



AN ODYSSEY TO PEACE

Expressions from the Hearts and Minds of Teens
in the Inpatient Adolescent Program &
Adolescent Partial Hospitalization Program at
Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital.

Published in 2023, Nashville, TN.

This project is a collaboration between Southern Word and Vanderbilt Behavioral Health. Southern Word is a Tennessee non-profit that offers creative educational 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 with the support of Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts + Culture, Tennessee Arts Commission, and National Endowment for the Arts.

Compilation, editing, and forward by Taria Person, Leslie LaChance, Shawn Whitsell, Kelly Falzone, and Amber McCullough. Book artwork by Taria Person. Printing by Vanderbilt Campus Copy, Nashville, TN.



Behavioral Health



Forward

The poems and expressions included in this book were written by teens at the Inpatient Adolescent Program & Adolescent Partial Hospitalization Program at Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital. The teens in the program participate in weekly writing workshops, facilitated by a Southern Word 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 young writers the opportunity to express their creativity and explore their emotions, as well as provide them with healthy outlets for their thoughts.

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 to be published. All pieces are published under a pseudonym. The editor has left most of the writing in their original form. However, small adjustments may have been made for space, readability, and confidentiality purposes.

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 elevates 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 Behavioral Health 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. To learn more about Southern Word programs and events, or to make a tax-deductible contributions to support the work, visit www.southernword.org.

Table of Contents

- 1 "The Flower Bed" by Lexington
- 2 "Family" by Anonymous
- 3 "A City of Sleep" by Anonymous
- 4 "I Am" by Anonymous
- 5 "Unable to Breathe" by Anonymous
- 6 "Until Then" by Anonymous
- 7 "Darkness with No Light" by Anonymous
- 8 "In a Blink" by Anonymous
- 9 "Whispers" by Anonymous
- 10 "Your Love" by Anonymous
- 11 "Untitled" by Iris Rose
- 12 "Numb" by Anonymous
- 13 "Nana Bananas" by Diggs
- 14 "Language" by Anonymous
- 15 "My Best Friend" by Anonymous
- 16 "The Happiest Place on Earth" by Greenleaf
- 17 "Stained Glass" by Anonymous
- 18 "Sobriety" by Anonymous
- 19 "Where I come From" by Anonymous

- 20 "I Dream of a Life" by Greenleaf
- 21 "Fall" by Anonymous
- 22 "Puzzle" by Anonymous
- 23 "Frozen Fantasia" by Anonymous
- 24 "5 Angels Helpers" by Anonymous
- 25 "Honestly" by Anonymous
- 26 "Ships" by Anonymous
- 27 "Never Any Silence" by Anonymous
- 28 "Gloomy" by Anonymous
- 29 "Flowers for Neighbors" by Willow Day
- 30 "Decaying Fruit" by Capgras
- 31 "I Want" by Anonymous
- 32 "Me" by Anonymous
- 33 "Green" by Capgras
- 34 "Power of No One" by Li
- 35 "Moms Who Aren't Around" by Anonymous
- 36 "Psych-Ward Boy" by F.H.H
- 37 "What I Am" by Margo Black
- 38 "To the Fridge and Back, Part 2"
By Cindy Lou Who

The Flower Bed
By Lexington

Don't you dare
You shouldn't look
under the flowers
in the flowerbed.

Why? Why would you look?
You have uncovered the secrets.
These secrets are deep and scarring.

The flowers help hide the pain
as long as you look in another bed
you'll be fine.

The flowers help mask these secrets
and now you have seen them.

Now shoo shoo.
we must go inside.

Family By Anonymous

Where I'm from happiness and sadness are always present.

For the happy times, I am with my family. Without them I don't know where I'd be. I love having them around me.

As for the sad times, I am alone with my thoughts. Without them, I'd be free.

For the in-betweens, I'm just me. I often feel unsatisfied. Can this feeling leave?

My family support me. They will sit and just BE with me. They will always love me.

A City of Sleep
By Anonymous

A city of sleep,

Eyes closed to the sound,

And I feel safe.

I Am By Anonymous

The truth is, I'm a pile of regret. I hate everything about me with anger. If I could, I would let it go, but if I do that then I am a failure. Now that I think about it, falling over in sadness isn't as bad as one thinks. It's good to feel regret, anger, envy if I can be truthful. I envy others with happiness in their lives. It's unfair that I went through pain, suffering, regret, sadness, abandonment, and others didn't. But I realize that I went through that, and I now know the world in better ways than ever. If I could go back and reverse all the pain, I honestly would, but I HATE the thought of not feeling pain. I'm growing more than ever, and I've never even thought about it. I am human. I have emotions. I am me.

Unable to Breathe
By Anonymous

What's it like to have your stepmom dying
to an overdose on your 13th birthday?

For those who don't know,
it sucks losing the one person who treated
you like they were your birth mom.

It's like you don't know how to swim
and you keep drowning.

It's like you can't come back up to the ground.

You can't breathe, and it feels
like you'll never be able to breathe again...

Until Then
By Anonymous

It rained not too long ago
the smell of battered dirt lingers.
She shifts to better comfort me,
pouring out the words,
"We'll meet again."

The canoe rocks, ripples echo on the quiet lake.

With closed eyes, our foreheads meet.

She falls asleep with a soft hum
as the wind caresses her cheeks,
guiding her along her journey.
A smile interrupts my tear's path
as I whisper, "Until then, my love."

Darkness with No Light

By Anonymous

I feel like I'm always in darkness
with no light to surround me.

I want people to stay,
but they leave from beside me.

I want to be transparent,
but don't know how to be.

My body is on fire with no water to cool me off.
I want change, but everything just stays the same.

I feel so alone in this world.

I feel so uneducated.

I want to run like a cheetah on a Safari.
Every time I stand, I just fall back to my world of
darkness with no light.

In A Blink
By Anonymous

I was, what was I?

I can't recall whether I was dead, alive, or
somewhere between.

The ropes hung loosely from the ceiling,
hosting hoisting plastic and porcelain dolls.
The lights blink for not even a mere second,
and like that, I'm gone.

I am no longer here. I am here, but not
where I was. It is empty and crowded with
shadows and blinding lights.

I will be back, he knows, and he waits.
Terror painted on his face, waiting for the
day I come back. He doubted me, and I
proved him wrong.

Whispers By Anonymous

I remember seeing you clean up the lunchroom after hours.

Kids mocking your accent and saying they're calling ICE.

I remember trying to talk to you in Spanish

to see you be more comfortable.

You would tell me of the roses or your home back in Mexico.

Said, "It is as beautiful as the blue sky."

Do you ever get angry?

hearing whispers about you

from people that don't understand.

Thinking you got lucky to get a job to pay for your 5 kids.

I remember the joy in your eyes

when you first introduced yourself.

Then to see your peace go like a moth to a flame.

They don't understand your struggles

and what it took for you to get here.

I'm sorry Ms. Rosa for letting the ignorance near.

Your Love By Anonymous

I still remember what you used to say, "When you grow up, you're gonna hate me one day."

I'll love you forever ran through my heart,
but how can I love you when you only want me
as an extension of yourself?

We did it all together,
but for you it was a show.

I want to be me,
not the church girl you raised me to be.

Back and forth is how it goes.
I just want your love during the highs and lows.

I'm getting the help I need,
and every night I end on my knees,
begging you, "Please
love my sister like you never loved me."

Untitled By Iris Rose

honestly, I can't communicate with new people. I cant even communicate my feelings without shutting down. I love Dr. Pepper, like an unhealthy amount. Some say its weird. I'm 5'5 3/4". I'm NOT a people person. I often wonder what my clothes think about me. I'm afraid to lose my person. I wouldn't be here without them. I like my friends; they have dad joke humor. I like my handwriting. Most people find that weird. I sing, too. My cousin is my favorite. I love him. I get stuck to people too fast. It's almost scary. I'm a clueless teenager who doesn't know who she is. I'm scared of confrontation. I'm, also, easy to read to say the least. I'm an honest person with a messed up mind.

Numb
By Anonymous

Numbness.

Such an unsettling feeling.

It feels as if it won't go away.

There are so many temporary fixes,
but they won't last.

I have a sense of being stuck.

Everything around me is moving,
but I'm just here.

There are two sides of this
feeling of being numb.

Feeling all the emotions,
or not feeling anything at all.

Even with the use of temporary happiness,
I still feel the same.

I wish this feeling would go away.

Nana Bananas
By Diggs

Her hair, short
color...grey
time...slow

in her guest room I lay
her love has no end
nor do her stories
I could not imagine life
if she didn't adore me.

Roses are red
I don't live in Montana
the person I'm talking
about
Monkeys Eat Ba ——!

Language By Anonymous

What it's like to be from a hispanic family
and know five languages
for those who don't know
it's like having to know and understand
what my family is saying
and not talking another language
by accident all the time
and having to speak correctly
like a boat going through a river
with a rapid pull in different directions
and having to manage to go the right way

My Best Friend
By Anonymous

I remember seeing you
standing there in your
boyish clothes
when you looked unhurt
when people pointed and laughed
they knew you were born a woman
but I only saw a beautiful man
I knew from that moment on
you would hold a special place in my heart
and you would forever be there
for me no matter the cost
I love you, and I will always be there
for you my best friend

The Happiest Place on Earth By Greenleaf

She's in her happy place
The tan truck, black leather seats
The driver's seat practically in the back, broken that way
No AC, but there is no need
The warm sunny breeze brushes her face,
all windows down and open
Hands out the window, it is certainly,
the most comfortable place she knows
She looks to her left and there she is
The person she loves most, her rock, she is focused on the
long road ahead, not realizing she's being admired
It gives her warm butterflies and absolute bliss
The radio is broken sometimes, but it doesn't even matter
The grass is green, littered with white and yellow flowers
The trees are full, and so is her heart in that moment
On a drive to nowhere, it is the happiest place on Earth.

Stained Glass By Anonymous

I have been broken
but no one seemed to care.
All of my colors were everywhere
but no one seemed to care.
I could not ask for help
no one knew what to do.
I thought my pieces were beyond repair
then I found out someone actually cared.
Picked up my pieces made me new
all my broken parts
no longer apart.
They were all put back together
a lot stronger than before.
All my colors were blended together
pretty forever, back together, I am who I am
I am a stained-glass window.

Sobriety By Will J

My name is Will
I like listening to music
I am often high
honestly I do it to escape
the truth is I just want to feel normal
at the end of the long day I spark up
and smoke my problems away
to worry about the next day
Fighting my sobriety is like being stuck in a
revolving door
I wanna get out but the door keeps moving
and there's no way to stop it
I wanna be like other people and walk through
the revolving door with ease
So god please I'm down on my knees begging
please guide me and set me free from this
revolving door of sobriety

Where I Come From By Anonymous

Where I come from,
the radio plays the country music my dad loves.
Where I can smell the spicy fried chicken and the
garlic mash potatoes smothered in gravy
I can hear the sound of squeaky brakes,
the coyotes, and owls at night.

Where I'm from,
you can see an old lady chasing her cat.
Where I can read for hours in the fall days,
but it's also where I lost my happiness.
Not all, but then I drank the rest away,
but I smile when my sister plays her horrid music.

I Dream of a Life By Greenleaf

I dream of a life with no struggles.

No hunger. No poverty. No hopelessness.

I dream of warmth, comfortability.

I dream of springtime, with the buzzing of the bees that bless my ears, and the beauty of the butterflies that bless my eyes.

I dream of yellows and greens.

I dream of her, that she can love me one day as she did before.

I dream of forgiveness and growth.

I dream of the salty spiciness that zings my tongue with flavor.

I dream of her again, that there will be nothing but growth in our future.

I dream of a world where everyone is treated fairly.

I dream of a world full of peace of mind and hope.

I dream that this world, this life, is a better place.

Fall
By Anonymous

Fall,
the scent of fresh newly fallen crisp leaves
the feeling of moist fresh air on your soft
pillowy skin
the cloudy sky and rainbow colored forest

Fall,
the feeling of a Zen state of mind
the feeling of relaxation in the morning when
you make breakfast near the frosty window as
the dew drops fall from the pinesap trees
while the grass sways through the gentle
breeze

Fall,
the season of calmness
the feeling of waking up to a perfect
temperature while mother nature's creatures
soothe you to sleep with their music as the
clouds drift by and the smell of pumpkin pie,
roasted turkey, warm apple cider from the
kitchen; the expression of love, joy, and a
warm fuzzy sensation
it seems as if the world paused
as though a new beginning were arriving

Puzzle
By Anonymous

What it's like to be adopted, for those who don't know...it's like being a puzzle piece pulled from its own box and being placed into a different puzzle. It may fit well in the spot where the real piece should be, but it doesn't look or feel like it's in the right place. It's being used to fill a hole, feels like something's missing, a crucial part to finishing the end picture. I am a deep red piece, spotted with bright colors, made with sharp and complex edges, but I was placed into a blue puzzle with pretty blends of green, blue, and purple, made with soft, smooth, welcoming edges. I may be able to fit in the spot, and I can fill the missing space, but I am red and sharp, and they are blue and soft.

Frozen Fantasia
By Anonymous

Northern winds and azure eyes
A frozen world under glaring skies.

Fires burn deep within since I was very young,
to warm me from this chilling place; tasting
nature on my tongue.

Amongst the snow with my kin, so different
yet the same, I dream that someday soon
none will be binded by their shame.

Of this world were we born, the same yet so
unique; we must learn to march together, lest
our will shall die asleep.

Of this world do I dream, looking into the sky;
waiting with a baited breath, and gazing
with azure eyes.

5 Angels Helpers By Anonymous

Baby blue sweater

Jean jacket leather

very tall man who's cool as a feather

blue scarf with a green sweater

dirty blonde curls with green colored nails

they all taught me it's ok to fail

two with red glasses

two who wear green

ones who told stories of how his father was
mean

they all give love judgment or not

when I first saw that I was drifted with shock

they remind me of hippies with how they talk

the style that they have when they walk

they made me feel home

& not so alone

I hope I can act with kindness & realness

they've shown

Honestly By Anonymous

To tell you the truth,
I'm a 15 year old girl
who can't handle the idea
of a future she doesn't want.

My shoulders are heavy
with the stress I carry to be perfect,
even though nobody tells me to be.
I read the same book over and over again
because I want that one constant
in my ever changing life.

I put effort into my looks
so that people don't see
what I see when I look in the mirror.
I wear perfume to cover up the smell of my lies.
I wonder if my shower drain feels clogged
by the guilt I wash down every day.
I love clouds because they are so free
to change and float away.

I like Greek mythology because I want to blame the
world's problems on gods that live on a mountain, far
away from me and my actions.

I'm scared of my action's impacts on others.
So I don't do anything.

I'm so burdened by life that I want to do all I can to
not burden anyone else, but I fail, and that's what
scares me most.

Ships By Anonymous

His ship is a yacht.
Hers is a battleship.
Mine is a canoe
but it feels like a yacht,
it feels like a battleship
to me.
My canoe matters.
It does.
Just as much as a yacht,
as a battleship.
It matters,
And it's
sinking.

help.

Never Any Silence By Anonymous

Where I'm from,
we've got a closet full of Ramen Noodles.

Where I'm from,
we have our specific days to cook a meal.

Where I'm from,
there is never any silence.

The neighbors are loudly in their garage smoking weed and blasting a mix of church/gospel music and rap to bop your head to.

Where I'm from,
I fall asleep to the sound of all the creatures playing in the dark night, and the sound of my rusty, record player that never fails to play a Dolly Parton song as I drift into a deep sleep.

Where I'm from,
my dad takes us driving in the musty country air at night and he blares the Black Eye Peas as we all get a turn to drive.

We swerve a lot on purpose.

Where I come from,
family always comes first.

I wish I could say I was happy
about where I come from.

Gloomy
By Anonymous

I am gloomy on a sunny day.

I am here when you don't have all
the pieces to the puzzle or when you
have a hole in your straw

When you get a bad hair day and no
one tells you

When the store doesn't have your
pick me up snack

Flowers for Neighbors By Willow Day

If I were a thing of nature I would be a
single blade of grass packed in place
by dirt and my roots.

I'd be one small thing among many;
a place for creatures to walk.

To have flowers for neighbors
to talk with the tulips and the clovers
to hear what they might have to say.

While I watch from my place in the dirt.
Free to look as life passes by.

Not able to truly live myself
but not upset about it
because there's nothing expected of me
except offering a home
to the insects and the animals.

Decaying Fruit By Capgras

If I was a peach tree, I would be flowering and bountiful, reaching my branches out to the world. Rooted in one place, watch the peaches begin to fall off of my body and wither on the ground below.

Come springtime, I would be beautiful once more, renewed. Come fall, I would be a mangled mess of bark and decaying fruit. Passed by all who come by me.

How I long for springtime.

My body is rotting.

I Want By Anonymous

I want to be as elegant as the white dog that runs into the field.

I want to be more than the classic rabbit, who's always late to the party.

I want my voice to be heard as loud as the music blaring from my speakers.

I want to see the bright blue that's supposed to come after the storm, but the rowdy woman in my head says the storm will never end.

I don't want, but I CRAVE the brutality of a place with sweat, sound, and love...wanting the sensitivity that I show to those I love.

I want to be like the Grinch. Yes, I know he is hated, but I aspire to be like him because his unlovable black heart grew three sizes, while mine continues to minimize.

Me

By Anonymous

Me, m-e, that's me. But who am I? Who is "me"? I am the boy who's favorite color is purple because of its varying shades, it can be as dark as the darkest thing imaginable or as bright as the brightest, just like life.

I am the boy who's misunderstood for his inability to express himself, but people don't realize talking leaves cuts and my tongue is the knife.

I am the boy who gives good advice, because it comes from a place of experience, a place full of pain and strife.

I am the boy who looks in the mirror and sees a man looking back.

I am the boy who is seen as a stone giant but now others also see the cracks.

I am the boy who tries to tell himself that he shouldn't be so hard on himself and cut himself some slack, but I'm also the boy who has all this luggage with no boy to pack.

I am the boy who loves that couch with his parents and the memories it creates. It also is the only place I truly feel safe,

Lastly, I am the boy who needs more confidence because I'm capable and can but my mind tells me I can't.

Me, m-e, that boy is me.

Green By Capgrass

Imagine a green field of rosemary and lavender. Do what your therapist tells you. Remember all the good times just like he told you to. Remember the IDKHOW concert? That was fun but the memory seems muddled. You're neurotic. You're pounding your head against the kitchen floor instead of listening to his advice. You're trying to be a better person, but it's just not working.

Power of No One By Li

The power of no one breathing down your neck.

The feeling of a presence and no one's there.

The power of feeling no one
breathing down your neck.

The chills trickle down your spine.

The way fear causes goosebumps
all over your body.

You start to shake.

Try not to panic.

Tryna take deep breaths.

But nothing's working.

Looking everywhere
paranoid of everything

Living in fear

Thinking someone is after you.

Your mind races.

Breath picks up.

I'm Safe.

But am I?

Moms Who Aren't Around By A

When you think "mother," what is the first thing that comes to mind? You say, a woman holding a newborn singing a lullaby. You say a kid running around yelling "momma." You can picture all of these "mother" moments and you smile.

How nice.

When I think "mother" I see a grown woman
drunk

off her ass crying her eyes out. When I think
"mother" I see depression creeping up on me.
When I see my mother I don't get that warm
feeling I once did before two words.

Pain and pity.

Having a mother and having a good relationship
with your mother are two different things.
Maybe one day I'll think mother and I'll see my
own beautiful kids playing and I'll see my
reflection and say, "I'm a damn good mother."

Psych-Ward Boy By F.H.H.

Dear Psych-Ward Boy,

An isolated schedule, only some get to leave.
I am a lucky one, I found peace.
It may not be fall or coming all from me,
Yet his polite hold keeps me whole,
His tall presence is a kind relief.
But like anything nice
We only have so much time.
So I hold his hand tighter,
and he squeezes mine.
Trouble with the nurses
won't keep me from what I need.
I cry going home, after days in a world more like me.
My mom asks what's wrong as the joyless tears stream.
"I'm going home," I say, but it's a lie.
My home is the psych ward boy who occupies my mind.
My home isn't with me.
He took a piece, no, I tore it off and gave it to him.
Now he has my heart.
Now he is all I need.
I smile thinking about him before bed.
All he does is fill my head.
Then I frown, because I can't hold his hand the next day.
Then I laugh, so sadly and full of hurt,
Because he doesn't think of me this way.
He has a whole life outside of what we were.
What we could've been.

Love,
A memory I hope he never forgets.

What I Am By Margo Black

When I look in the mirror, I see a ghost, a person hiding and floating unheard and unseen.

I'm a great unlicensed therapist to my friends.

They see me as a safe person, a book to write stories and secrets in without shame of discovery.

I need more love for the ghost looking back at me in the mirror.

My favorite memory is with my mom as we walked the streets laughing and talking about every little nothing.

The best part was the yellow be spread at the hotel, a color that fills me utter hope.

I've learned over the years to live according to yourself not according to the people with hateful words and scrutinizing eyes.

To the Fridge and Back, Part 2
By Cindy Lou Who

You loved me to the fridge and back
To the fridge was the extent of your care
Not the moon like you said

I felt as if I belonged with the fridge
Among beer bottles and expired food

I was in a little box
Placed in the back of our mind

You loved me to the fridge and back
To the fridge was the extent of your care
Not the moon like you said

