sat down and cried. There were many stray papers littered at its base, probably important documents that spilled earth-shattering secrets about our government from long ago, but they were too weather-stricken and dirty to read.

But this trip was different. I was thirty-eight, the same age my mother was when she brought me to the city. The dead buildings mean so much more to me, especially after the same tragedy happened to Chicago when I was eighteen, New Orleans when I was twenty-three, and Los Angeles when I was thirty-seven. A little over a year ago.

The President long-since told us it wasn’t a group of people. “Mother Earth is reclaiming herself,” he boomed over television. “We shouldn’t fear, for it is in God’s hands.”

I didn’t fear. I never had feared. But I was sad. The biggest cities, taken by the strong fingers of the universe, never to be restored. You have to say, it’s pretty bumming.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder. I averted my eyes from Dead City and turned to see Josephine there, her big green eyes filled with sympathy. “Ready to go?” she whispered, her
auburn hair blending with the old lights that sparked over head.

I cleared my throat, the sting of tears retreating back. “Yeah,” I managed, flashing her a quick smile. “Yeah, let’s go.”

She hooked her arm through mine and we walked away; my son grabbed my hand, squeaking, “Are you okay, Daddy?”

I smiled down on him. “Yeah, buddy, I’m ok.”

I looked at Times Square one more time before I sighed, ruffled my son’s hair, and turned away. I never went back.
The Professor and the Boy
Grace Cope

A single beam of sunlight streamed through the large windows in the auditorium, casting a faded, dull light across the rows of seats in the empty audience. Music filled the room and echoed on the bare walls. A boy sat in the center of the stage, his fingers moving across the keys without a pause. The melody the boy created was the only sound in the room, apart from the constant tapping of the professor’s foot. The boy finished his conclusion. Silence filled the room.

“You sped again in the last measure,” said the professor.
“Yes,” said the boy. His hands felt tired.
“Your timing was off after the left hand quarter rest in the twenty sixth measure.”
“I know.”
“If you know, you should have fixed it.”
The boy remained silent.
“Start again. Do it right this time.”
The boy started again. His hands shook with exhaustion as he played. The professor tapped his foot again and the boy flinched at the sound.
“Calando,” said the professor loudly. The music faltered slightly.
The professor slammed his hand down on the bench and the boy jumped. The melody was cut short.
“You sped again,” the professor said. “You are not ready.”
“I can get better,” said the boy. His fingers trembled. He did not look at the professor’s face.
“You said that before, but you have not improved. Tomorrow you cannot fail. They are expecting much from you.”
The boy stared at his hands. They were red from overuse. He did not say anything.
The professor shook his head and turned away. His shoes clicked across the hardwood stage as he walked to the exit. The sound made the boy cringe. He relaxed once the professor left the room.
The boy placed his hands back on the keys. He started to play the opening verse. His back was sore and his hands ached, but he made himself play anyway. The melody filled the room quickly and the boy closed his eyes. He liked to play when he was alone.
The boy kept his eyes shut throughout the piece. Even after he reached his conclusion, he didn’t stop playing.
Rose Colored Glasses

Caroline Howell

“I’ll see you again,” I said.
“We both know that isn’t true.”
“I want the pain to stop. I have to leave,” I said.
“So I can feel it for the both of us?”
“You’re being selfish.”
“You’re being irrational.”
“I’m running short on time.”
“Please stay for a while longer.”
“If you care for me you will let me leave.”
“Don’t place me in this position.”
“I have placed you nowhere.”

She began to weep as she walked back into our kitchen. She started to fix herself a drink as I walked in, dragging my tired and swollen feet against the rotten wooden floorboards. The kitchen, small and dimly lighted, had empty shelves. After pouring a tall glass of lemonade she took out a silver flask from the pantry above the sink and poured the remains into the glass.

Before she could mix the drink I grabbed the cold beverage and finished it off quickly as if it had no taste to me. The empty glass was shaking in my hand when I slammed it down onto the kitchen table.

“You know they don’t want you drinking,” she said.
“What about what I want?”

Her eyes were squinted behind her rose-colored glasses, and her cheeks were glowing red.

She grabbed a stack of unpaid bills so tightly in her fist that her hand began to turn as white as my skin had become. I followed her into the small living room area off of our kitchen. I flipped through my vinyl collection, which was stored in a wooden crate on a shelf above the fireplace. I pulled out All Things Must Pass by George Harrison and set the needle to play “Art of Dying.”

As the shiny black record began to spin and the drums started banging around in my head, I stood up and headed for the back door.

“I’m going out for a bit,” I said.
“Should I expect you back in time for dinner?” she asked.

I grabbed what was left of my brown hole-filled coat and slung it over my shoulder.

“No, I will eat at the hospital.”

“Your next treatment isn’t until Tuesday.”

I opened the door slowly and ran to our beaten up, cherry red Chevy pickup as if my life depended on it.
Eden to Travelers:
A Short Story
By Cullen (Clay) Harkins

In life there is understanding, but in death there is peace.

*****

Some time before peace was achieved globally, a great library was built. Tiers upon tiers of compendiums upon anthologies of the sum of literary ventures dating back to the birth of the art are all held within this library. All the greatest architects and all the greatest designers and all the greatest dreamers lent their passion to the construction of this bastion. Each brick laid in the foundation corresponds to a single volume that is held within the labyrinthine corridors of shelves. The great panes of the windows, each made from a medley of sand from different shores, welcomes the magnificent glint of the sunlight to seek refuge in its walls. The complex twist of paths, which lead to an innumerable amount of vast chambers where books cascade off their oversaturated shelves, all radiate from a grand parlor. The stairs that lead to the different levels of the library are made from a prismatic material that, when the sunlight strikes it, fills the room with rich, dancing spectrums. The colossal rosewood doors that stand guard at the entrance of the keep, simply and elegantly slide shut without much navigation. This library is truly a castle—and it is silent.

*****

A long time after peace was achieved globally, a couple stand atop a hill gazing at the library. The couple is young, but knowledgeable of the world around them, because they have to be, and partly because they want to be. They keep each other fine company, because they have to, and partly because they want to. They love each other, not because they have to, but wholly because they want to. The couple is well worn, their faces ashen, and with frames that are faint, but not lacking in strength. Their faces, creased with time that has not yet passed, are unremarkable, but not unhandsome. Their faces are unremarkable, all except for their eyes. Their eyes contain a certain luster, similar to the shimmer of a fish passing beneath the boat of a sallow fisherman, and more similarly to the gleam in the sallow fisherman’s eyes.

*****

“Help me! The doors are too heavy, I can’t open them alone!” The woman beckons to her husband. A creak echoes through the parlor as the couple pushes open the door, and as they shut it. Awestruck, the couple cross the threshold. Lovely colors dance through the musty air of yesteryear.

*****
“How grand of a place to be silent,” the man ponders aloud.

“Maybe this is where they all are,” the woman assures her husband.

“Perhaps,” mumbles the man. He peers at his wife. She is engrossed by the grandeur of the library. He smiles.

The woman catches his smile, and she smiles back, wider. “Let’s set our packs down and have a look around,” she says. Her pack has not even hit the floor before she takes off. Gaily, her husband follows suit.

With carefree abandon, the couple races from shelf to shelf until dark. Returning back to the parlor, they cannot contain themselves.

“This book is like a story I read as a child,” exclaims the woman. She reads it to her husband as he flips through all the books that he has found.

“Is this maybe where we are?” the man points to a printed map.

“Hm?”

“Oh, sorry love, I was just thinking. Continue with your story, it’s fascinating”

And so they continue into the night; the rhythmic dripping of candle wax accompanies the gentle rustling of the book pages. The woman is the first to doze off. Her husband lays down beside her, his mind racing. Eventually, he too falls asleep.

Time passes in the library, and the couple is happy.

“How long have we been here?” asks the woman.

“I don’t know, dear”

“It doesn’t matter; I never want to leave!”

“The shimmer in her eyes... she hasn’t aged at all.”

Time passes in the library, and steadily, the couple make their way through the chambers, voraciously picking their way through the countless tomes.

*****

Tucked between bookshelves, the man stirs from his sleep. With bleary eyes he lazily surveys the patterns on the ceiling.

“I think we should move to the next floor today,” says the man, half-awake.

But when he looks over, he sees his wife is not there.

“She must have gotten up earlier... Maybe she has the same idea.”
The silence is his only response, as expected.

“I should leave a note telling her where I am.”

Straining to carry both he and his wife’s pack, he trudges up the stairs. After setting both packs down, he spends the day reading absentmindedly, off-put by the innocuous silence.

Just as the sun begins to sink into the horizon, so too does anxiety sink into the man’s thoughts.

“Maybe she got lost... Maybe she is on her way back right now... Maybe she is in a room where she can’t hear me calling for her... Maybe she is just hiding... Maybe she is just sleeping... Maybe she found somebody else...” mumbles the man, frantically rationalizing.

Silence.

Unable to sleep, the man rises to search for his wife. His panicked footsteps shatter the silence.

“Where are you my love? Are you hiding? Are you sleeping? WAKE UP!”

Silence.

Racing through all the floors, scouring every room, the man reaches the top floor. A lonely door stands vigil in front of a rotunda. The bookshelves that wrap around the room choke the sweltering air.

Collapsing from exhaustion, the man looks around him.

“The stacks...of books...” The rest faded off his lips.

“They look like gravestones.”

With tears welling in his eyes, he notices an open book on the floor. With a considerable effort, he crawls over to the book. He reads the book, and he vomits.

A mild breeze slips through the bookshelves; it tickles the man’s face, playfully beckoning him to get up and find where it is hiding. As he trudges around the bookshelves, the sound of broken glass grinding underneath his shoes startles him. It doesn’t take long for him to come to the source of the wind.

“So this is where she went...” the man says forlornly, looking out the shattered window. His wife laying on the field below him, peacefully.

“After all these years, after our fruitless search, no wonder we couldn’t find anyone else. So we... so I really am alone” the man chokes out.

Silence.
Consuming Lines

Lena Pelham

Lead exposed through my lips
The pencil feeds my hunger
As it streaks the white paper

A glutton for the metallic sheen
I am consuming lines
That create scenes and stories

Dragons, dreams, and days
Dance on my tongue
As I devour the paper whole

Characters, creations, and cartoons
Slide down my throat
As I gobble the pencil’s lead

My greed consumes me
As hours fly through the day
Then I stop

My skin is grey
My eyes are white
The lines have consumed me
SOUTHERN GOTHIC
A study of Southern Gothic traditions

Drawing by
Mary Arden Pennington
It was September 22nd, 1913, and Anne Christian was saying her annual goodbyes to her mother. Anne was a simple yet beautiful teenage girl. She had long, straight pale blonde hair, and large almond-shaped green eyes. Her face was the essence of innocence, and her soul was one that was in desperate need of love. She had been home schooled her whole life, and she lived alone with her quiet, and heartbroken, middle aged mother. Anne’s father had died when she was very young from a sudden heart attack, and her mother was never the same woman after that. Therefore, Anne never really got to experience having a close bond with a parent. Anne and her mother live on a desolate farm deep in rural, south Alabama. The farm was still functioning as far as selling crops and raising livestock went, but the actual farm house itself was old and rotting. However, the appearance of the house did not bother Anne and her mother because the house was the only home they had both ever known, and the farm had been passed down for generations in their family. At the start of every fall, Mrs. Christian left Anne to look over the farm in its unserviceable months, while she went to town to stock up on supplies for the winter and try and sell the last of the summer’s harvest. Anne’s mother usually came back from her trip about a month and a half later, and she always left Anne with directions on how to get to the local police station, and the nearest neighbor’s house if need be.

It was the first day since her mother had left town, and Anne was already starting to feel lonely. She woke up bright and early and fixed herself some fried eggs and bacon, then she began her usual casual walk around the farm checking on the animals and cleaning supplies off. As Anne was sweeping her front porch she began to hear footsteps approaching her from the start of her lawn. She looked up to discover that it was a young boy who looked just around her age, maybe a little older. The boy was attractive in a mysterious kind of way. He smiled a dimply smile at Anne. It was a genuine and happy smile, yet it still held some emotion in it that Anne could not comprehend. Sadness or guilt maybe. The boy was tall for his age, around 6’1, and had reddish brown hair that fell in perfectly tousled curls atop his head. He had a pale complexion, and electrifying blue eyes. Anne also noticed something strange about his appearance that was a little off-putting. His eyes had dark circles under them as if he hadn’t slept in weeks, and he had highly noticeable purple-blue bruises engulfing his entire neck. The boy introduced himself to Anne as William Walton, and he explained to Anne that he had been hired by her mother to help Anne maintain the farm during her mother’s absence. Anne was delighted to have another person she could talk to for the time being, and she welcomed William with open arms. Days passed quickly for Anne and William. They ate breakfast together, did routine farm maintenance checks, and William would leave every night right before Anne would start to fix her dinner. William was charismatic and magnetic, and Anne grew more and more fond of
him everyday. William had a good sense of humor despite his seemingly dark outer appearance. He made a few strange complaints towards Anne at times, but she just assumed he was a little quirky. He got nosebleeds very often, and he always complained of having headaches. Anne would offer to go and get him a tissue or a cold rag, but William would just turn them down. He claimed that his headaches always subsided eventually. Anne was always too afraid to ask William about the bruises on his neck, and how they never seemed to fade. She was afraid the subject may be something he was self conscious about.

It was an especially chilly day outside, and it had been about a month since Anne’s mother had left for town. William and Anne were taking a break from cleaning up the barn behind the house, and they sat on a haybale and talked for a while. They discussed topics such as the weather and how the animals were doing. While Anne was looking at William while discussing her favorite horse, Rosie, she sensed something she had never seen before in his eyes. It looked as if he was staring deep into her soul and into her mind. That was when time stopped. William slowly leaned in toward Anne and delicately placed a kiss on her lips. His lips were cold and smooth, and his kiss felt as if wind was being blown lightly onto her face. When William pulled back Anne was faintly stunned, yet content. William did not say anything to Anne after the kiss other than goodnight, and he quietly left the barn and started down the road the same way he always did at night.

Anne woke up the following morning to a loud knock on her bedroom door. She got up as fast as she could muster, still groggy from her sleep, and ran to open it. Anne was instantly embraced by none other than her mother who had a slightly cheery smile on her face. Mrs. Christian and Anne sat at breakfast together as they discussed everything her mother had encountered while in town. Anne then told her mother how everything in the farm was still running smoothly since she had first left, and she told her mom how close she had gotten to William and what a nice boy he was. As Anne was describing what all her and William had accomplished on the farm together, Mrs. Christian’s face grew more and more puzzled. Anne had never seen her mother make such expressions in her whole life. Mrs. Christian asked Anne to describe how William looked and as she did, Mrs. Christian’s face morphed from quizzical to sheer fear. Anne asked her mother what was wrong, and her mother replied frankly. She explained to Anne that everything Anne had ever known about her father’s death was a lie. Anne’s mother then proceeded to tell Anne the full, real story.

In truth, Mr. Christian was murdered by a young servant boy whom he had hired to help do handy work on the farm. The boy had deep psychological issues to say the least. Anne’s father attempted to choke him to death when the boy lunged at him and attacked him, but the boy had possession of a gun, and he shot Mr. Christian in the heart the first chance he got. It was at that point that
Anne’s mother walked in on the scene and quickly pushed the boy to the ground from behind. Mrs. Christian lifted the gun that had fallen from the boy’s hand off the ground, and she shot the boy in the head with pure fury in her eyes. The boy died rapidly without a single last word. That servant boy’s name was William Walton.

The boy was walking down an old, beaten-down road. His shoulders were broad and muscular, and he was tall. His hair was a mixture of brown and blonde, and it had been grown out further than his neck; his beard was the same color and it was thick all across his face. He was wearing dirty, brown pants and a navy blue raggy t-shirt. It was raining, so the once dusty gray road was now a darker gray with mud creeping into each crevice on his feet while he walked. The road seemed to go on for miles, but that was what the boy wanted. After a couple hours, he arrived at a house. A man was sitting on the porch of that house, and the two were almost identical. His shoulders were broad and muscular. He had a mixture of brown and blonde hair too, but his hair was shaved, except for the middle which he kept long and braided. His beard was thick, but it was only grown out on his chin, and the sides were trimmed. He stood tall on the porch, with a brown long sleeve shirt on, covered by a chain and leather chest guard, and brown pants. He appeared ready for battle in a viking style. He had on a belt that held his weapons which included the axe on his right hip. The boy was instantly interested in this man.

“Come in,” the man yelled from his house. “Let me get you something to eat and drink!”
“Thank you,” the boy replied as he walked to the house. “My name is Agro by the way. This is a nice house you have, thank you for helping me. I’ve been walking for hours.”
“It’s my pleasure. I always figure people walking down this road have been walking a while. The name is Ragnar.”

As Agro looked around, he noticed the amount of weapons and animal fur Ragnar had around his house. It seemed as if Ragnar was a viking, which is something that Agro had always been intrigued by.
“What do you do for a living?” Agro asked.
“I take it you’re wondering why I have these furs and weapons?”
“Yes sir, I’m not meaning to be rude, but it’s hard to ignore.”
“Well let me tell you. My ancestors were vikings back in the 10th century, and my family didn’t want to give up the culture and the style of the vikings. It was passed down from all of my ancestors through my family, and now it is down to me. I am the only one left to carry on the viking tradition, so I try to do it as best as I can. I go out and hunt my own food, I wear the vikings clothes and use the weapons of the vikings, it’s just who I am and who I’ve always been.”

“Wow,” Agro murmured in awe. “I didn’t think vikings still existed. I’ve always loved vikings and now I’ve actually met one.”

Ragnar’s den was made up of wooden furniture that had fur coverings on it and fur rugs scattered about. They continued to talk in the den for a while when an older man appeared in the doorway.

“Agro, this is Mr. Claude Frederick. He is a farmer who lives not too far from here. He stops by every Sunday for a drink and to catch up.”

After Mr. Frederick left, Ragnar gave Agro some clothes to wear, and told him that he could stay with him for as long as he wants.

After Agro had stayed at Ragnar’s for a couple weeks, he told him that he would have to get going soon. That night after Agro had made sure Ragnar was asleep, Agro snuck out of his room and grabbed an axe off of the wall. He began towards Ragnar’s room as silently as possible. Once he got next to Ragnar’s bed, he lifted the axe above his head with both hands, and swung down as hard as he could, directly on Ragnar’s chest. As he swung down, Ragnar woke up, but it was too late for him to say or do anything. Agro then took Ragnar’s dead body down to the cellar in his house where he keeps the dead animals, and left him there.

The next morning, Agro put on Ragnar’s clothes and fur, and cut his hair and shaved his beard to make himself look like Ragnar. It was Sunday, so Agro knew Mr. Frederick was going to come over, and when he did, he noticed something was different.

“Where’s Agro?” Mr. Frederick asked.
“He told me that he had to go because his family would start getting worried.”
“Alright. You’re acting a bit strange this morning Ragnar,” Mr. Frederick mentioned.
“Yes Claude, I didn’t get much sleep last night, so I’m a bit tired.”
“Why don’t I go so you can get some sleep Ragnar.”

Scared Mr. Frederick was catching on, Agro quickly replied, “No Claude, I want to talk to you, how are you?”

The two talked for about an hour and then Mr. Frederick proceeded to leave.
“Bye Ragnar,” He declared as he walked out of the house, “Have a nice day!”
“Bye Claude! You too!” He yelled with a smirk creeping across his face.
Enclosed Future
Hudson Dorough

A broad-shouldered man marched his way up to his favorite rock and sat down, his legs dangled off the sides as they always had. He was a tall, muscular man. The park was enclosed by a calm river that trickled across its rocky banks. Lush, green grass stretched from the rock to the river banks. There was a single bridge that traversed the river. The park was always empty, except for the man. Although the man was the only one around, he continued to scan his surroundings as if someone was watching.

As he laid his head on the rock, he heard a series of splashes coming from the river. There was a boy. He splashed in the river, laughing and falling to the ground every once in a while. The man descended from his rock and looked around to see if the boy belonged to anyone. The boy was the only one around.

He went to the boy to see if he was alright. “What are you doing here?” the large man asked.

The boy did not answer.

“Are you okay?” he asked again.

“I’m fine.”

“Why have you come to my home?”

“This isn’t your home.”

“Could you leave me alone? I am trying to rest.”

“Why?”

The man grew impatient, “Please leave me alone.”

“Why?”

“Please,” the man begged.

“Please.”

“Why do you mock me?”

“Because.”

“Are you ever going to leave me alone?”

“I have no where else to go,” said the boy.

The man rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. He stepped away from the river bank, “Let me show you something.” The man led him out of the river to his rock.

Taking a seat next to the man, the child asked, “Why did you bring me here? Isn’t this place wonderful?”

“Not really.”

“What do you see?”

“What do you see?” the boy countered.

“I see what is given to me, and although it’s limited, it is wonderful.”

“What do you have?”

“I have all I need, I have peace, and I see a future.”
“What does your future look like?”

The man sighed, “My future lies here, on this rock, with nothing to live for.”

The man rose from the rock when he heard splashes coming from the river. A dark figure rose from the water. The figure walked slowly with his head down. And although he had just come out of the water, he was completely dry. He wore a black cloak that cascaded over his head. He was a tall, slender man who carried something sharp in his right hand.

“Who is he?” the boy’s voice trembled.

“Do not be afraid, stay behind me and everything will be alright.”

The ominous figure approached the two. The boy began to sob. As the figure stepped closer, he reached out his hand.

The large man stepped between the boy and the figure. He reached back and set his large palm on the boy’s trembling shoulder. “Everything will be alright.”

---

**The Lost Ones**

Isabella Narducci

She could remember that night so well. She was wrapped safely in her thick blanket with her dreams taking her away from the worries of reality. The crisp autumn air brushing against her window, politely asking to be let but being denied by the window’s harsh return. Her parents slept soundly in the room just across the hall, only waking if someone came knocking on their door or if a bump in the night was just a little too loud. A crescent moon shined through the crack in this little girl’s curtains, poking at her eyelids and making her turn away towards the darkness as she did.

But this autumn night wouldn’t be like all the others. In fact it would be unlike any other night she would ever experience. This would be the night something very dear to her would be stolen right out from her grip, no matter how much she protested and pleaded. Though this would also be the night something equally precious would be given to her as a replacement. Though it still wouldn’t be the same as what she lost.

She didn’t know what to make of her situation at first. After all, this little girl was only about nine years old. What nine year old knows what to do when they see a strange-suited man with a leather briefcase and a golden chain hanging out of his coat pocket, checking it every so often with a slip of paper peeking out of the corner of his pants pocket? He had brown, slicked-back, clean-kept hair. He looked fairly young, no more than her parents looked. He looked like one of her friend’s fathers with his looks and dress, though she was positive she had never seen this man before.

She didn’t know what awoke her. Maybe it was his footsteps, even though she
couldn’t hear him move when he began to peek about her room. Maybe it was the quiet ticking coming from his pocket where the end of the golden chain hid. She didn’t quite know, but at the moment, she didn’t quite care. She just wanted to know what this strange man was doing, poking around her toy box.

“Hello?” she asked with her timid child voice. The man turned his head to take notice of the little girl in the room he had so graciously let himself into. He dropped the toy he was inspecting, closing the lid to the box and wiping his gloved fingers along his pants to get rid of the invisible dust.

“Hello,” the man echoed to her. The two strangers stared at each other for a minute or two, each wondering who would get the next word in their conversation.

“What are you doing in my room?” she said, trying to move the conversation along.

“I’m here to collect something,” he said, looking around her room again.

“What do you collect?” she asked, now quite curious of this strange man’s habits. The man smiled rather warmly and went over to the edge of her bed, and then sat his briefcase down beside him, patting the spot next to the bag and calling her over. The little girl looked toward her bedroom door, wondering if she should call her parents over. She wasn’t supposed to talk to strangers and certainly not ones that had snuck into her room in the middle of the night.

“It’s alright. Your parents are fast asleep and I will be gone in a bit. No need to wake them,” he said, putting a gloved, slender finger to his lips and motioning for her to keep quiet.

The little girl took a breath and crawled to the end of her bed, sitting in the middle and eyeing the leather briefcase, trying to guess what could possibly be in there. The man reached into his coat pocket where the golden chain hid and pulled out a golden pocket watch with words she could not yet read quite well. He smiled to himself, nodding, and put it back into his pocket.

“What’s your name?” he asked her.

“Violet Jones,” she said rather proudly, “What about you, sir?”

“Sir?” he asked, unused to the grand title. The man chuckled to himself, thinking for a moment. “I have long forgotten what my name used to be. Though nowadays I tend to go about being called Lennox.”

“Can I call you Lenny?” she asked innocently.

“Lenny, huh? I guess that will be alright for now,” he smiled and the small girl began to notice his odd Scottish accent. She had never met anyone outside of England before and her new friend seemed rather unique.

“So, why are you in my room? Do you want to collect one of my toys?” Violet asked, rather hopeful he was an expert on the wondrous world of toys. The man now known as Lenny now looked rather sad. He eyed the briefcase with a look of solemn.

“Not quite. Forgive me for snooping, I just grew quite curious with your room. It’s quite unique. I don’t usually get to visit children so it’s nice to have a look around when I do,” he sighed. “You see Violet, I collect things for a client of mine. He is a businessman of sorts. He makes deals and trades for people. He gives them money, wealth, power, love, and
anything they desire. Though when things go rotten, and they tend to always do, they seem to always want a refund. In some cases my client is forced to comply, though he sure does hate losing. When this happens, I have to go find and collect something of equal or greater value. You just happened to be on my list,” he motioned to the paper in his pant pocket.

“What does your boss want from me?” she asked, looking up at the man with bright green eyes while her black hair brushed against her pale rosy cheeks.

“He needs something that I always hate taking from children,” he wrung his hands together, trying to stall the deed as long as possible. Violet eyed the briefcase again, now growing a bit impatient to find out what was inside. Being the child she was, she unclasped the golden handle and opened it up to see several glowing, seemingly glass orbs, each of a different variety of colors.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you it’s rude to look through other people’s things without their permission?” he asked, taking the bag away from her. Violet puffed her cheeks.

“I could say the same thing about you, you know,” she motioned to the toy box. Lenny furrowed his brow, sighing again and thinking things over. Violet wondered what could possibly have him so worried. “What are those things?” she pointed to the bag.

“They’re souls of people on this list,” he handed her the old parchment. She opened it up to see her address, one of the few unscratched names left on the list.

“You want my soul?” she asked, rather confused of what he wanted with the strange object. “That seems like an odd thing for your boss to want.”

“A soul is rather valuable to my client, as it is to humans, but humans take it for granted rather often. A soul is what makes you feel. It's what separates you from anything else. It lets you feel happiness, joy, and all those wonderful emotions, along with the not so happy ones.”

“Are you here to take mine?”

There was silence in the room again. Lenny didn’t want to answer that question. He hated answering that question. Why couldn’t she just have stayed asleep like all the other children he had to collect from? It would be less painful for both parties if they just stayed asleep. But this one just had to wake up to his luck.

Lenny nodded his head, reluctantly. Violet stared down at the floor, wondering what will happen to her afterwards.

“Will I die?”

“Oh no, you’ll probably live a long life. Though it will be a dull life. You won’t be able to feel anything. You will feel empty...lost. Like there is a hole inside your chest that you can never hope to fill,” he explained rather vividly.

“Is that what happens to everyone?”

“Most of my patients live their lives trying to fill that hole by finding any emotion they can reach. Most try to use money, lust, drugs, the drink, others’ pain, their own pain—it’s a confusing existence,” he put his hands on his knees, stretching his fingers.

“Will that happen to me?”

“Probably so,” he said apologetically. “I hate taking from children because they still have so much hope for their lives. So much potential. Though with this I feel like I am
plucking a great tree from the ground while it's still just a sapling so it can just be turned into chicken feed,” he said, growing confused by his own analogy. “Ignore that last part,” he said.

“Is there anything I can do to make you leave me alone? I have some money in my piggy bank. It’s not much but it's all I have. If you want one of my toys you can have those too. I just want to keep my soul,” she said, clutching her chest while her tears pricked her eyes.

“I’m afraid that once you’re on the list there isn’t much I can do to get you off of it until I scratch your name off. But I can offer you something in return,” he smiled, trying to ease her worry.

“What could you possibly give me that could replace my soul?” she asked, shakily.

“It's not much, but it's something,” he said, placing a small locket into her hands. It was a golden locket with a thick heart shape at the end, and with the initials L.O.C carved in fancy cursive in the direct center. “This locket, when you have it on, will provide some emotions for you. They won’t be real and they won’t feel real, but it's nice to pretend,” he said taking off his glove as he clipped it around her neck. As she stared down at her new locket he placed his thumb to her forehead, mumbling words in a language she didn’t quite understand.

“What was that?”

“Think of it as a consolation prize. I think in time you’ll figure it out,” he smiled.

“Is it going to hurt?”

“Probably...” his voice trailed off. Violet stared down at the locket and felt the warmth from the strange touch on her forehead circulate her entire body. She found a new sense of courage swell inside her as she closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable to come. She could feel something cold reach inside her chest. A slight stinging in her lungs and then it was over. It felt like someone set an icicle through her chest and then quickly doused it all in burning water. She opened her eyes to see Lenny, now holding onto a glowing, purple glass orb. She looked at it curiously, almost trying to wrap her head around the whole situation. Lenny sighed, placing it into his bag with the others taking out the sheet of paper scratching out her name with the wave of his hand.

“Are you leaving now?” she asked, with no emotion in her voice.

“I am. Just one last thing,” he said, placing a glove back onto his hand. With another wave of his hand, a book with the same golden heart on the cover as she wore around her neck, initials and all, landed into his hand. He promptly handed it over to her, giving a small bow in the process. “Open that when you're ready,” he said. The locked windows blew open, swaying the white lace curtains as they did. Lenny took a step out into the cold but turned back to have one final look at Violet. “If you ever want to buy your soul back, just give me a call. I’ll be waiting,” and with that, he disappeared into the air just like he came.

Violet stared down at her new locket and the new book she had no idea to open, pondering what life would be like now. Her locket, just as promised, gave her some version of what fear would be like in this situation though she knew it was not the same.
NARRATIVE

An exploration of the personal narrative
We tread in silence as we study the gravel path ahead, watching the synchronized movement of our steps: left, right, left, right. The mountain air smells of fresh manure, courtesy of the locals’ wandering cattle and the horse-drawn carriages. We maneuver around the scattered piles. We pass a grazing cow, her full udders swinging beneath her like a pendulum and seeming to double the force of gravity on her existence. I notice her powerful horns and wonder why female cattle in America lack such an important feature. Maybe the cows in Romania are just meant to be tougher; most things in Romania are tougher I’ve noticed, people included—and mostly out of necessity.

A few steps later and we’ve made it past the “crazy chicken lady” and her wide, darting eyes. She ushers in her hens and waddles back into her chicken coop of a house. A rooster screeches. A little prayer house lies on the left of the path now, and we approach it with a few candle offerings. I read the Romanian inscription on its roof as my older sister lights the candles. Underneath, the rough English translation takes me aback: “Travelerr [sp], remember you gone die.” Somehow it sounded much gentler in Romanian; surely the translator couldn’t have meant it like that. Nonetheless, the jarring phrase assumes a strangely foreboding tone as we approach the cemetery.

Three of my siblings step away and continue towards the church, but I linger behind for a second with the prayer house’s warning echoing in my ears. My fourth sibling, Sorina, stands beside me and reaches for my pinky, curling her stubby fingers around it. Maybe she senses my emotion, but more than likely she’s a clingy five-year-old. I turn around to see my older brother’s curly locks disappearing around the corner.

“We better catch up,” I tell Sorina, and we hustle to the church gate where the others have arrived. Inside the gate, I hear the gossip of the old ladies as they fill their plastic water bottles at the fountain. Soon they will wind around the church and walk the steep path to the cemetery, where they will visit their loved ones and join with friends to commemorate the past. The modest but elegant church is a hand-painted masterpiece. The surrounding gardens are a splendor of greenery. Everywhere I look there are prosperous trees and vibrant flowers that sprout out from the graves. Life seems to seep from the ground and dance through the air of the hilly cemetery. A gentle breath of wind blows over our shoulders and loops through the endless mounds of brilliant crosses. To the left, a group of lively men sit at a bench and tell stories; they laugh from their bellies and express their ideas with dramatic gesticulations. The cemetery’s a social playground. Descending from the top of the hill come a couple of ancient-looking ladies, their wizened faces like wrinkled prunes. Their frail bodies approach us with familiar smiles, and we recognize Ms. Paula and her sister.
“Buna Ziua!” they exclaim, greeting us in their Romanian tongue. Everyone knows us as the exotic Americans with a Romanian mother, and in this small town, we have connections with them all. The women continue with a series of typical questions: “When did you arrive?”, “You remember us, don’t you?”, and “Who are you going to visit?”

They asked who we are visiting. Since her death three years ago, when I was nine, it’s been the same woman every time. She’s a woman who selflessly left behind her familiar life in Romania and immigrated to the United States of America, a daunting new country halfway across the world, in order to support my mother and her children in their new life. The woman who taught me to wash my hands, and to love, to button my shirt and to give, to cut my nails and to pray. In technical terms, she’d be our great-great aunt and my older sister’s godmother, but for us, she’s the equivalent of a second mother. That’s why we, and everyone else who knows her, call her Naşa, the Romanian word for godmother. With her angelic patience and unsurmountable generosity, this woman really was like everyone’s mother from God.

“We’re visiting Naşa,” we respond and smile politely.

“Oh, Naşa, of course. What an extraordinary woman,” they reminisce, thoughtfully nodding their heads of gray hair. “So kind-hearted and hard-working...never met another quite like her.”

We agree, say our goodbyes, and climb higher, feeling the burn in our calves. Those Romanian grandmas are fit; this trek is a workout.

Finally, we arrive. Naşa’s name, in beautifully crafted cursive letters, decorates the wooden cross that emerges from the dirt and stands before our faces. Vegetation surrounds her grave, framing it like a picture. I stand there for a moment, admiring her, remembering her, feeling her, until the memories overflow and then flood down my face in a violent waterfall of tears. I feel dizzy; suddenly I’m gasping for air and I taste the saltiness on my tongue. Around me, my siblings faces look the same. I feel Sorina wrap around my waist, so I blindly pull her in, embracing her. I can’t see her; my vision is blurred.

But through the sobs of my siblings, I hear the laughter of men. And past the pounding in my ears, I hear the cheerful chit-chat of ladies. For here in the cemetery, where the dead are brought together, the living also gather. The vibrant cemetery is an acceptance of mortality and a manifestation of life’s everlasting persistence.

“Travelerr [sp], remember you gone die,” the prayer house read. Though still an awful translation, the words no longer haunt me. Yes, we’re all “gone die” but, like Naşa, we may all achieve immortality within the beating hearts of others. And flowers may grow on our graves.
As he trudged in the door, he shook off the snow from his cap and gave me a look that sent a chill up my spine. While my eyes scanned the room, I noticed the reflection of the Christmas lights glimmering in my mom’s eyes. My dad placed his suitcase down and called my sister into the kitchen to join me and my mom. I checked my mom’s face for reassurance, but I found none.

“Did you make a decision?” I finally broke the silence. My dad’s eyes looked into mine as I finished the sentence, and I knew that his answer was not going to be favorable in my ears.

“I know what I want to do, but I wanted to make sure it was alright with my family as this affects you a great deal.” The conversation felt almost as if he rehearsed it the entire plane ride.

“Well, what did you decide?” The veins on my sister’s hands were protruding as she placed them on her knees.

“I decided that working at UAB would ultimately be a great job change for me. UAB has a lot of room to grow, and I would love to be a part of this growth. But I would only want to be a part of this if you two were on board.” My dad’s eyes darted around the room in search of a glimmer of acceptance, only to find solace in my mother’s. My sister’s glassy eyes looked at mine. I nodded my head as if to hopefully redirect the inevitable tears.

As my dad’s surgical career soared, so did his interests in other, more competitive hospitals. The possibility of moving became a common undertone of my everyday life. He toured Utah five years before and just when my sister and I had become acquainted with the idea of moving, our parents ultimately decided against the move. A couple years later, Dad had told us he was interested in a job in Texas. He flew to Texas and toured the job. He promptly called my mom and told her to come to Texas to help him look for houses. My mom’s search history on her laptop was filled with different public and private schools in Dallas, Texas. It seemed to my sister and me that we were about to relocate to Texas. However, despite the many promising signs, this move ultimately did not happen.

My sister and I were not unaccustomed to the idea of a move. When our dad came home one day and asked if we would be alright with moving to Alabama, we agreed to it light-heartedly. As the months passed, and our dad’s interest increased for the job, my sister and I began to worry. However, we felt as though this move would ultimately not happen.

“I am okay with moving to Birmingham.” I gritted my teeth as the words slipped out of my mouth. I knew these words would bury my friendships in Madison, but it would open so many doors for my dad. The only thought I could keep in my mind was to save my tears for my pillow as I repeatedly nodded my head.

I looked out of my peripheral vision and saw a stream of tears pour out from my sister’s eyes. She was in her sophomore year at a college an hour away from our house.
My sister purposely chose this college to stay close to our family, and this move was about to ruin that.

“I mean, this move majorly affects you three, so I’m okay with the move if Mom and Allie are.” The look on my sister’s face spoke much stronger words that contradicted what had escaped from her lips.

“Thank you. That was very big of you two. I know this move is going to be very hard for the family, but I know it is going to turn out great. We found some schools for Allie to look at and some houses for us to see. Birmingham has some great suburbs and I’m so happy you two are on board.” Something about the Christmas lights were a little less bright and the songs were much less jolly as the news sank in and the day became night.

I had four months to tell my friends of the move and to square everything away for school work to be transferred. These four months were the hardest months I had experienced. I struggled in school and watched my perfect straight A’s, the ones I worked so hard for and took great pride in, turn to B’s and C’s. I felt myself becoming distant from my boyfriend of two years and felt my world crashing down. When it came time to get in the car for a grueling 12 hour drive to a city where I had no interest in living, I was devastated.

I left for Birmingham March 8th and started at Mountain Brook High School March 9th. Grades suddenly became the least of my worries; the new school was almost triple the size of my old. In a sea of double names and strange accents, I was most definitely drowning. I realized my short, northern name, was the minority among the long line of family names. I decided that I needed to be a more proper version of myself. I would go by my full name, Alexis. I began to make up a life in my mind for the “New Allie.” A life where I would make the volleyball team, just as I had in Madison, and I would become this mega-popular girl from out of state. My dream of what had seemed to be perfection fell flat as my spine was on the verge of a stress fracture and both of my shoulders had rotator cuff tendonitis. For the first time in 7 years, I would no longer be able to define myself as a volleyball player. My spirit weakened just as my body had, and my smile had faded away. I came home day after day feeling more and more unlike myself. I had chosen to be called by a name which did not feel like mine, I had failed for the first time to make the volleyball team, and I had no friends. My once confident and strong self had begun to deteriorate into an all time low.

After I had spent a month at the new school, I felt as though I could fully understand the longer, drawn out words the teachers spoke. I began to find the charm in the tones and rhythm; I started to appreciate the friendly smiles and waves, regardless of which “Mary” it came from. I realized that it was okay to make other friends—I allowed myself to be happy. I had to find a way to meet people and decided joining the cross country team would be my way. After long runs that were accompanied by tears of pain, I perceived that I hadn’t cried over something like physical pain in a while. Suddenly, it became obvious to me that I was tired of feeling sorry for myself and decided that was no longer my mantra. Just as a runner gets themselves up every day and stretches and prepares to condition, I realized I was conditioning myself all along, everyday, by forcing a smile—until one day I realized I wasn’t forcing it anymore.
It was a warm Saturday morning at Lake Martin and I had woken up early. I walked out on the porch and began talking to my mom. “Do we have anything for breakfast?”

“No, but you can run up to the country store and get something.” My mom gave me some money and the keys to her car to get breakfast for the family. I stumbled to the car, still half asleep, and started towards the little country store about ten miles away. After zipping through the rutted gravel backroads, I hit the main road. I came up quickly behind a big Toyota Land Cruiser. It looked very new, but it was going kind of slow, and I was hungry. I considered passing, but I decided it wasn’t a good idea with how curvy the road was. After a while of tailing the Land Cruiser, I dropped back a little.

As I came around the next curve, I saw a beat up 90s Chevy Impala with bald tires come flying around the curve the other way. The car eased off the road a little, and then the driver jerked the wheel to get the car back on the road. When he did that the car skidded into my lane and nailed the Land Cruiser in front of me. It was a head-on collision and both the cars went flying off the road. I pulled off the road, still in shock, and grabbed my phone. With my hands shaking, I tried to dial 911, but I looked up and saw that the lady that was following the Impala was already on the phone with the 911 operator. I put my phone back in my pocket and watched as people stormed the vehicles, trying to help.

“Are you okay?” a man said into the crashed Land Cruiser. I didn’t hear any response but then I saw a mother and two children emerge from the crumpled mess of metal and airbags that once was a car. They were all ok, just a little shaken up. The two men in the Impala, on the other hand, were not in good condition. The whole front of the car was completely gone and there were engine parts and glass scattered across the road. The old car didn’t have airbags, and the two men looked to be injured pretty badly. There were Wpeople all around talking to the men and making sure they were okay.

“We are going to wait for the paramedics to pull you out of the car!” one man yelled. The only response was a grunt of pain. I looked to the other side of the road and saw a small fire starting in the Land Cruiser. The fire grew to where the entire car was engulfed with flames. I was not the only one to notice the oil and gasoline spilled out all over the road, because people started tearing away at the Impala to get the men out before the fire reached them. As the two injured men were being carried away from the wreckage, I watched the fire from the Land Cruiser reach the trees. I drove away as police cars and ambulances began to show up. With a rear view mirror full of blue flashing lights and fire, I headed home, no longer hungry for breakfast.
As we pulled into the apartment complex, I frantically searched for any trace of my precious children standing nearby, waiting for our bus to arrive for the day.

“Hey, look, Carolanne, there’s Timipaw,” Hannah exclaimed.

Angel will come out when they see us, I convinced myself as I sipped the last gulp of my chocolate milk. As the church bus came to a halt, I hopped out and began carrying the soccer goals and boxes filled with beads and yarn to the table on the lawn. When I turned back around to grab a second load off the bus, I noticed several police cars and a van marked “Nashville Crime Scene Unit” parked in front of building G, where Angel and her family lived on the bottom floor.

“Have you seen Marvin yet?” Charlotte asked as she lathered herself with sunscreen. “No, look at their house,” I motioned over to Building G, my voice trembling. “What are all the police cars for?”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped as she noticed the vehicles parked at their apartment. She was quickly distracted as her buddy Jonathan tugged on her hand with his large, round eyes twinkling. She ran off to play a round of soccer with him, and I was left to ponder over the crime unit cars.

Time passed and no new information came about as to where Angel and Marvin were or if they were safe. My heart dropped as a childcare van drove into the parking lot and parked in front of Building G. All week, I thought, all week of playing with Angel and her family and I don’t even get to say goodbye for the last time. I want just one more piggyback ride, one more game of chase, one more smile from the precious child I have spent all week with.

I smelled the pizza from across the tennis court and knew the day was half gone. Quietly, I munched on my pizza with Hannah and her buddy. In the back of my mind I wanted Angel to be sitting in my lap, showing me how she could eat a whole slice of pizza. As I folded the tablecloths and picked up the leftover watermelon on the sticky blue tarp, I heard the sounds of multiple engines starting up. Wanting to go by their apartment, I quickly volunteered to take the trash to the dumpster. On my way, I slyly looked at G201 to see if anyone was there. Where are they, I thought. Leaving the dumpster, I headed back to the arts and craft table that sat upon the lawn next to the tennis courts.

I began to wipe up the colorful paint from the morning activity off the table. I scrubbed the table while making little conversation in some English and some Spanish to try to get to know the little kids that were helping me. Suddenly, the sound of flip-flops fiercely slapping the ground met my ears and I jolted around.

“Carolina! Carolina!” cried sweet Angel with her arms wide open. “Carolina!”

“Angel!” I rejoiced as I felt a smile coming over my face. Angel wrapped herself around
me in the most heartfelt hug I had ever received. “Angel, are you okay? What happened?”
“Carolina, they took the children away. They said they needed a new mama and papa.
Mami wouldn’t let us out because she wanted us to be safe,” Angel spoke out of
breath with her eyes wide and worry in her voice.
“It’s going to be okay. I’m glad you are safe. Have you eaten anything? Let’s get you
some pizza. I am so happy to see you.”
“Okay, but can we play after? It’s your last day. I want to play with you as much as I can.”
For the rest of day camp, Angel ate her pizza and kicked the soccer ball with the
biggest grin on her face. She did not mention anything else about the negativity in her life.
She solely focused on living in the moment.
The sounds of the ice cream truck song pierced through the air and all the children
hollered and ran to the sidewalk. I wish I could be as happy and carefree as them, I thought.
They face many more difficulties than I do yet they exude positivity constantly.
“Come on, Carolina! We can eat the ice cream together.”
Two o’clock quickly approached and I couldn’t get enough hugs from Angel. I may
never see the girl who changed my life again, my mind kept telling me. I dropped Angel off
at the tree across the street from her house where her grandmother and aunt were sitting.
The time I had been dreading all week, came. I experienced the weirdest feeling; my heart
was longing, yet it was the fullest it’s ever been.
“Thank you for playing with me, Carolina. I’m going to miss you so much.”
“I love you, Angel. I’ll write you as soon as I can. Bye, sweet girl.” I knew she would
not understand if I explained to her the impact her positivity had on my life. I knew I would
remember this moment for the rest of my life. “I miss you already.”
I walked down the 300 hall at 2:24, dragging my feet all the way to the end. As I approached the end of the hallway I stopped at the door of the last classroom and sighed. My final class of the day is English with a bunch of people I didn’t know. I wandered into the room and chose the seat in the back corner. As I look around the room I saw many unfamiliar faces that all seemed to be staring straight ahead, desperate to hear the shriek of the bell. It looked like a scene out of The Breakfast Club. None of us had ever crossed paths before this moment. I could hear myself breathing as we all waited for our teacher, Mrs. Ray, to say something. This is going to be a long year, I thought to myself. Fast forward a few months and the atmosphere is the complete opposite. I rush down the hallway and glide into Mrs. Ray’s room.

Almost immediately she glared at me, “Caroline, what in the world are you wearing?”

“Somebody bet me that I wouldn’t wear this shirt all day,” I said showing off my cartoon bikini body t-shirt. “So I did.”

“That is extremely inappropriate Caroline. You need to take that off right now.”

“Mrs. Ray, it’s just a tshirt.”

“Well, I hate it. I can’t believe you could wear that to school”

If it had been any other teacher that told me to change I would have reluctantly switched shirts but since it was Mrs. Ray, I happily obliged. I knew she was pushing my buttons and only wanted the best for me. Our entire class began to make comments on my outfits everyday, but only to drag out the time. None of us ever thought we would become that close through and english class. Throughout they year the ten of us in eighth period english had formed an unbreakable bond with the help of Mrs. Ray. She brought ten strangers with drastically different personalities together. She taught us more than just English, she taught us how important friendship is. In any other setting, none of us would have become friends, but we ended up having a wonderful year together.

Before Mrs. Ray’s class I was consumed with the thought of popularity. I thought I would be perceived as strange or weird if I was friends with someone in the band or some of the other people in my class, but Mrs. Ray taught me that popularity doesn’t matter. She enforced the idea that as long as you are happy, it shouldn’t matter who your friends are. By the end of the year that’s what I truly believed. Even though everyone in our class came from different backgrounds, we were all kind to each other and that’s all that mattered. At the end of the year Mrs. Ray informed us that she was moving schools and we were all heartbroken. We decided to pay tribute to her and give her a video of our class. With teary eyes and shaky voices, we described what we loved about Mrs. Ray.

After watching the video, we came together for one final group hug,

“I love y’all so much. I hope y’all know that. I know you feel the same way and that
only makes it so much harder to leave”.

“We love you, too, Mrs. Ray”, we all chimed in.

After that day, we came to the realization that Mrs. Ray had to leave. No matter how much we cried and begged her to stay she had to go. She was needed at Bayside Academy to help other students. We knew those students there needed her as much as we wanted her to stay. Mrs. Ray gave us something we can never repay her for, a strong bond between friends. Even though Mrs. Ray is gone, we will remember to be kind to one another, and carry on our true friendship throughout the rest of our time together.

Sculpture by
Emily Bolvig
Tag! You’re it!

Candler Brown

Pulling up to the hospital turn-a-round was terrifying. I felt stuck somewhere between nervousness and excitement to begin this new journey. After a brief goodbye to my mom, check-in began and I immediately immersed myself in handing out luggage and name tags to dozens of excited children. As I was looking around the crowded entryway to the hospital, I realized what a paradox I was experiencing. Here I was in a hospital, full of sick kids, and everyone was overjoyed.

I overheard conversation after conversation: “How is school going? What counselor do you think you’ll get? Maybe we’ll be in the same cabin!” Mostly mundane conversations that may be heard between ordinary kids prior to departing for any summer camp. But this wasn’t any summer camp and these weren’t ordinary kids. These were children facing the realities of life and death with childhood cancer who were getting to experience an extraordinary summer camp where children with cancer can go to be ordinary and special all at the same time.

New kids seemed a little nervous but the “oldtimers” helped calm their nerves with kind words of welcome and encouragement. Many interactions I witnessed that day appeared to be joyous reunions, which I never expected. Some of these kids hadn’t seen each other since last summer but they picked up exactly where they left off as if a moment had not passed. As it became time to get on the bus, the energy peaked and everyone could feel it circulating throughout the foyer. Pictures were taken as the children waved goodbye and I let out a sigh of relief. Following an energetic roll call, I took my seat in the middle of the bus, surrounded by excitement.

About halfway through our journey, I stood up to help a camper get to the bathroom at the back of the bus. Little did I know that this one action would shape my entire experience. As I turned around, I finally got a good look at all of the campers. A handful of them looked sick, but the majority of them looked completely healthy. In this moment, I did not see a bus full of cancer patients, but a bus full of kids about to embark on what would become their favorite week of the year. While walking to the back of the bus, I saw a bald-headed little boy who had a Goofy mask on. You could tell, not by his mouth– it was completely covered by the scrunched up mask– that he had a wide smile permanently etched into his face. Freckles danced around his smiling eyes that glowed with the joy that came along with the opportunity to go to camp. I stopped next to his seat to wait for the camper and the freckle-faced boy captivated my attention. He was laughing and making faces, completely caught up in his own world.

A quiet voice exclaimed, “Tag! You’re It!” I laughed along with him and continued my way to the front of the bus.

About twenty minutes after I sat down, another camper needed help getting to the back of the bus. As I walked by the boy in the mask, I tagged his shoulder. He erupted with
that brilliant smile of his. This became a routine until we got close to camp. It was obvious when the surroundings slowly became familiar to the kids because the whole bus seemed to have an electric current running through it.

As we crossed the bridge, the excited speed-talking began, “What counselor do you think I will get? Do you think we will ride the banana today? I wonder who is coming with their parents?”

They asked question after question and as the bus once again filled with excitement, so did I. As we pulled into the campus, the familiar view of the lighthouse welcomed us. We drove up the winding road and a sea of people in grey shirts greeted us. The campers immediately began to stir and stand up. I looked back and there was the young boy in the Goofy mask with his hands full and his grin clear.

“Are you excited?” I asked with an uncontrollable smile.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, bouncing up and down.

The bus door opened and the director came aboard with a smile on his face.

“Who’s ready for camp?” he yelled. A chorus of cheers followed. The director began to call the names of the counselors and their kids. As the names were called, the kids got off the bus.

I was able to get off the bus first, so I had the privilege of watching the kids as they met their counselors. The excitement surrounding these meetings was even more electrifying than those that occurred at the hospital. Whether it was their first time at camp or if they were a ten year veteran, the feeling rang through for everyone. I was entranced by all of these interactions when the young boy came up to me. His giggling broke me from my trance and he tagged me once more. I did not know how much that little game would mean to me at the time. It was on that bus ride that I learned to not take happiness for granted.
ALABAMA WRITERS

As part of an Alabama Writers study, Journalism students explored the works of several Alabamian writers. They explored the different topics and themes, and then applied these to their own writing.

Photograph by Mary Coleman Coats
Metamorphosis
Simona Shirley

(Exploring the theme of superficiality as expressed in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.)

“She starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see” (Hurston). Glancing at the smudgy mirror before her, she practiced her smile, the kind of surgically straightened smile that everyone expected to see. She could manipulate her mouth, but her eyes remained untamed. In her eyes, those deep, revealing eyes, one could peer inside and discover a frail butterfly of a girl, a girl trapped in an impenetrable cocoon she has built around herself. There she hid, inside that protective cocoon, from the threatening attention and criticism of the world. In that unassuming, leaf-like cocoon she camouflaged herself, and she closed herself off. Only through that miniscule rip in her cocoon, those transparent eyes, could one truly behold her true beauty, and very few ventured so near.

She stared once more at the white-washed version of herself in the mirror and then moped over to her backpack, swinging the heavy weight over her bony shoulders. Another day of school, another day of pretending. A piercing voice interrupted her anxious thoughts: “Come on Annabelle, we’re gonna be late!” It was her mom; she better get going before she’s left behind: not that she would really mind.

Metamorphosis is a difficult time, but the cocoon’s small tear will eventually expand, and the shield will be shed. A confident butterfly will emerge and flutter off into the world, a graceful creature without fear.
The Affliction
Emily Bolvig

(Inspired by Stomping the Blues by Albert Murray)

Sometimes people forget all about it in spite of its arresting presence, like a pressure filled zit on your nose, or that thing in his teeth, hanging as if it is wasted gas around an idling car, how could anyone ever forget? And yet they do, and they sit there, in a cloud of oily fumes, letting it seep into their bloodstream, slowly and unwittingly drowning in one less oxygen than required.

Not that they ever do notice. They only talk about it in myth-like tone, even as it is real as the horn rimmed glasses on its face. But being absolutely honest, it has reached such a presence, in both weight and quantity, that it has reached numberlessness, become an unquantifiable plethora, a true pandemic. The it becomes a them.

Anyone could tell you how it feels when they’re around. You become afflicted, as if infected by some miasma-generating microbe. You instantly become lachrymose. The whole room develops a mustiness like the vintage clothing to which they cling, swirled together with the overly sweetened coffee they adore. And yet as they are teeming, with it wrapped around their heads like a plastic bag, nobody ever notices how hot it is in there.

So the very first problem that it all adds up to is as specific as its ghost-like vagueness that is their existence. It’s like tentacles. It got ahold of us and clung. It is the hipster movement, and it all started with a pair of horn rimmed glasses he made cool.
This House
Ethan Harradine

(Inspired by All Over but the Shoutin’ by Rick Bragg)

“They hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in
the sky are holes in the floor of heaven.” -All Over but the Shoutin’ by Rick Bragg

The longer I spend walking around this old, empty house, the more ghosts and demons
I see from my past. The stairs creak at night, and I’m not sure if it's warning me to stay awake
or telling me to sleep, but I stay awake in fear of my mind drifting through colorless pictures of
things I can’t forget. But eventually my sight fades and my eyelids close.

A woman I used to know as my mother sits on the porch steps of a content and joyful
home. She tells me stories about her childhood, about how she would run through the
forests, swim in the streams, walk through fields of wildflowers, and lay down and look at
the stars. She said that stars are holes in the floor of heaven and that God created them to
remind us that even in darkness there is light. Though I want to believe her, I can’t anymore.
Not after what my God has done to me, he took everything from me, and when I thought
there was nothing left to take, he took more, and left me only with this house.

A moan from down the hall pulls me from my light slumber, forcing me to sit up. The
noise continues. I slide out of my bed onto the old hardwood that creaks like rusted hinges.
I use the flashlight on my phone to guide me through the long hallway and down a set of
stairs to the room where the sound is coming from. I open the door and my sight wanders
off towards the window where I see the wind cut into the trees causing them to sway back
and forth. I hear the noise once more and conclude it's just the wind, pushing against the
side of the worn house. So I climb back into my bed and shut my eyes in fear.

My brother plays on the floor in front of me while I watch T.V. He yells and commands
his miniature army of green soldiers to attack, but I soon end his game telling him to shut
up. I don’t know why I was always so mean to him, I guess it was because I wanted him to
be more like me so I could have someone to agree with and talk to. But I was always able
to see our similarities through observing our differences. I had the dark mind and creative
passion while he had the optimism and scientific smarts. He was my exact opposite, yet
exactly what I needed. But all I have of him now are some old photographs and dying
memories that fall through my fingertips the same way sand slips through the crevices in
between each finger.

The sound of soft tapping on the tin roof grows into a pounding rhythm that my heart
remembers, but can’t connect to anymore. I fix my eyes to a spot on the ceiling and lay
there. A flash comes through the window, illuminating the half of the room where the door
sits, and casting a shadow over the other half of the room where my body lies. The thunder
is soon to follow, adding a bass line to the rhythm of the rain. The music eventually slows
my thoughts and forces my eyes shut once more.
I’m in my father’s truck riding home with a couple two by fours and siding in the bed. Not many words are spoken but he knows I am happy to help him fix the leaks and crooked framing in the front bedroom. I was always happy to see him because most of the time he was out of town for work, he sometimes had to spend up to three weeks away from home overseeing his projects. When he was at home though, I would always stay glued to his side and do anything he said. I’m not quite sure why I would always listen to him and do what he wanted, I guess it was just that I wanted his approval. Approval never meant much to me coming from strangers, but I admired my father. There’s nothing to admire anymore however. The only thing I have to remember him by is an old house that creaks and moans.

The early morning sun shines through the window. I open a set of tired eyes and head downstairs to make coffee. The floors creak and the house is empty.

“They hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven.” Rick Bragg
The Night
Sophie Truppner

(Inspired by In Cold Blood by Truman Capote)

“I didn’t want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat.” - In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

I watched as another cloud of warmth escaped from my chapped lips. It was a frigid October night and thankfully there was no wind. What made it almost as bad was the gentle mist that hugged to the earth. Even mother nature needs a scarf to keep her warm on a night like tonight. Shaking off another chill I tried to see through the slowly growing mist that cloaked its way around the tree roots. The night was perfect, almost too perfect. Where are they? I thought to myself as I trudged through the forest. Then it hit me, the iron-like smell of blood flooded to me through the thin mist. Turning north, I headed deeper into the haze. The mist that cloaked us was perfect for our cover however, it made it ten-times harder trying to see where I was going. Approaching my group I saw that everyone had brought the items. Dawn had brought the candles, Mike had brought the book, Blake brought the body, and I had brought the lantern. So we continued on with the sacrifice, placing each candle in the direction like a compass. Taking out the book, Mike turned to the page with the knife and sliced his left palm. As the rich drops fell on the face of the body, Mike began with the first phrase, as he chanted the knife and book was passed around until all of us had spit our left palm and were chanting along with him. Our blood drops began from Mike’s at the face of the body to mine at the ankles. Our verse ended and one by one we blew out our candle and went back home. The killing for this month was done, I wouldn’t have to worry about it until next month. But I could tell Mike was not getting the thrill of it like the rest of us. He had been doing it longer, and like a drug he was becoming addicted. Once a month was not doing it for him like it use to. It was only a matter of time before he would confront the rest of us about doing it more often. I knew how he would start it off to, he would say something along the lines of,

“Oh it's only twice a month it won’t hurt any of us. Plus the book has more way to make it harder for police to figure out its us.”

And everyone will be okay with it because as long as no one gets caughts nobody cares. But I worried, not about getting caught, but about Mike. He had begun to change in the last couple of weeks since I’d joined. Every time I saw him it looked like he had hardly slept, he was eating less too. His once fitted clothes were now beginning to look baggy on him. He began talking more about the book as well, nobody said anything but I could we all thought the same, Mike was becoming obsessed with that book. He treated the book like a person to, carrying it like a baby, being gentle with it, he even began to whisper to it. At first I thought maybe Mike thought the book was a way to talk to our Lord but as I payed more attention to him the more I began to think differently.
Counting Cracks
Max Gault

(Inspired by Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston)

Twenty four. Twenty five. I exhale quickly. My chest aches for a long deep breathe, but I dare not make a sound. Twenty seven. Twenty eight. The cracks seem to grow wider. Thirty one. Thirty two. I yearn to run. I yearn to look up. I am oblivious to my environment. Thirty seven. Thirty eight. I feel the cold gazes of hateful men. They send shivers down my spine. Forty two. Forty three. My lungs are screaming now. I feel them expand between the holes of my rib cage, begging for another breath. Forty six. Forty seven. Without thinking, I free my lungs from the polluted air that I have been keeping in since the beginning of the walk. Fifty five. Fifty six. Sweat rolls down my forehead as I realize what I have done. Sixty one. Sixty two. I lose control of my lungs. I choke and sputter. Sixty five. Sixty six. Tears flood down my cheek alongside droplets of sweat. The chokes grow louder as I begin to grasp for air. Seventy. Seventy one. Tears hit my shoes, which seem to walk aimlessly on the concrete path. A door behind me slams. I imagine my body, helpless and alone, in front of the bead on a rifle. Eighty four. Eighty seven. The black crevice between each block begins to move faster. Ninety six. Ninety nine. The click of a boot heel echos through the road. It keeps clicking, growing louder and louder. More clicks suddenly join. They strike the earth with a bone chilling sound. The vibrations of each step they take are felt within my feet. My body stops. I crave the end of this walk, whether I reach the end of the path or not. My legs cease to move, and the thundering clicks slowly die down. Shaking uncontrollably, My head slowly tilts upward, and for this first time since the start, I see colors other than gray. Two dove glide gracefully down the barren street. The trees behind them are covered with leaves glistening in the sun's light. I turn, ever so slowly, to my followers. A small group of men greet me. Not with stares of hate, but with stares annoyance. Each man wears a pair of long southern blue jeans that roll down to the bottom of their worn out country boots. Their hands fill their pockets as they stand slumped over, carefully studying me. I wonder why, the only thing their is to observe is the darkness in my skin. They slowly begin to avert their gazes from me to each other, doing so in state of weariness and drudgery. Then, I hear more clicks. Clicks similar to the sound of their metal boot heels striking the concrete sidewalk, but these clicks are muffled through the fibers of their baggy southern jeans. My gaze sinks to the concrete block I am standing on. Slowly, my feet take two backward steps over the dark crevice. “One hundred.” I whisper out loud, before the volley of bullets ring in the street.
Painting by Madelyn Boodoian

Collage by Molly O’Neill