

REFLECTIONS UNSEEN

A person is seen from behind, standing in shallow blue water. They are wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt and dark trousers. The person's feet are partially submerged. The background is a vibrant sunset with a bright sun low on the horizon, casting a warm orange and red glow across the sky. The water is dark blue with gentle ripples.

A COLLECTION
OF POEMS AND PROSE
PIECES WRITTEN BY
THE YOUTH IN THE
ADOLESCENT PROGRAM
AT VANDERBILT
PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

Reflections Unseen

**Poems and Prose from the Adolescents
of the Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital**

Published in 2018, Nashville, Tennessee.

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The poems and prose pieces included here were written by the young people in the Adolescent Program at Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital in Nashville, TN, between August 2016 and June 2017. While in residence, youth between the ages of 13 and 18 attended weekly writing workshops provided by Southern Word, a local non-profit organization that offers creative solutions to teach literacy and provide social and emotional support for youth to help them succeed in life.

Stays in the program are typically brief and, thus, writer mentor Lee Conell met with most of the teens only once, though some teens were able to attend two or more sessions during their stay. The ninety minute workshops included writing prompts and performance exercises, as well as sharing of new writing. Participants were offered the opportunity to submit work for this anthology, with a guardian's permission, that would be published under a pseudonym. Editing for space, readability, confidentiality, and illegible handwriting was sometimes necessary for inclusion.

Southern Word believes that through words all youth can claim the power to determine their future. We are absolutely committed to providing young people, especially from underserved (and under-heard) communities, with the chance to develop and publicly present their voices. We ask you to join us in celebrating the brave and often misunderstood youth of this anthology who share their stories, struggles, hopes and healing, all of them breaking the silence that often surrounds mental health diagnosis and the stigma associated with seeking services and support.

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 or events, or to make a tax-deductible contribution to support the work, please contact us at info@southernword.org or visit www.southernword.org.

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Celadon

Jonathan Grenway

Being around her made him think of celadon,
of a translucent glass eggshell in palest green.

The way she spoke was the chalky crackle of crushed shells;
the scent she brought with her was herbaceous and springtime.

She and her sisters inspired him like the Muses,
and he often found himself captivated by their faces as he sat in front
of the ivory keys of his piano.

The chords he pulled lovingly from the rheumatoid spindly hulk of his
aging upright tasted of coriander and cucumber
and the notes sprung up about him like the gentle curls of ferns.

The Girl On Fire

(a feminist poem)

Eden Jo

The girl on fire is unsteady.
She wants to work hard but plays harder.
The girl on fire is desperate to say goodbye
because her beauty is only skin deep.
It only goes so far until you go past the clouds
that are her personality and reach
the center of her heart,
which takes comfort in the thrillers of the night.
She is truly lonesome, the girl on fire,
she grasps the adrenaline of fright.
So they say her beauty has worn away,
completely out of sight.

Emotions

S.M.F.

Emotions overflowing my brain. All wrapped up, all the same. Never changing, always staying, like an ocean wave crashing over the shore that I feel a little more. Words can't describe one by one how I feel like sand storms rising but slowly dying. Hurricanes spinning me angry in a rage. Dying down storms, slowly hitting the ground, trees blowing, sun shining, tight squeeze down my chest, cold breeze across my neck and hands, warming up in the sun. Then the weather dies down. I feel safe once again back in my hometown.

Dear Bloody Mary

LMM

dear bloody mary,
how does it feel to be you?
how does it feel
to be summoned by fightless teens,
to be poured in a glass for him,
to forget?
dear bloody mary,
I know how it feels to be you.
I know how it feels to be the freak in the bathroom.
turn the lights out so you can't be seen.
you're his last option.
you're her final drink.
I know how it feels
for the bartender to pour you out,
claim you as his own.
dear bloody mary, I know
what it's like for the people to cry
at the mention
of your name.
Mother and Father tell you yes,
but your own reflection screams,
no, no, no, no, no.
dear bloody mary,
some days I pray that you'll stop
mimicking my every move.
come out of my reflection
in that same dark bathroom.
lights on, lights off, lights on, lights off, lights on,
lights off.

Only Me

JB

I am not a Chucky doll that's in love and depressed because of Tiffany.

I'm not the gold unicorn,

I'm not the black tooth fairy.

I'm not the gold Pegasus in Swallow Falls, Hawaii, Manhattan.

I can't be Bob the Builder or Eeyore staring at the sun.

I can only be me.

Peaches in Particular

Alan

peaches in particular are almost perfect to my preference
I want to eat them with you, just us in your room
listening to you play bass guitar, to physically feel your presence
I want to see for myself your Pink Floyd posters
take your hand in mine & bring you closer
cause this screen is frustrating
you can see but can't touch, it's stupid
what were you thinking, cupid?
putting us both so far away, just cause you like to play

your lovely lilac eyes lull my lonely heart to sleep
until the clock strikes ten and it's time for me to leave
I wish I could meet your eyes for real
go for a lovely meal, cringe at the pineapple pizza
when they serve it on our plate, oh what a lovely day

romance was once repulsive, I resisted unrepented
until I met you and the sound of your voice, god
I was in heaven
I used to hate the thought of hugs & kisses
now I crave them from you, I'm desperate
maybe one day, one day, I can take your hand in mine
until then, oh, until then, I'll make sure to countdown the time

My Intention

Dr. Space

I have a mental illness.

No, it does not mean I'm violent.

It means that I like to stay silent.

I'm paranoid about saying things.

It makes me want to go out without a bang.

It doesn't mean you should spoil me.

It just means you should pay more attention.

Though this is also my intention.

My Mind Races

Bonah

My mind races faster than I can run

I feel like crap because life isn't fun

Looking for love in all the wrong places

I hate to see these passing faces

You broke my heart while tearing me apart

But I'm in a new place, getting a new start

Road Map

CSL

There are those who do not possess their beauty carved into their skin, as a road map. Those individuals stand alone, left to define their own beauty: Their sorrow taking the reins, insecurity carving its own story. Forming scars, gasping for air in the sea of solitude. Each wave crashing, the gritty sand digging into the flesh, coating their skin. The wounds filling with brackish water, ruining the “beauty” that society wants for them. The salty air pushing through their noses, each gasp marred with drops of water.

The Resident Nurse

H. Brooks

The resident nurse
was plumbing
the children’s ears
with clouds.

A Self-Operating Eternity

CM

That split second before the clock hits zero has been said to contain in itself an entire eternity. A self-operating eternity that holds a light bulb ticking ticking ticking away as the seconds and the minutes grow longer than the lies you were told as a child until—

If I Could

Tobi

If I had a soul, it would be black or dark red.

If I could, I would go to the Brentwood Stone Arena or Ascend Amphitheater.

I am like a siren & unicorn with Gameboys & Nintendo
wishing I had money
to buy Respect & Equality.

The Wait

Wonderland

Throughout the day, he sat and waited.

Watching, waiting for the moment

when time stopped, locking into those sea green eyes, he smiled.

His heart stopped, everything stopped. In that moment, nothing seemed to matter

other than that beautiful porcelain skin, her short brown hair, those freckles on her nose. The way her lips were shaped. When she smiled in that moment, he knew.

He was in love. The way the Atlantic water hit her face or how her lovely Nutter Butter smell filled his senses.

He longed so much to touch her once more.

He reached out, waiting, watching as his hand got closer.

Right as he was getting to that moment, he opened his eyes, sitting up in bed, looking around the dark room, panting.

Life Is Not A Shiny Penny

Lilyann16

My life is not like that of a
shiny copper penny
My life is filled with
chrome but blue is the
warmest color
I'm mounting a silent hill
overlooking the Dead Sea
it's not as threatening as
the Amazon or Bermuda Triangle
I have lost all love and happiness
I just want to float
but instead I sink
All I see is black
I see images of teddy bears,
Barbie dolls, and pop-ups
float away
It is a childhood lost

Throw Me to the Stars

Child of the Cosmos

My body is a solar system

A head in the clouds

A brain full of cosmos

A heart as big as Jupiter

Split me in two

throw me to the stars

into the sun

like they did with Joan

or else I'll set fire to my head

So throw me to the stars

Vacation

Hale

Playing with my army men in Hot Wheels cars, I reenacted the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Suddenly, there was an oddly stereotypical blonde girl's head in front of my face. It was my sister, with her fuchsia colored hair and black complexion. She said, "Boo!" She was pretending to be Casper the Ghost, loving in the heart but scary on the outside. I fell back, hitting my head on my custom burgundy door. No, not maroon. Burgundy. I screamed and stomped outside to complain to my mom, a refugee from Haiti who served in Japan. She was coming back from the mental hospital where my dad was slowly regaining his sanity after his breakdown while we were on vacation in Hawaii. He claimed that he was a vampire and Zeus had ordered his servants to hunt him down. My mom was never the same after my dad lost it.

Scars

Bailey Stone

Haunted by the darkness
because I can't fall asleep alone tonight
I'm so tired of being here
all alone sitting in silence and with nothing to do
contemplating what's next.
Who will be the next victim?
Who will be seduced by the mystery
you perceive yourself?
Broken, shattered, unwanted,
the scars are the only things that are left.
It's time to say goodbye, my dear.
Rest in peace.

Observed By Clouds

Kai

I don't want to say goodbye but
it's like the girl is on fire.
It's like I worked hard and now
everything's unsteady and now I
feel observed by clouds like a thriller
in the night. It's like we play too
hard and now we're born lonesome
but it makes sense because beauty
is only skin deep when it comes to
you. I used to take comfort as
I was with you, but now it feels
different than when we were in youth.
I must say it again, I feel so unsteady
as I'm just the way that you left
me. I used to work hard on what
I now know were just games and play.

When I Look In The Mirror

MAC

I am not who I say I am. When I look in the mirror I see the silver spots of a cheetah from Japan looking for love from Phoenix. I've seen the brown stripes on the tiger from Ireland looking for trust and happiness from Nike. I am not who I say I am when I say I am the black elephant.

I'm Like A Test

Phoebus

I'm like a test. I'm never failing.

I gotta do like a Disney cruise, smooth sailing

I gotta be Hermes and run from the cops

Stand on your feet and run like you're never gonna stop

Girl can't catch me, I'm too neat

too hot, girls, you can't take the heat

Other guys they wanna brag and wanna boast

but, girl, I'm too infectious, I'm the virus, you're the host

you might not be on the hall of fame

I may have moves but you got the same

and just when I'm running from the police

I take a quick view at you and say who's she

You

Trace

The roaches marched along the wall like little soldiers headed to battle over who got the leftovers that'd been on the table for a good while now. I sighed and sat my bottle to the side so I could just close my eyes.

Sleep overtook me quickly and I found myself reliving the nightmare of losing you. I awoke with a start and felt sweat pooling around me. I groped for my bottle and quickly sucked down what was left in it. I watched as the cockroaches marched on to my bed and I realized I'd never forget you.

Twisted Honey

LMM

all I can remember
is your voice.
scientifically, that *should*
be the first thing I forget,
but as I lie down at night
and fall asleep, your sweet
honey voice narrates my dreams.
you tell me stories and sing me
lullabies as if I am a child
who cannot rest without your tone.
it's perfect but I know that
when I wake, that same voice
will hit me with her dominance.
you come to my hospital bed
every night to scream at me.
praying that I'll wake from
this paralysis, but I can still hear
you through my coma.
don't forget, dear mother, what
it's like to not have me
here.

Make It Out

JB

see we spitting fire trying to get out of here
the bars coming off the dome, watch it shed a tear
most of my fam been dying for about a year
granddad died so it made me a lil queer
he called me young buck so I guess I was his deer
never got to say goodbye, so it's kinda weird

A Unicorn Caged in Dollywood

Soph

I am the black Loch Ness Monster in a stuffed bunny shell. I want love like pink but get it like turquoise. I get about as much respect as a unicorn caged in Dollywood would get. I'll scare you away with the level of friendship I have like a jack-in-the-box or Rumpelstiltskin. You keep turning me like a barn clock but no one can hear me in this empty football stadium called life.

I'll Leave A Window Open

Infant

I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you
though I'm afraid there's not enough air for two.

I could make this disease pass
easily between infected skin against skin.

This affliction is effective.

Your fever, it radiates like a stove
left on at night.

My hand won't be cool enough to
help you through this fight.

I'll leave a window open in hopes of your return.
Cold air against your flesh will sizzle like a burn.

Bliss

CM

bliss—the snowflake falls ever so gently to the frozen earth and piles on his brothers. They join hands and here comes good ol' Uncle Randy. Pit pat. Whoosh whoosh. The wind screwed Uncle Randy up and now he's gone gone gone gone. And excruciatingly he is pulled to the earth by the unstoppable forces that destroy us all—

a moment no more.

In the sky?

In the ground?

Blackbird Singing

Jinx

Blackbird singing in the dead of night. Hearts will sacrifice your taste for it. I thought I reached the bottom of a love that is as shallow as my breath as I am holding it. A soft speak with a mean streak makes the water warm as it's going under. Now that I've nearly been brought to my knees, it's do or die. I am just wondering why you had to go. With all the begging and praying, why won't you answer me? Your kids are begging for you, but should I tell them the truth? I need you to let me know, but I know you can't.

My Other Dreams

MeowCat18

I want to get through my life like a cheetah and just be done.

I try to buy all my love and all it leaves is a black heart

left lonely outside my British flat.

I want to disappear like a phoenix and smother in my own flames.

My hope is then gone, smashed by Bigfoot

like in all of my other dreams as a child.

I want to trust that Ireland will change my mind and make me whole...

Make me slow down.

Make me believe.

The Lonely Tree

Dr. Space

There was once a tree. This tree dreamed of being with all the others in what they called the forest. Its family was over there and so were many other trees. It liked how there you'd see creatures that weren't only attached to the ground and could move! It wished it could just rip its roots out of the ground and plant itself into the forest. It wished on the stars every single night that one day its dream would come true. One day it smelled something it had never smelled before. It looked around to see a smoke raging towards the forest it dreamed of living in. It couldn't do anything. All its hopes and dreams in flames. Then it realized something it never had before. Its life wouldn't have changed. Even if the fire never spread and it lived in the forest, its life would have been the same. Trees couldn't talk, so they wouldn't even socialize. All that would change was being surrounded by a bunch of the same creatures bound to one day burn itself up... It might have been even better to be alone.

Conversations with Eeyore

Wonderland

I'm a black Pegasus swimming in Swallow Falls with Bob the Builder on my back. I like to play with gold Chucky dolls and talk with mint-green Eeyore. We have very interesting conversations about smoking on the sun, looking at Hawaii and Manhattan. His depression sometimes covers up his love for this unicorn I know.

But the tooth fairy and me, we plan to fix that.

I'm Just Human

S.M.F.

I am just human. I look like I want to laugh when I'm about to cry. I'm most times happy though I feel a different emotion inside that I'm hiding. I like it when people call me beautiful though I never believe it. I love it when people say I'm a great person but inside I feel hatred. I have fallen before but I learn from my mistakes. I may have fear but I've now got a little more. We all have feelings and emotions. Maybe some of us don't know how to deal with them but that's okay. It's because we are just humans.

The Chemicals

Soph

Running my face across the floor until I feel warmth. The chemicals aren't working anymore. My car radio's gone so I sit here in silence thinking about the syrup that should be filling my sippy cup. I lost her. I couldn't talk to her and I lost it all before I could think about it. I'm ready to run through the heat of the sun because sometimes to stay alive you've gotta kill your mind. My life is a mystical myth leaving cockroaches in my bed.

Out Of Control

James

The night sky of Japan turned maroon as Goliath sent the wrath of Satan's dead Beatles for the country's lack of wokeness.

Mermaids control Hawaii with love of the Lochness Monster's Barbie jeeps.

Unicorns control the Philippines through the grey PlayStation they created in Manhattan.

Depression

H. Brooks

It was my birthday. There was no joy. The cream-flavored cake was being cried on by the mint-green candles. No one was there. It was just me surrounded by the empty seats as the smooth espresso taste filled with sadness. This is all a lie, I told myself inside my head. On the outside I'm as joyful, as good as Saint Nick. April Fools to you: My insides are falling out. The happy me is slipping into the cosmos. The joy is like Groundhog Day. It peeps out one moment and hides the next. The next six weeks will be great despair. I spend my time filling my lungs with hydrogen but what I really need is oxygen. I go to the plumber to get rid of wrong. But he just fills me with empty waste.

No Matter What

Rainy Storm

I won't give up
no matter what they say
no matter what they do
no matter how hard it gets
I won't give up for you

Static Mind

Reagan

I see black and white

I hear only static

My mind is as faded as the paint on dolls
in an old antique attic.

I sit like a statue, so still and quiet.

I'm the last pack of cigarettes,
and no one will buy it.

My mind is a full yet white blank page.

So many thoughts, I watch, still sitting
as they race.

Never Ending Love

HLH

I did declare that this love would be the death of me. When I am without you, I'm unsteady. Yet when I'm with you everything is surreal and at this point living doesn't seem as satisfying if you aren't by my side. For us to have our fairytale, we have been to war and are wounded. I fell in love with you as fast as I found my purpose, my person. You are my person with everything taken. It was given back. Sadly, I believed it was taken again. Then? The end.

Only Today

T.20.M

I'm not a cheetah or a tiger.

I'm not as beautiful as a phoenix.

I'm not as free as Nike.

None of this matters today.

I know one day I'll be just as beautiful or
more beautiful than a phoenix.

I'll fly higher than Nike ever thought.

I'll learn to trust.

I'll learn to have hope.

I'll learn to love.

None of this matters today.

There's always tomorrow, people say.

But there's never tomorrow for me.

Only today.

For me, all of this matters today & only today.

I'll work as hard as I can.

To the best of my ability.

For me there is no tomorrow, only today.

The True Problem

Ricky

I've always thought anxiety and depression define who you are but they don't. What defines a person is whether or not they want help to fix it. You have to try before you fail. It doesn't matter what others think. It's what you think! You may not feel strong but in reality you are the strongest person you know. You may crash and break into a billion pieces but you pick up every single piece to create a beautiful puzzle. You are a beautiful person inside and out, so don't let anyone tell you different because you are worth it!

The Silver Cheetah

Levi Hate

I'm not who I say I am; I'm not a brown elephant jumping from mice. I'm not even a phoenix from Ireland flying to Great Britain. I'm definitely not black Nike dougieing in Japan nor am I Big Foot hopelessly in love and looking for trust. I'm just a beautiful strong silver cheetah experiencing the whole big world.

Reflections Unseen

Joseph Ansak

I have so much pain that I've forced inside
It lies unseen by everyone besides me
The rage I suppress which froths at the rim
and the numbness within which saps my will to live
So the next time you see me, just keep this in mind
The reflection you see in the mirror can only show outside
for a reflection in a mirror cannot reveal what truly lies inside

Born to a Skin

CM

Born to a skin that tears and rips
at the boundaries
I found myself in the brink of tomorrow
yearning for a time that will never
come
looking down at a self that isn't
really there?

The Rapper (at Pandemic)

Lilyann16

Under the maroon sky
a pandemic occurs
a rapper cat became
a forensic scientist
When his tunes kill
he searched high and low
left and right
He realizes his mistakes
I wasn't fake
He retreated in his cave
like Puff the Magic Dragon

The Perfect Wrong

Bonah

You were always there but never there
You work so hard but it feels like you didn't care
Home alone caught in your snare
I almost thought it was too much to bear
You sent me here, full of fear
but now my eyes see crystal clear
You were near but never close

Against the Law

Tobi

It's against the law. They crawl in like cockroaches leaving babies in my bed. The chemicals that make her laugh don't seem to be working anymore. Somebody stole my car radio & now I just sit in silence. Sometimes to stay alone, you've got to kill your mind.

It's against the law, running my face across the cold tile floor until I feel warmth. My life is a mystical creation myth but I'm ready to run through the heat of the sun.

The perfect wrong.

Wise Men Say

CSL

Wise men say only fools fall in love
but I can't help falling in love with you

my funny valentine, sweet comic valentine

you make me smile with my heart

i ghost through

Alan

i ghost through this home, this home i once owned
i died in this home, i died here alone
and these rose bush gardens, i seep through their leaves
vanish into the cracks, like a warm summer breeze
and because i'm a ghost, with no form to be, the rose bush thorns do
not bother me
and as i move through my home, filled with people unknown
i scream, i scream, i move through the house to and fro
get out! get out! get out of my home!
in this bed that was once mine, a girl does now lie
but that girl is not me, not me
i pull on her hair and listen to her scream
serves her right, on my bed she shan't be
and this family i see, in my home to be
why won't they pay attention to me?
oh! i know! i'll scream, i'll scream as loud as I can!
throw things around with these hands i don't have
and the family leaves, oh yes, they leave
i'm finally alone in my home to be

Ode To My Random Lover

LMM

dear random lover,

I'm sorry that everything I've done has set off an endless ocean of rising and sinking tides that no one can predict, but in my greatest moments I still looked into your aqua eyes and saw myself drowning in the ocean, gasping for air while you held me under the water.

I'm sorry that our love was cynical to you. I'm sorry that I dug myself deeper and deeper into a trench full of your love decorated with hearts and ribbons and anything you could ever ask for.

I'm sorry that I gave you anything you could ever ask for.

I am sorry for staying up with you until two a.m. making sure you were okay because god knows if I ever lost you, I wouldn't have anything left.

I'm sorry that my shaking hands can't hold yours anymore because they have clenched 45-46 times now.

I'm sorry for "it's not you, it's me." Those words on replay again and again and again. Haunting me every time. Well, I'm sorry.

It's not you. It's me.

This May Seem Deep

JB

roses are red, my heart is black
an old man dies from a heart attack
the devil is walking, I'm a child of
god, I'm trapped in my bubble a tripod
this may seem deep this may seem dark but
this poem comes from the bottom of my heart
the clouds are grey, the sky is blue
these are my words from me to you

When the Sun Comes Up

Bonah

When the sun comes up I feel it on my skin
The light shines into my eyes but I'm dark within
I try to get help by talking to others
but the more my mind races the more the depression smothers
My anger builds like bricks on a wall
Trying to knock it down without hope to fall

Star Boy

Dr. Space

There was once a boy. He traveled the stars and galaxies and occasionally he visited planets. He was very lonely, especially since he'd never seen another living creature. Because of this he didn't have a name. He lived off star clusters that occasionally came out of dying stars. They were made of most of the things the star burned as it was alive. There was one cluster made of nutrition and food. He wanted to find the things the star collected from. He thought this might also help him find out where he came from.

One day he found a place called Earth. It had a lot more green stuff to it and when he went down to check it out the green stuff he originally saw was on the ground and was very moist. He called it "grass" because he thought it was a funny word and sounded weird if he said it a lot. He also named the new color he saw "green" because it had the same sound at the beginning and saying "green grass" was hard but fun, especially since he didn't talk much unless he wanted to remind himself of something.

Then he saw something like nothing else on any planet, star, or whole galaxy. It was green like grass and he thought he saw it move. Had he gone insane? No, in fact it moved again in the same direction. He called it a grasshopper since he was tired of naming things creatively.

He decided where he'd sleep and then what time he'd sleep. He wanted to wait until the sun went down to fall asleep so he could see the stars again. He usually had planned his sleep schedule in this way on other planets, unless the planet was too slow or fast, and if it was then he'd wait twice or find a way to cover his face from huge close stars. This time it was the perfect amount of time to wait. The stars came out and he was tired. He finally went to sleep but before he did, he thought, "What an odd planet."

The World

S.M.F.

The color burgundy on my pants as I reach down and feel the fabric. Me, crying a river of tears. Me, depressed as always. I jump and skip rocks as I look up into the cloudy sky. In fact it looks like it is about to rain, trees blowing. As I jump down from my rope swing, I land roughly on the ground. Ouch, I say. As I look at what I landed on, I see I landed on a note. I open the note and it says... *I know you're depressed but there's no reason. Your love is so unusual though you have a wonderful heart, soul, and mind. Rest. I say rest in peace. Meditate your mind. Slowly. Now come back to reality.*

