

# At Our Essence



Expressions  
From the  
Hearts and Minds  
of Teens In the  
Adolescent Program at  
Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital



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## FOREWORD

This project is a collaboration between Southern Word and Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital. Southern Word is a Tennessee non-profit that offers creative education solutions for youth literacy and social-emotional development. All rights to the work included in this anthology belong to the authors and visual artists, who have given permission for this publication. This chapbook is made possible through the support of the Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts + Culture, Tennessee Arts Commission, and National Endowment for the Arts.

Compilation, editing, and foreword by Shawn Whitsell. Book layout by Carlton Boleyjack. Cover photo by Jima Akhenjah. Other art by Anthony Carrera and Charles Micheal Graham Jr. Printing by Vanderbilt Campus Copy, Nashville, TN.

The poems and other expressions included in this book were written by teens in the Adolescent Program at Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital in Nashville, TN between August 2019 and June 2020. The teens in the program participate in weekly writing workshops, facilitated by a Southern Word writer mentor. In these workshops, participants watch and discuss videos of spoken word performances, engage in performance games and exercises, and write about a wide array of experiences in their lives. The workshops offer an opportunity for creative and emotional expression.

Participants maintain physical and legal ownership of all writing completed in the workshops. Submitting to this anthology is optional. Those under the age of 18 must secure permission from a parent or legal guardian in order to be published. All pieces are published under a pseudonym. The editor has left most of the writing in their original forms. However, there have been small adjustments made for space, readability, and confidentiality.

Southern Word is committed to providing youth, especially in underserved communities, with as many opportunities as possible to develop and publicly present their voices both live and in print, video, audio and digital media. Southern Word lifts up the stories, voices, struggles, and triumphs of young people, especially those who are often marginalized.

By simply opening this book, you are contributing to the healing and empowerment of the teens in Vanderbilt Psych who were generous enough to gift the community with this valuable piece of art. As you contribute to the healing of these young people, may you also find any healing you may need yourself. Read these pieces and share them with others.

For more information, referral, or crisis intervention assistance from Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital for children, adolescents, and adults, please call

(615) 320- 7770 or visit [www.vanderbilthealth.com](http://www.vanderbilthealth.com).

To learn more about Southern Word programs and events, or to make a tax-deductible contribution to support the work, please email [info@southernword.org](mailto:info@southernword.org) or visit [www.southernword.org](http://www.southernword.org).



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## **Untitled**

By Argula Pernerstein

Pain HAS climbed up onto my shoulders.  
Despite falling under the weight, I still find them  
there.

PAIN takes its two feet and jumps on my back,  
MAKING it go crack and snap again and again.  
Pain wrestles my skeleton out of my skin, and I  
Lie there not naked,  
But a discarded change of clothes.

I turn my eyeballs with my hands to look,  
but pain isn't in sight;

All I can see is my backbone, my spine, free,  
slithering off into the distance, discontented, pain  
comes back into view, gnawing at my unrest.  
The flesh is gone, like cotton candy on pain's  
tongue.

Pain takes one soggy finger, and pikes my  
lungs.

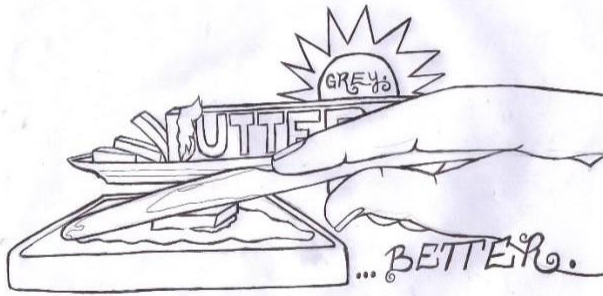


## **BUTTER**

THE GREY MAKES THE DAY GAY  
ALLOWING HOODIES, SOCKS, AND  
SWEATPANTS  
TO BE OK  
MAKING BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS LOOK  
ALL THE SAME  
SO WHY BE ANXIOUS ANYWAY ?  
WHY LET GREY MAKE YOU DOWN  
WHEN AFTER GREY THE FLOWERS SPOUT  
AND THE CLOUDS ALL LEAVE AND SAY  
GOODBYE  
AND THE OLD PEOPLE COME OUT TO SAY HI  
SO FUCK THE GREY AND HOW IT FEELS  
BECAUSE TOAST ISN'T TOAST WITHOUT  
BUTTER

ANONYMOUS

"Better"



## **Emotions**

Do you ever compare depression to a disease?  
Oh, how it can take your ability to achieve!  
My story is just as gory...  
And this is how I was stripped of all my glory.

After years and years of abuse  
the only thing my dad did was cut me loose.  
Over the years my depression began to rise,  
and everything I loved, I began to despise.

Without a glimpse of hope,  
I slowly took my soul to cope.  
After nine years of the gory madness and the  
countless gashes,  
I revealed my true colors before I turned to ashes.

Because my confusion, I was introduced to the  
psych ward.  
The doctors and nurses tried to help, but I still  
wasn't restored.  
Though, the patients I had met helped me  
understand my worth.  
But it didn't stop me from thinking of my last days  
on earth.

Finally, after all the gore and doubt,  
I got much better and I was let out.  
I'm now living freely in this world today,  
and I no longer have to be afraid  
-Ghost Pilot



## **A Blood Splattered Rose**

Do I choose to bask in the sun,  
Or, do I choose to use the gun?  
Just the simplest of tasks in life, under  
the sun.  
Oh, it challenges me so much that I  
choose to use the gun.

The only thing I see is a bloody rose  
and my body being left for the crows.  
The cool heavy winter breeze,  
and the dark, looming, and messy trees.

When I look in the future, I see myself  
dead,  
but as of now, I'm just laying in bed.  
Though I can only predict the future  
ahead of me.  
Maybe what lies ahead is just the key.

-Ghost Pilot



*"A Blood Splattered Rose"*

## Untitled

This darkness.  
This blinding darkness.  
What is that I see  
That Beautiful light,  
what is it?  
Oh. I understand.  
friends. family.  
They are my light.  
They are the ones who  
will lead me out.  
Of This darkness.  
This blinding darkness.

-P.L.T.





## **Cold Thoughts**

By Juan Rolad

All this negativity in my head has me yelling at my mind.

Begging this awful sensation to freeze itself.

Using the ice from my heart. As I scream my heart heats up; it's ice melts and now my veins

rage

with fire on the edge of combustion. The fire explodes within me and destroys those cold thoughts.

Now I am filled with fire and determination.

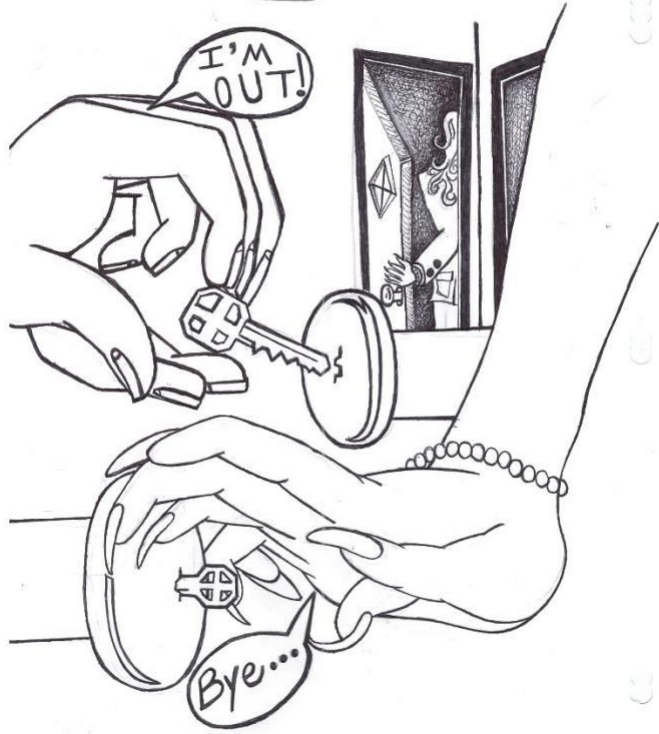


## **The Day I Left**

By: Kelly Veetitte

The day I left  
The wind ran by my side  
making me shiver  
not with cold but with excitement  
the day I left  
the fields of guilt I once tended wilted  
they wilted of sorrow and pain  
Making me shed tears of remembrance  
remembrance of the pain I felt here  
and why I was leaving this place  
The days I left  
Hate nipped at my heels as I hopped the Creek  
And landed in the warm embrace of equality  
the day, I left  
Peace jumped up and down with Joy  
while judgment shouted at my back  
trying  
to break me down  
The day I left, I was free  
Free from the hatred in my heart and the  
impossible standards I held myself to  
the day I left  
war died in my heart  
And I was resurrected as Art that dashed into my  
hearts of everyone I met.

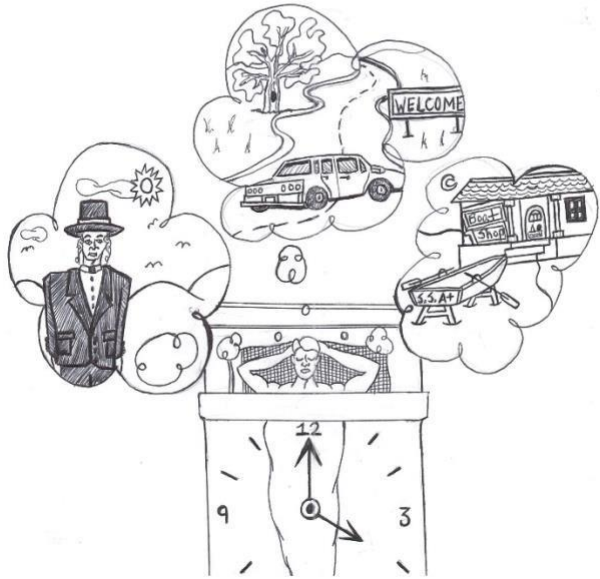
The Day I Left



Joyful Times  
By Reese Holland

The small town where my name originated from welcomes me with an empty boat shop. I turn left and see my Granny Martha's house filled with different places and memories. The plush carpet makes me blush as I run around and take in that I am filled with joy. Leaving her house, I take a long road that goes into an Amish community created with the love of God and the lack of political knowledge. I end at my farm where my great-grandfather's 80th birthday party was and my body fills with chills as I remember that his house is haunted. Yet, I walk up his narrow stairs where I'm told that I will stay in the clock room. Electrified, I walk in and see the long window with the view of a trailer house. That night, I fall asleep to the sounds of loud silence and to the sight of bright darkness.

Joyful times™



## **Acceptance Being Personified**

By Reese Holland

Acceptance is at my table taking in my words and feedback, trying to understand my views. He's telling me that he is proud of me being different, but while talking to me, he is trying to take in that I'll never be the same as anyone. Talking became less simple when aggression stumbled in and created a disaster of words. Acceptance took aggression into his hand and swallowed it, which created an environment of disgust.

Acceptance  
Being  
Thronified 19





## **Untitled**

By McKayla Starr

What's it like to be a CNA for those who don't  
Know.

It's like being a parent.

You have to care for a person who can't do it for  
themselves.

Help them eat, bathe and walk.

You even end up changing diapers.

The downsides to the job are there too.

Losing patients happens often.

You have to be the one to tell their family they've  
passed away.

It's a rush when someone codes and you have to  
perform CPR on them.

Saving and improving lives is the most rewarding  
part of the job for sure.

You'll never be bored or have a minute of free  
time.

Someone always needs your help one way or  
another.

People depend on you every day for their health  
and safety.

I remember the first time I was called to a code.

I ran to the room.

I could hear people yelling,

the monitor emitting a steady, high-pitched tone,  
and the crash cart whirring to life.

I walked in and saw 6 people crowded around one  
hospital bed.

I saw my patient laying still and lifeless.  
The smell of saline, and the hospital food was all around us.  
I ran over and felt the chest of my patient.  
No heartbeat.  
I jumped in and started pressing steady 1-second beats with my hands on her chest.  
Then I felt the hands of a nurse push me to the side so she could get to the patient.  
She grabbed the paddles.  
The whole floor could hear her yelling to charge.  
She shocked her once...twice.  
Nothing.  
The room grew silent.  
The only sound was the study high pitch tone of a heart failing to beat on the monitor.  
The doctor stepped forward.  
Everyone's head was bowed as he called time of **death.**

## Untitled

By Bailey Morgan

Today when I woke up, I knew it was going to be an unusual morning. I got up out of bed and the water filter was broken. So, I had to fill my water with tap water. Then when I went to make my lunch, we were out of lettuce so I had to put pickles on my sandwich instead. Also, I packed some goldfish and cheese and something called ubershumper that my mom had set out for me. I got in my car and hit snuffle and "Bad Guy" by Billie Eilish came on. I skipped it because it is way to overplayed and "Hey There Delilah" came on. After I got out of my car I walked into school. Some guy was blasting "Paint It Back" with his windows down. It was way too loud for 7 a.m. Then during first period our bell ringer was to debate who was worse, Friedrich Nietzsche or Thomas Jefferson. I said it was Thomas Jefferson because he was racist and I did not think Nietzsche was but if I am being honest I really had no idea what I was talking about. Then I was glad to leave 1st period because my English teacher's positivity was too much to handle that early in the morning. Thankfully the rest of the day was normal.

## Untitled

By Un-named

Today I woke up, feeling positive,  
not racist. I played Bad Guy By  
Thomas Jefferson on my speakers. I  
made my water-bed and fed my dog,  
pickle, some cheese and  
uberrshumumpei.

I greeted my neighbor "Hey there,  
Delilah." Delilah lives with her  
husband Friedrich Nietzsche and  
their dog Goldfish. When I was 7,  
I painted it black, it being  
Goldfish. To this day, I have not  
been Honest about it.



## **Untitled 1**

By You

I am 16.  
My brain is burning.  
I feel like a whore.  
Why don't I like my body?  
Why don't I eat any more?  
I have to get better.  
I'm not good enough.  
Why do I feel so numb?  
Because you're not good enough.  
Men are trash.  
Why don't I eat any more?  
Boys don't think they only wanna fuck.  
Wish they would ask, before  
trying to explore.  
He wasn't even cute  
Why did I date him?  
It been 2 years  
Why do I still feel like a whore?  
Why don't I eat any more?

## Untitled 2

By You

The 15th of August, 2003  
I grew up to be good like ALWAYS  
taught to be.  
Tired of trying  
perfect I CAN never be.

August 2003  
Perfect I WAS taught to be  
CAN never be.

I WAS taught to be perfect.

I WAS perfect.

Perfect.

## Home

By Vera

My mother told me to get a haircut today.  
She said “you look like a girl.”  
But mother, I’m walking that direction because I  
want to.  
Paste your predefined notions of masculinity and  
femininity onto me if you choose to,  
but airplanes land on  
landing strips,  
even if you try to force them off,  
because there’s nothing you can do to  
stop it.

My sister pins a purple bow into my hair, and it  
speeds me up, my mother rips it out  
and I slow down to a turtle like pace.  
She’s comparing boys to girls, apples to oranges,  
But I don’t have to apple, I can orange if I want to.

My brother sends letters to his boyfriend at night,  
fingers gently gracing across the keyboard,  
communicating  
emotions and failed moments to each other at  
3 am, sometimes waking me to help check  
his spelling, but never getting anything wrong,  
his words spill out across the screen into  
poem sprung up from nothing.  
My sister wakes from our noise, dropping herself



off her loft, giving us hugs as she travels to another floor  
for some water, a journey  
that all of us have walked at least once.

My mother still wants to paint a picture of  
a perfect suburban family, a single mother  
who worked her way up, a daughter who's  
already got modeling contracts lined up, and  
two ideal sons. One who plays football  
and the other who's competing for valedictorian.  
But really, it's a secret door, where my mother  
brings home men who we never got to know,  
hoping desperately to find a father, two daughters,  
One who stays awake studying and the  
other who won't eat, and one son who's  
always practicing, only making time for human  
communication when he is alone.

Underneath my sister's mattress is some money.  
She's saving up to leave.

Underneath my brother's pillow is a quarter,  
because he only lost his last baby tooth a week  
ago, and our sister played the tooth fairy.  
The other day I met the girl I want to be, with  
high heels and long brown hair, her monochrome  
red outfit a picture out of a catalogue.  
She flashed me a bright smile and disappeared  
into the crowd, and I have yet to convince myself  
that she was real.

## **Red M.**

By La Lane

this heart of mine grew to a flame,  
anger filled my very soul,  
but I still love you, what a shame  
your words prick like a rose's thorn,  
“why can't we just be friends?”  
because you still love me, I could have  
sworn  
our bond heavy with panic,  
why must I hurt you?  
i promise

## **White**

By Mandy Crox

Clouds flow above me  
The silhouette of white  
fills my teary eyes  
air fills my lungs  
and I sit and stare  
at the different white shapes  
my mind for the first time  
becomes a clear sky.

## **Untitled**

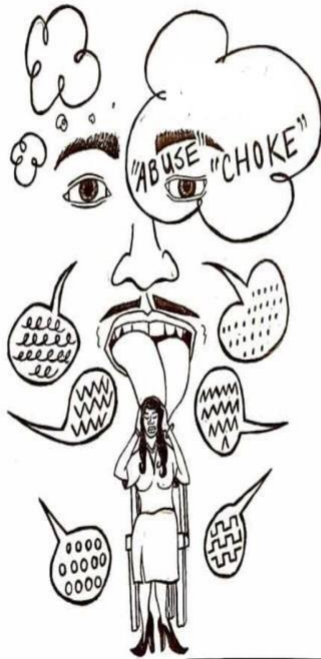
By Liam Holder

The blue of the skies  
It feels like it begins to rise  
filled with all these lies  
The world always has its goodbyes

## **Conversation**

By Maranda Cox

i sit and stare  
conversations mindlessly  
flow all around me  
being alone is a common  
theme in my life  
sometimes while the chaos of mental patients  
scatter  
i imagine the good times  
i see his sisters  
i see him  
i see his eyes  
i hear his voice  
i smell his cologne  
and then i feel his  
hands around my  
neck  
and I snap out of  
my mind and the  
conversation flows into my ears again



Innovation  
 I sit and stare/  
 conversation  
 mindfully/  
 flow all around my/  
 body alone is a  
 common theme in  
 my life forward  
 while the ~~time~~  
 chaos of mental  
 patients/ notes/  
 el imagine the good  
 times/ I see his  
 sisters/ el see him/  
 el see his eyes/  
 el hear his voice/  
 el smell his cologne/  
 and then el feel  
 this/ this-around  
 my neck/ and el  
 come out of my  
 mind and the  
 conversation flows into  
 my ear again.

## **A Family Angel**

By Rose

She was beautiful,  
no doubt.  
Inside and out.  
She spoke words from an  
angel's view  
with white wings by her side.  
She fought every day with  
the disease the devil had made.  
But her heart was unaffected.  
She still loved and prayed.  
Though a day still came,  
she had to leave suddenly.  
God gave her wings,  
but she still stays.  
Looming over us.

## Untitled

By The Pursuit of Happiness

When the sun goes down, the bottles  
rise as the moon does  
that action taken by papa  
encouraged me to express myself  
differently  
I learned to bring my hands toward  
the canvass rather than the bottled poison  
“I promise I’ll be better” soon sounded  
like “don’t be like me” as his efforts grew  
weak  
& I wrapped myself into a blanket  
scented with a place that wasn’t “home”



This Darkness  
#Untitled#  
1/16/05

is that light  
is d  
is



## Untitled

When a writer decides what to write,

It can be sad, or it can be bright

Sometimes when you write for the reader's perspective

You tend to be less protective

Whenever the readers make the image in their mind

You and the readers thought to begin to combine

It doesn't matter if your poem is happy or sad

As long as you wrote from the heart and don't feel bad.

-Ghost Pilot



Untitled:  
When a writer decides to write / It can be sad,  
or it can be light /  
Sometimes when you write for the reader's perspective / You tend to be less protective /  
Whenever readers make the image in their mind / You and the readers thought to begin to combine /  
It doesn't matter if your poem is happy or sad /  
As long as you wrote from the heart and don't feel bad.  
writer @ table  
- In the moment

## Untitled

By Mercy

to me, it seems

as if everyone around me

has it all figured out.

From celebrities to teachers,

no sign of self-doubt.

They're themselves,

they persevere,

they're courageous and strong,

to figure out how,

why has it taken me so long!?

Even nature knows her way

towering trees and growing shrubs

alive all around me

despite attempts to scrub

despite storms and disasters

attempts to wear nature down

she still stands big,

stands tall,

with not even a frown.

and here I am,

all alone,  
fiddling with my bracelet  
wondering why I can't seem to figure out what's wrong,  
& how to combat this thing.  
But as I'm sitting here,  
thinking,  
admiring the world  
for its resilience  
I see a glimmer inside me  
and it's been there since.  
just like the others,  
& like the nature around me  
I've pushed on,  
unapologetically survived,  
and found resilience  
inside me.



