A collection of works by Calhoun Community College students, faculty, staff and alumni.
muse: def.

**muse** v. 1. To ponder or meditate; to consider or deliberate at length. 2. To wonder. 3. (Greek Mythology) Any of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, each of whom presided over a different act of science. 3. In general, the spirit, or power inspiring and watching over poets, musicians, and all artists; a source of inspiration. 4. (Archaic) a poet.

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**Foreword:**

We’re very proud of this year’s MUSE, partly because of the quality of the submissions and partly because so many hands joined in its creation. Again, we’ve included SKD (Sigma Kappa Delta) Honors students as editors, Kris Reisz and Shannon Banks, whose insights and hard work helped shape this year’s journal. Our Art/Photography faculty supported us by encouraging their students to submit entries. We received submissions from our current students at the Huntsville and Decatur campuses, and some of our entries came from our alumni, staff, and faculty who take time to remember us with their contributions. Our Public Relations Department shared their considerable talents with us through their lay-out and proofreading skills — especially Beth Butler, Lanita Parker, and Janet Kincherlow-Martin. Thanks to all of you, and please remember that students, faculty, and staff past and present are encouraged to send us poems, essays, short stories, artwork, and photography. This journal is, quite literally, nothing without you.

Enjoy!

Jill Chadwick, Editor
They were gone again! Hank stomped and stamped around the living room. The dogs jumped at his heels and the cat hid under the chair. His forehead wrinkled up and his lower lip stuck out. As he watched the doors of the yellow school bus close behind Jake and Helen, he thought about the “big windies” and “eye-poppers” they would be able to tell at suppertime. Hank just knew that he had to grow up... and fast! He was getting tired of having to make up his suppertime stories. He wanted to tell school bus stories. But his mom always said “First you have to grow up,” and Hank always said, “Then, I’ll grow up today.” Unfortunately, hard as he tried, the business of “growing up” seemed to drag on and on.

However, this Monday morning was going to be different! Hank marveled at his “plan.” His mother’s button-tin was the answer! The buttons in that tin had always been an endless source of fascination for Hank. He couldn’t keep his fingers out of them when his mother was sewing or mending. He sifted, sorted, and sized them and wondered what kind of person might wear these ones or those ones or that one. Now, he had found the perfect use for them.

On that historic day, that Monday when Hank planned to grow up, he picked out big shiny golden buttons and had his mother sew them on his overalls. He had decided to be a King.

So.......
Hank set his crown up on his head and draped his robe upon his shoulders. His carriage was haughty! He felt wiser and older. He instructed his mother on the fine art of bowing and her friends on marching, scraping and cowing. He roared quite loudly at all who would listen, and pointed his scepter at the dogs and the kitten. He sat on his throne and directed the action of all his friends, with great satisfaction. But, his face was quite stern, his form quite stiff.

So, Hank didn’t like “Kinging” the least little bit. “I’ll be a Pirate instead,” he shouted out loud. “Kings are too bossy, too serious, too proud.”

That night at supper, Hank announced to everyone’s great relief that the “Kingly” buttons would have to go.

“Being a king is just too much work,” he said. “I’ve decided to be a Pirate instead.” Tuesday morning he found square, hard, very, very shiny black buttons for his overalls. Mom sewed them on.

So.......
Hank strapped on his cutlass, put a patch on his eye, and leaped up on the table with a warlike cry.
He climbed up the riggin’ and slashed at the ropes, sparred with the family, dashed all the prisoners’ hopes.
Jake was forced into walking the plank.
Helen barely escaped a mean prank.
He jabbed and he parried.
He growled like a thug, ’Till finally he wearied and fell limp on the rug.

He thought, “Pirates are crabby, too loud and too mean. Clowns are much nicer, that’s plain to be seen.” That night at supper, Hank announced to everyone’s great relief that he was giving up Pirating. They said “Oh, no!” when he told them about the Clown idea.

Wednesday morning he dug through the buttons ’till he found the perfect Clown buttons... red stars with yellow polka dots. Mom sewed them on his overalls.

So.......
Hank started Clownin’. What a day for them all! He stood on his head and balanced his ball. He laughed the whole time, unless he was talkin’, entertained with bright scarves and balance beam walkin’. He blew on his whistles, played hide and seek. He joked and he tumbled until he was weak. Then, he sat on the floor and thought for a while. His face went from grins to a sad little smile. Clowns just aren’t real... The laughin’s too hard. I’ll just be a Pony and play in my yard.
That night Hank announced at supper that he had decided not to grow up to be a Clown after all... “I just don’t feel silly all the time,” he said. Everyone gave a sigh of relief until he mentioned the Pony.

It was a tough job coming up with Pony buttons on Thursday morning. Finally, Hank settled on brown leather buttons with silver trim. Mom sewed them on. Hank left the house.

So.......
Hank became a Pony boy prancing in his yard. He pulled his wagon through the grass in happy disregard. He pawed the ground and stamped his feet. He whinnied high and snorted deep. All day his friends could hear him squealing. He reared with pride and feeling. He jumped a fence and tossed his head, but wished he was a boy instead. “I need my friends,” he thought at last. “I’ll just be a Baby and go back to my past.”

Hank announced at suppertime that he no longer wished to grow up to be a Pony. “After all, Ponies spend most of their time in the pasture alone, and besides, they can’t ride on the school bus.” Everyone gave a sigh of relief until Hank mentioned the Baby business and not growing up at all.

Round pink baby buttons were easy to find in the button tin on Friday morning. Hank’s patient mother sewed them on his overalls and Hank gave up on that dark day.

So.......
Hank stuck his thumb in his mouth and kept his blanket quite handy. He demanded a breakfast of pudding and candy. He curled up with his pillow, took off his shoes, and spoke not a word, just “dadas and goo-goos.” He napped in the morning. He napped after lunch. His thumb got all prunie, wrinkled, and scrunched. That day he was clucked at and patted by all. He thought, “Babies are helpless, too quiet and small. This isn’t as easy as I thought it would be.

So.......
Tomorrow....... I’ll just wait and see.”

No one was the least bit surprised that night at supper when Hank said he couldn’t go back to the Baby business. They were all very relieved until he told them that he had definitely decided to become a Bum, and that way he could just sit around and think about growing up instead of doing anything about it.

Saturday morning Hank’s mom cut off the Baby buttons. He said that he didn’t want any buttons at all “because Bums don’t need buttons.”

So.......
Hank took to Bummin’ He thunk and he thought. He worried and he wondered. He sat still a lot. Jake hoed in the garden. Helen pulled weeds. Hank sat on the swing or rolled mud into beads. He sauntered past the tool shed and strolled beside the beans. He watched his mom bake bread and his dad repair some screens. Hank felt quite comfy in a slouch or a slump, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and leaned back on a stump. The family didn’t bother him. There were no rules to go by. He could stare at lady bugs or watch the clear blue sky. He didn’t tie his shoes that day. He didn’t comb his hair. He didn’t brush his teeth, and he didn’t even care. No one called for breakfast. No one called for lunch. His dogs went unattended and the kitten played alone. He didn’t watch the TV or use the telephone. As time got heavy and the sky grew gray, Hank said to himself, “This is a very dreary day. I can do what I want, but there’s no one to care. I can go where I please, but there’s no one to share.”

That night at supper as everyone chatted about their day, Hank didn’t have much to say. Actually, the family was waiting to see how he liked Bummin’. To their great and everlasting relief, Hank said that Bummin’ was boring and that he would just wait until his birthday to grow up and ride the school bus. That night at bedtime, his mother sewed his old buttons back on his overalls.

So.......
Sunday was a lovely day.
A rather large vessel pulled into the harbor one day, a cargo ship. But this ship was carrying something other than its shipment to be dropped off. There was a large number of mice—stowaways, in fact—in one of the ship’s lower compartments. Mice don’t like this term “stowaway”; we prefer to be called emigrants; besides, it sounds too similar to “throw away” and we hate the idea of being disposed of, although our main diet is junk that humans dispose of—what a paradox—humans, in general, want to be rid of us, and mice, for the most part, want to eat most things that humans want to be rid of. Such are the issues of our cute and furry existence. But our strength, wit, and resilience was to be tested on this particular day, on this particular ship.

The mice had boarded the ship a couple of days before this fateful day in search of—you guessed it—food, and then the ship decides it wants to leave the dock. It happens all the time. History calls it mass deportation, which is a fancy way of saying the mice were forced to relocate—but in their defense it was night time; those ships usually don’t pull out till morning. Since there was little food for the taking, in the minds of these mice the ship was as good as sunk. They wanted nothing more than to feel land under their scampering paws once again. So they planned to exit the ship as soon as it docked.

The day had come. The ship had stopped progressing and was simply rocking side to side. It was time to put their plan into action but... What was that strange noise?... A loud, constant, and somewhat annoying, buzzing. There seemed to be panic on the decks above, evidenced by the distinct sounds of scurrying feet and raised voices. Perhaps a minute or two later, water began seeping into the compartment where the mice were situated, serving as their epiphany: the ship must be sinking.

Luckily, the ship was sinking quite slowly. No doubt the men above were taking only what was necessary and aborting the ship, claiming safety by lifeboats. We had no such procedures in place; this situation was unprecedented—and if not, no mouse had ever lived to tell the tale.

The elders met quietly to decide who should lead the mice to safety and announced their decision to the trepid mass. As was expected, there was some dissent. “He’s too old and out of shape,” one mouse strongly protested. “We will surely drown.” So the elders proposed their second selection before another mouse vehemently opined, “Although he is strong and healthy, he is far too young to have the sufficient knowledge of this sort of ship, or the experience needed to lead us out. We will surely drown.”

Adverse statements continued to flow, as did the water, and chaos seemed to be the order of the day. Then a group of female mice raised their voices above the din—which was both an incredible feat and an incredible waste of time—saying, “What we don’t understand is why there was no female mouse considered for the task!”

The ship had begun sinking more rapidly now, and confusion permeated the compartment as the mice began scurrying and jostling for position on a complicated, obstacle-laden path to safety.

Meanwhile, two mice (who were decidedly smarter than the others), perceiving the ever increasing threat of the intruding waters, commenced on a much plainer and, needless to say, less congested venture to safety. Before long they had accessed the higher decks and, to their relief, were able to hitchhike—by means of a man—onto a lifeboat. The man showed little, if any, concern towards their presence realizing that they were just another species stuck in the same boat as he was.

Safety was in no way guaranteed to these two mice. They knew that if enough time was spent at sea, the young man was likely to eat them. But by some stroke of good fortune, they reached land before he became hungry.

Your grandmother and I (sort of contra-Noah’s Ark since we left the ship to attain safety) survived the ordeal because of two reasons: we realized that being the leader or the follower was not nearly as important as taking the right path, and we realized that in order to reach a goal you should follow its course and not, necessarily, the leader.

“Wow, Grandpa! I had no idea you and Granny were such heroes. What a story!”

“What a reality. Now it’s off to bed for you.”

“Dream big!”

“Live big!”

“Aim high!”

“Fly high!”

“That’s a good boy.”

“Hug Granny for me.”

“I will. Goodnight son.”

“Goodnight Grandpa.”
Temporary Haunting

by Shannon Banks

Hearing that song
Brings you running
Through my heart.
A smile creeps across my face
As memories of you
Crash over me.

On the verge of falling apart
The song ends.
Life returns to normal.
You’re gone.
Your memory sleeps
As life goes on.

Keeper of Illusion

by Asa Baugher

Sitting in the mirror
examining the state of my reflection.
Viewing this broken man
in the corner of the room.
Did he hold on too long,
or let go too soon.

Dissection.

Staring down confusion,
challenged to defend my position...
“Master of My universe.”
Or Keeper of Illusion?

Dissolution.
Disillusion.
Decimation.

Destruction of My world
in the midst of its creation.
Wasted...
In the midst of Creation.

Drank up the milk.
Ate the honey.
A promised land wasted
can’t be built back with money.
A puzzle with no picture
paints me clearly.
Me looking back at me—
right before my eyes.

Go ahead, shut your lids—
but don’t turn away.
I still want more than any thing,
to rule this Illusion again someday.
Picking Blackberries in the Rain

by Daniel Byford

During a sudden June storm that breaks, I creep through the blackberry patches avoiding the canes and watching for snakes and pausing at nasty bug hatches.

It is all elemental and makes me think of primitive peoples gathering dessert. And I think of kids and how they’d shrink at a chore that pricks my thoughts alert.

For it is something of childhood and a thing of time, a generational echo that fades like so many others. Now life comes in a jar without any thorns or slime without surprise, juice or jolt, joy of find, or furry brothers.

Disconnected as we are among our landscaped lawns with boxwoods, rose gardens, lilies, Japanese cherry, we bear a debate of worries canned in bored yawns. Forgotten are seed, root, branch, thorn, flower and berry.

Why go to the trouble? That’s the burr. It’s not worth the effort to rob the rife world in person. Not when web host, the salesman’s woof, the ad’s warble lays it at our feet without a care but the money. But what’s the real cost?

I see lost chances when I pick wrong and a fat berry fleets into bramble. Missed opportunities. Wrong choices. Defeats.

And yet the bucket fills and each year’s picking compares and contrasts to voice nature’s concerns and whisper on the wind that nothing ever lasts.

We have gone out of ourselves and into the world and each day carries us one step farther from home. It takes something simple or wild, like this snake curled before me in the rain. Or the gleeful thorn holding me fast. Or a poem.
My Friend’s Honest Eyes

by Pedro Monzon Echeverria

He was sit’n thar look’n, look’n at me.
I looked straight into his eyes and they said,
“I’m hungry friend, how ‘bout some meat?”
I gave him his share,
Half of a skinny hare,
He didn’t care.
“I’ll save the bones fur later,” I got from his stare.

“Back to work!” I said.
His satisfied look gave me a perk.
Walking out to the barn,
Not a long walk, ‘twas a small farm,
Laid out on the dirt
Wuz Satan hisself. Sweat started wet’n my shirt.
I stood dead still, did not want him alert,
But it was too late, he’d done sensed me and Bert.

Bert smelt my chicken smell and began to growl.
His mouth turned into a quivering snarl.
Hair up on their very ends and wide warning eyes as big
as an owl’s.

The devil started rattling his rattle and it made the dead-
liest sound a living creature could make.

O’l Bert wasn’t daunted,
But I think he should’a thunk it
Before he started trying to hunt it.

Mad he got for the creature was but five inches from my
foot.
Mad at me for being stupid, I got from his look.

Nonetheless he barked furiously at the forked tongued
fiend.
Its tongue was sticking out beckoning him closer for a
quick sting.
Bert dove forward and missed the snap.
Purposely, just to distract,
While I ran a few yards
And managed to hold on to my cards.

Bert managed to dodge the return assault.
He trotted towards me look’n and shaking his head at me
and I knew that one was my fault.
I gave him a good pat on the back and thanked him.
I could tell by the way he looked at me that I’m almost
kin.

That night I thanked him with a small surprise.
After supper I gave him a slice from one of Mama’s
famous blueberry pies.
One day Bert will meet his unwelcome demise.
When he goes I hope he knows he has left me wise.
But if I ever forget I know his ghost will rise
‘cause he will never let me forget the day that I looked
stupid in my dawg’s honest eyes.

WOW, LOOK AT THAT TONGUE

by Shannon Banks
Times Were Slow

by Christopher Glock

Times were slow when you came,
With nothing to lose and none to blame.
You opened up doors that long have been sealed,
Using sharp tools, you slashed and you peeled.

Giving myself, my heart I did serve,
Investing my faith, trusting your words.
The fault is my own, through heart did I look,
Seeing your truth, the pawn takes the rook.

All this I gave, sometimes more than I should,
You took what was given and stole what you could.
Knowing what is, I see my true worth,
If you define love, then death defines birth.

Where there ain’t no clouds

by Antwan Habersham

Many say they will arrive where there ain’t no clouds,
Speaking loud, unknowingly, as if in blasphemy,
And they keep asking me if I know my own arrival
As is a tribal king asked questions by his followers,
And my face falls because of the utter annoyance of it,
And as I interrupt quick with a clearing of the throat
They stop in a waiting stroke thinking something good is to come,
But the words that hum from my mouth are these:

Ask, and ye shall be answered. Seek, and ye shall find.
Stop running me over with these Godforsaken questions,
Your guess is as good as mine.
The Continuous Cycle

by Johnny Johnson

Reminiscing of all the other times
Of the “tat-tat tatted” soothing chimes
Better than quiet when not even a peep
The rhythmic noise makes for a good sleep
No matter day or night
No matter how hard or how light
Although in movies it’s portrayed as creepy
All it does for me is make me sleepy
It has been on evil people and good alike
It has also been on Jesus Christ
Nature recycles and uses it again
Just like it does earth and also wind
A symphony has been written yet has changed
Here or there the places have ranged
Thank God for this lovely thing
"Tat-tat tat" the sound of rain

*inspired by an interchange with acclaimed poet Linda Pastan during her November 2005 visit

*Socks Don’t Taste So Bad

by Marty Kellum

My mouth – so much faster than my brain -
Often says the most interesting things.
Old Sam once said
"Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool..."
But I don’t know.
Can I learn when I don’t even know I need to?

My mouth – so much faster than my brain –
Often surprises everyone in the room.
How did Sam finish it?
"...than to open it and remove all doubt."
But I don’t fret.
Everything is an opportunity to learn something new.

My mouth – so much faster than my brain –
Often plays host to my foot.
The wise often say,
"Think before you speak."
But I don’t listen.
If I insult myself, my boss, or even a famous poet, that’s OK –

Socks don’t taste that bad.

*Winner of the National SKD Poetry Prize

Watercolor by Sallie Estes
I never was a fan of flowers.
Such vivid colors and fragrant perfumes
Rather make me sick.

A rose by any other name is still a weed.
To dub one an "American Beauty"
Is patronizing and a lie.

The lily is too white.
An albino blotch on an otherwise
Bleak landscape.

Marigolds are the color of fire.
And I agree that is the very place
They should be put.

And, concerning Violets...
No gentleman would allow
Himself to say.

No, I never was a fan of flowers.
But in my opinion, I often
Think to myself:

I would rather have picked tulips then,
Than push up daisies now.

I go in my mind to the sweet breath of honeysuckle sighs,
and sometimes I hear the talk among the trees –
rustling through leaves –
whispers of wisdom.

I turn my face to the sun
and feel the warm hand of God upon my skin.

I stand in the rain to cleanse myself of the pain
of bloodshed in the battle between Divine Will and Mortal Gain.

Close my eyes as a Mother cries
tears of Joy and Sorrow
for children born and children died.

I fall to my knees, and the gentle embrace of the Earth
tells me that Love is the path to Freedom.

This is the strange experience of life,
from the beauty of creation
to the wonder of acceptance and faith in a world full of adversity and suffering.
The Snow Ballet

by Daniel Martin

A snowflake delights
In a winter’s night,
When the frosty zephyrs blow.
And begins its dance
Of white romance,
As it floats to the Earth below.

Each ice crystal’s unique,
Never copied or meek,
For a snowflake loves a show.
And enjoys being hung
On a lamppost or tongue,
As the wind guides it to and fro

Yet, some eyes are cold,
And the dances seem old.
Where a snowflake’s a drop in a sea.
But the attention is won
To a dance in the sun,
For that snowflake will soon cease to be.
The Quilt

by Sue Pumphrey

When I snuggle up beside you
With our days in dimming time,
Let us wrap the tattered quilt around us.
Let us linger beneath the bits of scraps
Which, with tangled knots of threads,
Make up our life together.

The Visit

by Nicholas L. Rives

“Let’s evaporate.” She said to me.
Hospital smell and clean linens
fill the atmosphere while I leave.
Should I go or stay and kiss death,
miss her heart when it stops?
Take another step then turn around,
“She’ll be there.” I cried,
still am, up the elevator there.
Empty room with bodily impression,
nurses working, preparing for another.
“Did she evaporate?” I asked.
“Yes, sir.” I looked out the window
at the birds flying, ascending
to the clouds made of vapor.
She whispers in the wind outside
while I’m in here evaporating.
With moth on hands behind cellardoor,
and book of ghosts to hold.
An orchid moans to share some voice,
and kiss the lips of emptiness.
Too frail to follow in a flower’s wanton steps,
so I killed the lights to let the vapors settle.

War Dream and You

by Sara Scronce

A frail room emerges into a faint light
becoming visible to sleeping eyes.
Standing in what appears
an abandoned storage barn with stacks of bailed hay.

People start scrambling about.
Look around to acknowledge whom each is.
What reason and why they are here in the poorly lit room.
Only notice that they are civilians, soldiers, and reporters.
One cameraman holds a camera shaking with fear
as the reporter screams into the microphone.
But reporting what?

Jumping onto the pile of hay only being hit with shock.
Seeing a bloody devastating war being struggled
Foreign men battling left and right.
To an unforgiving death for peace, for power,
or for pure hatred of another.

Earsplitting gunshots fly through the suffocating air.
Pounding into living souls.
Dropping each victim helplessly onto the ground.
Horror echoes through the space.
Ears open but not willingly
to the war cries of innocent victims.

Pleas in different languages for mercy
To their gods and to their enemies
To see once more
mothers, lovers, children, and life
just once more.

No mercy, not even one.
The draining sound of blood
spilling from the bodies onto the land.
More powerful than the sounds of weapons
being fired for this war.
I was in my car on my way to work, listening to a Sarah MacLachlan CD. Aside from the fact that every song I have ever heard this woman sing moves me to the core of my being, I realized that most of her songs remind me of different people in my life and of different times. For instance, the song “Good Enough” has the line... “it’s not the wind that cracked your shoulder.” Every time I hear that song and especially that line, I am reminded of Nikki.

She lived behind me on the third floor of our apartment building. Nikki was attractive in the same way that a scruffy looking drug addict seems attractive to clothing designers. She had huge puppy dog eyes and round cheeks. Her nose looked swollen, but that was just her nose. She had a boxy figure, like a female athlete. She smoked a lot of pot.

That is how we knew each other. Other female neighbors across the country get together for an afternoon of tea or coffee and complain about their husbands and boyfriends, gossip about their neighbors, and cry over heartbreaks and headaches. Nikki and I smoked pot. More often than not, she would cry to me about her abusive boyfriend, T-Bone, giving me a detailed tour of each and every bruise and cut she had acquired since our last afternoon together. We would usually visit two or three times a week. Twice our visits were less frequent.

The first time she disappeared for a week and a half. I had not seen her boyfriend, either. I was beginning to think that he had finally gone too far and killed her. I convinced the manager, Patty, to let me in her apartment momentarily to check for any bodies or damages. As Patty was also a pot-smoking buddy of mine, she was happy to oblige. Of course, now Nikki was going to be in the gossip circuit of Carriage Corners, because in order for Patty to let me in, she had to know the scoop.

There was no body and no sign of foul play. I felt rather silly, but equally concerned. She had not mentioned going away. A few days later, Nikki showed up at my doorstep grinning from ear to ear. Relieved to see her alive and seemingly healthy, I embraced her and pulled her into the living room. She reached in her purse and pulled out a cigar. “We’re going to smoke a blunt in honor of my wonderful husband, Terrence!” I was speechless. Did she just say husband? Who was Terrence? What happened to T-Bone? In honor of? Was he dead? She went on to explain that Terrence was T-Bone’s real name and they had run off to get married a week ago. They had gone to the beach for a week to celebrate a honeymoon.

After that, not much changed. She would come over; we would get high; she would show me her new bruises; I would tell her she deserved better; I would try to convince her to leave; she would go home and I would see her in a few days.

After a few months she disappeared again, this time for five days. I didn't go snooping in her apartment this time, because I had seen Terrence come and go several times. When she finally showed up, she had her arm in a sling and a crazy looking brace around her shoulder and neck. Come to find out, he had really gone too far and had broken her shoulder. She had been in the hospital. Again, nothing changed. Our routine remained the same.

Eventually, he got tired of my attempts to get her away from him. He moved her across the bridge to another city. We didn't keep in touch after that; I'm sure he wouldn't allow her to call. I think about her whenever I hear that song and I pray that she is still alive. Hopefully, she has recognized her self-worth and moved on to better things.
When He Played

by Juan Bedolla

Like every afternoon, he was there. His usual bench in the middle of “La Plaza” lay hidden under the ragged remains of a red and yellow Spanish reboso whose once vibrant colors had been drained by the bright sun of the park. He wore his usual attire: an ancient denim jacket that told as many tales as he, a jade-green bow tie adorning a red striped shirt with more holes than stripes, and a pair of old blue jeans thrown over a pair of old rubber boots. He was ready. His craft was story, and his instrument was music.

Every day he played his life’s joys and sorrows to a crowd of children with their mothers, lovers with their love, and businessmen on their break for lunch. He changed when he played. The tired strings of his old violin enveloped him in song, and he left his human form behind to be transformed into something grander. With every note he took a step further from reality and closer to his true self. He became a violin when he played. Inside him lay a melody so powerful and so majestic that it could not be expressed by words alone. His facial gestures and the pain of his cries and moans blended together with his voice to depict life in its truest form. He was more than human when he played. He became music when he played.

But as the afternoon wore off and the park’s sky bled red before night, his song died too. His imagination ceased, and he stopped dreaming. The truth of his music faded out, and he was left only with reality. He was no longer a violin, and his stories no longer spoke in song. He suffered when he played. His human form grabbed hold of him and kept him captive for the whole of the night until the next morning when he could once again escape to the freedom of his stories and the peace of his song. He changed when he played. He was music when he played.
My 73-year-old mother is a George Jones fan and has been one for as long as I can remember. Her love for George Jones’ music began with the first song she ever heard by him called “The Love Bug.”

A considerable part of my childhood consisted of my mother driving us to any place where Jones was performing within 3 hours of our house, which was located outside of Huntsville, Alabama, deep in the country. I remember seeing him with Tammy Wynette at the Madison County Coliseum and later at Huntsville’s Civic Center, where my mother stood for more than an hour beside his bus to get to see him even though she didn’t get to talk to him.

One night, we drove about 2 hours to Florence, Alabama, to see him. Mamma had borrowed money, and she had taken off early from work to go in time to see him, but George was nowhere to be found. My Mother did not budge one inch from being his fan; she simply said, “We’ll see him next time.” Sure enough, a year or so later, George was appearing about 3 hours from our house in Rainsville, Alabama. We left early that day, drove some horrible back roads, over a mountain, and through a terrible storm, but George showed up, and my mother loved it. She bought us both t-shirts that read, “I saw No-Show Jones.” I still have mine tucked away in a closet.

One interesting facet to my mother’s personality is that despite her Christian faith, she loves Jones’ hard-drinking songs. She explains that it is his voice and style more than his subject matter that makes him great. During Jones’ bad times, my mother would always say, “I know he will come through; he is too talented to fail.”

As she has gotten older, she still goes to where George is going to be. We saw him a few years ago at the Ryman in Nashville, and when she found out where he lived, she started making an annual pilgrimage to see his Christmas lights. She expectantly reminds me each year, “I’ve heard that he and his wife come out and speak to people some times.” Additionally, she has been to several stores where he is appearing and has stood in line to have him autograph her CD’s.

Her record/tape/CD collection of George Jones’ music is museum quality. She has old, new, duet, repeats, and albums where George simply appears on someone else’s song. Her idea of quality time, whether alone or with family and friends, always includes George Jones’ music on the stereo. Sometimes, with Jones’ music in the background, she will interrupt conversation and say, “Listen to this; he knows what he is doing.”

I grew up singing in a family band, which has continued to grow and change over the years, and recently, while we were preparing for a country music show, we had arranged our songs and practiced them with Mamma sitting there listening.

After the practice session, she said with that “I-thought-I-taught-you-better-than-that” tone which only a mother possesses, “Well, you don’t have any George Jones songs on your program.” So we dutifully added two Jones standards.

My mother, on the one hand, is a devout Christian and a hard-working, kind woman, yet on the other hand, she is a life-long fan whose pleasure money has always gone for one item: George Jones music. She thinks no better talent exists in the world, and her conviction has never faltered.
Life placed a shovel in my hands on many occasions. It seems I shoveled through the most trying times I lived through. I both physically and mentally shoveled through the problems I faced and found pleasure in the sweat that ran down my face in the glowing sun that gives such hope. Seamus Heaney addresses the similarity between mental and physical digging in his poem entitled “Digging” and expresses admiration for those whom he has known who work hard.

“Once I carried him milk in a bottle / Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up / To drink it, then fell to right away” (19-21.813). The description of the milk in a bottle transports me immediately to my grandmother’s house. She lived in a one bedroom shanty on a dirt road in west Texas. When she wasn’t cooking or hanging clothes on the line (she never owned a dryer), she was pulling weeds in her garden. As my two sisters, three to five cousins, and I piled on cots on the screen porch or in sleeping bags in the back of my uncle’s pick-up, I never thought of the house being small. There is no small house when one is allowed to sleep under the Texas sky. There is nothing small about it. We’d sit on the porch most of the day or catch horned toads. We might get to ride my uncle’s horses or a neighbor’s motor bike. Swimming in the neighbor’s stock tank was preferred to the green water in the city pool; but however we passed the day, the evening always ended in the kitchen. The kitchen had the peach cobbler and a peach pit forever drying on the window sill. I never saw the tree my grandmother insisted would grow from that pit, but it remained drying there until the day she died. I think she never really meant to plant that tree. I think she just wanted to hope she would.

“Under my window, a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground” (3-4.812). I see myself, in a different time when my boys were small. I see my “divorce recovery job” as was my coined answer to the always asked question, “Girl, what are you doing out here?” Here I remember the roughest crew imaginable and two highways I helped build as a bobtail, dump-truck driver. Trying to keep a roof over my children’s head taught me the real meaning of hard work. I’d wake up at five a.m. and tie on my steel-toed boots. I’d move two sleeping, preschool boys to the van and guzzle coffee the 40 minutes to daycare. I habitually made the 7:00 a.m. show-up time three minutes late, but I showed up every day. I think my foreman thought I’d cuss him out the first time he handed me a shovel, but I didn’t. I picked it up and dug in and from that point on that “clean, rasping sound” became part of my everyday life. That sound kept my family alive and fed which was better. I shoveled base dirt and asphalt, but mainly I shoveled out the sheer rage I felt right over my own shoulder. I shoveled with tears running down my face mixed with sweat; and by the time the calluses on my hands bled, I noticed I had earned the respect of the hardest working men I had ever known. That respect remains this wonderful badge of honor written in my heart that strengthens me and reminds me not to forfeit on my own life.

“Through living roots awaken in my head. / But I’ve no spade to follow men like them” (27-28.813). Except to turn my compost pile, I’ve put down my shovel. Like Heaney, I now dig in a figurative manner. I could not remain with that rough crew that became like brothers and follow them from city to city as is the nature of road work. I have children to raise, the same now as then, only one more to count and kiss goodnight. Also like Heaney, I have fond memories and overflowing admiration for the people I knew who labored so intensely, and labor still, last I checked. My mind, however, was not content with physical labor alone. It yearned to grow and learn and discover what it was to become. So now, I dig into texts, lectures, notes, lab manuals, and even good conversation.

Conclusively, there exists a proper way to run a shovel. On a construction site, a shovel is considered a piece of equipment the same as a truck, front-loader, Gradall, sweeper, anything. It’s the basics. All operators eventually have to pick one up, and there is so much to learn from doing so. No matter what someone wants, dig. To find answers, dig. To find truth, dig. To find knowledge, dig. To find character, self-respect and inner strength, dig! If for nothing else, pick up a shovel and work until the realization of the lack of appeal of that occupation presents itself. One may not desire to shovel for a living or even for long, but a person will be altered by the experience of digging.
It has been said, “You are what you eat.” If so, I’m Mom’s cooking, so I must be pretty good. Eventually, I’ll be my own cooking, then someone else’s after that. Someone whom I’ll have to trust a whole lot.

It has been said, “You are what you read.” If so, I’m fantasy, I’m doctrine, I’m science, and I’m history; I’m mostly English, I’m a little Italian, and I’m all American; I’m many opinions, a few truths, and I’m not always easy to understand. I’m mostly someone else’s writing, but I’m steadily writing some more of myself right now. Perhaps some more of you, as well.

It has been said, “You are what you see.” If so, I’m a busy hospital room, with tired but wonderfully happy occupants. I’m a swimming pool in Pasadena, filled with the sun’s rays and the joy of a new-found freedom. I’m the crowded streets of L.A., filled with cars and trucks whose occupants do not truly occupy, but do try. Oh, they try. I’m the valley of death, driven through carefully, with the cooling glance of a loving parent descending reassuringly on my face. I’m several homes, each entered and exited with care, few remembered, but all appreciated. I’m a host of good friends, each with a unique spirit, and a bright life about them that fills the supposed dark void with a love not soon forgotten. I’m the caves of Carlsbad, dark and cool, and filled with the beauty of treasures innumerable, standing as immovable monuments to the powers that created them. I’m a special place in the Heart of Dixie, a place where good memories and loyal friends abound. I’m a difficult period of time, a struggle between the forces of good and evil, where good did, and always will, emerge victorious. I’m two loving parents, I’m five younger friends, I’m a family of truth and righteousness. I’m a type and a shadow, a number with meaning, a burnt cookie, a broken connection, a bottle of window cleaner, a sweet spirit, a friend eternal, and one. I’m a future, a past, and a present. I’m the stars above, the earth beneath, the waters all around. I am not the whole, but I will be before I’m the end. Until then, I’m colorless and blurry, but only until then. Until then.

It has been said, “You are what you hear.” If so, I’m the sweet song of a new mother to her child, each sweet note dancing on the clean earth of a freshly-formed lyric, falling like dew on freshly-formed ears. I’m the council of a wise father, opening doors heretofore unknown in a world that is strange but wonderful. I’m a million weird questions, and a number of weird answers. I’m the silly song of a four-year old. I’m a joke with hidden meaning and an unintentional wake-up phone call. I’m the heavenly music of a choir. I’m sharp reprimands and kind words, bitter chastisements and enlightening encouragements, harsh shouts and soft whispers, lawn mowers and bird songs, conglomerate, but complete. I’m my own words as well, but I am even more when I’m someone else’s.

It has been said, “You are what you feel,” (or something like that, anyway.) If so, I’m the warm embrace of family, the sadness of loss, the thrill of a coaster ride, and the spirit of Christmas. I am many strange and wonderful things. I’m weird.

It has been said, “You are what you think.” If so, I’m too much, as you can probably tell.
War claims more than a soldier’s death. It is a gruesome parasite — a cancerous tumor feeding from society’s simplest. Its insatiable maw sucks the spirit from the bone leaving a distorted and hollow shell, and no one wants to take responsibility. The chivalrous idea of war is false, and security is only guaranteed by terror and interrupted by absolute anarchism. My friend Patrick, after returning from the war in Iraq, taught me the raging country across the world was not so far away.

The familiar highway between Alabama and Georgia is dotted with mile markers and simple signs, but a weekend road trip across I-20 with my friend changed my direction on war. Patrick had spent just over a year on foreign soil before returning to the states. But the person buckled in the passenger seat was different — changed somehow. Before he left, a silly smirk and a quick joke kept me slightly off balance, but his lightheartedness was replaced with astute awareness and an occasionally twitched cheek muscle. His brown eyes had become fierce, and a scar above his left eye traced a two-inch seam perpendicular to his eyebrow. The first joint of his right thumb twisted at an odd angle upward while the entire hand trembled slightly.

We left Birmingham and headed east. The early morning sunshine slanted into the car casting our long shadows into the back seat. Setting the cruise control, I relaxed and started the conversation. “Tell me about those camel spiders.”

Patrick spoke with a directness I didn’t recognize. “That was the worst part of being there,” he said. “The damn things were attracted to our lights. They’d get into your boots and your bunk. Nasty things — and fast as hell.”

“Ugh,” I fidgeted as Patrick told me how he tried to smash one in his quarters one night with the operations manual for a Bradley tank.

“The book is this thick,” he emphasized, holding his bent thumb and forefinger about three inches apart. “When I picked up the manual, the damn thing ran under my bunk, and I tore that whole room apart chasing it. Finally, it turned and lunged at me. I dodged and I stomped it with my boot. Bastard thing.” He paused and said slowly, “It sounded and felt like crushing one pecan against another in your hand.” Patrick saw the disturbed look in my face and shrugged. “Yeah, that was the worst part of being there, but ya get used to it — sleeping with spiders.”

We rode in silence, and I became conscious of the polar personality that now dominated Patrick. In my peripheral vision I noticed he sat so cat-like and focused on some unseen target. I was uncomfortable when he spoke, but I felt almost fear when he was quiet. Trying to stir some small talk, I asked, “How’s your momma?” “Fine,” he said.

I tried again. “Does your brother need help building his deck next weekend?” “Nope,” he replied flatly. His answers were terse with no feeling and no emphasis. These things seemed trivial to him now, and I wondered what else was lost in my friend and at what cost. I remembered two years ago the passion and excitement he had in God and being saved through Jesus. On the church pew, I watched Patrick clap his hands at Sunday singings; and he would smile and poke me with his elbow to encourage me to sing as the choir went through another chorus of “I’ll Fly Away.” I asked, “Did you pray much while you were there?”

“Pray?” he turned toward me, repulsed and said, “Pray? There is no God there and no Allah, either. The temples and hospitals are empty or blown up.” The muscle twitched hard in his cheek, and I uncomfortably averted my eyes. Nausea crept in my gut with the realization that my friend had lost his faith. This pressed on me like no earthly weight could. As we passed a church on the right, I noticed a large, hill-top cross standing defiantly to the oblivious traffic. Patrick gave it as much palpable interest as one would a coat tree in the corner of a room. I sighed to myself, retreated back to silence, and was mindful of the diminishing cross in my mirror.

I glanced at the state trooper in the median and verified my speedometer. Patrick nodded toward the patrol car and said, “That’s how the Iraqis ambushed our convoys. They’d bury a football-field length of C-4 in a daisy chain series next to the guardrail on the right shoulder.” He stated a decoy vehicle was placed in the median and set on fire; and when the American troops merged to the...
right lane away from the burning car, someone detonated the chain of explosives with a garage door opener from a nearby ditch. “I learned the sound of a bullet passing beside my ear that day, but my gunner—he heard the crack of a closer round.” I comprehended this scene with bizarre intensity as I envisioned the man; he flinched suddenly, as if struck by a bludgeon. He faltered, and then became motionless, save for his quivering knees.

We stopped for gas at a Chevron in Atlanta, and while the tank filled, I sat sideways in my seat with the door open. With my elbows on my knees and my hands loosely folded together, thoughts of this war connected and kaleidoscoped together in slanting patterns. Frustrated and angered about the malicious crime and shame of 9/11, I struggled with my Christian ideas of right and wrong and knowing both sides believed it a war for liberty and humanity, if ever there was one, I became bereft of focus.

Out of an adjacent garbage can, a red wasp flew into my car and startled me. I froze and watched it pop angrily against the windshield attempting to escape. It faltered, fell, and righted itself near the defrost vent. With its purple-black wings high in agitation, it walked across the dash, antennae twitching. Suddenly with lightning speed and accuracy, Patrick smashed the wasp with his open right palm. My mouth dropped as I gawked at him over my shoulder. Without looking at me and holding pressure with his hand, he twisted his wrist a quarter turn and said, “It’s that easy to take a life.” He then turned toward the window, brushed the crumpled insect from his palm, and said without a change of tone in his voice, “Tank’s full. How ’bout some lunch?”

After the Burger King drive-thru, we headed toward home, but the salty French-fries tasted like dried leather as Patrick talked about two teenage boys who somehow gotten into their compound on a motorcycle. “I popped the driver right off his wheels with the 50 Cal,” he stated. “But his buddy almost got back over the barbed wire before I took him out.” He told me they let the bodies lay for two days before they threw them over the ten-foot south wall. He asked, “Do you know what 145 degree heat does to a body in two days?” We passed a bloated deer carcass on the shoulder, and I wanted to put my hand to my mouth; but I gripped the steering wheel and glanced at his cold eyes. Disturbed deeper, I forced my concentration again on the highway. Patrick must have read my thoughts; he chuckled and said, “The signal light on that damn motorcycle blinked for two weeks before the battery finally died.” I tried to smile, but the bile in my throat threatened to betray me.

At the rest area, a rusted green truck backfired behind us. Patrick jumped hard against his seatbelt. He shouted at me to take cover and get into my Kevlar before the next mortar hit. Confused, I asked if he was okay. His brown eyes were distant but searching frantically. Patrick looked at his watch and told me not to stop at the checkpoint near Fallujah. “They’ll be all over us, and we’ve got to get to Baghdad. If they’re in the road, just run ’em down.” After a moment, his posture relaxed, and his shoulders slumped. Embarrassed, Patrick turned his head toward the window and mumbled apologies. Unnerved and astounded by his mental displacement, I asked again if he was all right. Shaking his head slowly, he said, “I have these dreams—these nightmares.” At that instant I recognized an old friend, but then he opened the car door and disappeared into the men’s room. In a moment, Patrick returned to the car in broad and even strides. Ever alert again, he sized up each person passed at a glance. “While we’re parked,” he said firmly, “let me show you something.” He muttered an okay, and he retrieved a silver and blue laptop computer from his duffle bag in the backseat. As the computer hummed its startup, I curiously watched Patrick pick through several DVDs in the bag. “Watch carefully,” he said as he loaded a disc. “This is a nighttime reconnaissance video of enemy weapons exchange recorded from the belly-cam of an Apache helicopter flying under stealth mode.” His emo-
tionless words were measured off like a rhythmic report, “Our men have orders to destroy all identified enemies, weapons, and transport vehicles.”  Although in night-vision green, the images on the screen were impeccably detailed.  On a road in the desert, a three-axle transport truck stopped near a man on a tractor. The door opened, and the man in the truck jumped to the ground and walked to the rear of the truck. He pulled two rifles from under a tarp, handed the rifles to the man on the tractor, and started back to the tarp. I jumped slightly as the computer squawked, “Delta-base, Delta-base. Weapons identified and enemy targeted.”  A small pause followed, and the computer answered itself in a different tone: “Roger that Alpha-three. Fire on target. Over?”

“Roger that. Firing.”  From an unseen origin, a series of twenty or more small yellow-green lights, curving slightly to the left, dotted the trail of rapid-firing grenades to the chest of the first man and exploded on contact. The man on the tractor jumped off and dove under the truck.

“Watching for movement,” the computer squelched. The man’s hand moved slightly from behind the tire, and the computer said, “Enemy identified. Firing.”  Six or seven RPG’s struck the man’s hand and exploded the tire. In obvious agony, the man rolled unknowingly from under the truck and writhed on the ground in blinded pain clutching the mangled stump below the elbow. He twisted himself up to his knees just before a final dozen of deadly fireflies detonated him from abdomen to chest. The truck and tractor were similarly destroyed before the computer squelched affirmative and the screen went blank. The ejected rainbow-silver disc had no label on it, but its images from the screen burned in my mind. I didn’t know what to say, so I started the car and asked, “You ready?”

The afternoon sun glared as I fumbled for my sun-glasses on the dash. Patrick asked, “Did I show you my night vision scope?  It’s for a German-made rifle.”  He reached over to the back seat and pulled out a ten-inch metal cylinder from his bag.  It tapered slightly in the middle with dials on either side; the convex lens at the slightly larger end was sea-grass green.

“German made?” I asked, “Is that blood on it?”  He absentely scratched at the crimson spot on the army green scope with his fingernail.  I gritted my teeth at the sound and forced my attention to the traffic around me. Patrick claimed the scope was a sort of “victory scalp” that he took from the sniper surprised near his base close to Najaf. With stone-set eyes, Patrick said he struggled and wrestled with the man before he ultimately killed him with his sharpened shovel. “I was out of ammo,” he said as he deliberately turned his head, looked at me, and replied with uncomfortable candor, “I had to use something.”  He explained Iraq as a place of three intensities: sun, blood, and sand. I wondered what other wretched things came back with Patrick in that bag.  Deep inside, I shuddered and understood the source of Patrick’s demons.  My friend was lost – half buried in a bunker of rubble — pulled down and drowned in the sand dunes of bullet and bone. I didn’t know this man, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to.

Soldiers learn three things in battle: complete selflessness, undiscerning obedience, and soldiers die. But death (not just physical death) is more than the purloined release of a man’s soul. And the soldiers that do return are not the soldiers that left; they are twisted, scarred, or destroyed with a sharpened shovel.
In the remote, warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean, a storm is brewing. As the ocean starts to churn, meteorologists begin monitoring the eleventh tropical storm of 2005: Katrina. Katrina gains speed and roams across the Atlantic; her target is southern Florida. Civilians in Miami and other surrounding areas are only expecting a minor tropical storm; however, Katrina throws her first surprise. Just before Tropical Storm Katrina makes her first landfall, she transforms into a category one hurricane. The citizens in Katrina’s path are ready for a tropical storm, but not a hurricane. These Floridians can only watch as Katrina unexpectedly shreds her way through Florida, killing eleven people before plunging into the safety of the steamy Gulf of Mexico. The atmosphere and waters in the Gulf are calm and unusually warm—perfect for Katrina, who is quickly rejuvenated. Katrina nearly triples her strength as she barrels toward New Orleans. Meteorologists fear the worst and hurriedly issue all possible warnings available in the event of a devastating hurricane: storm surge predictions, wind advisories, and immediate evacuation. However, there is a problem—many of the people in New Orleans and the surrounding areas live below the nation’s poverty level. Nearly eighty percent of the people living in the evacuation area are unable to simply pick up and leave their homes and other belongings behind. Just before Katrina achieves her second landfall, she fulfills her ultimate goal—a category five hurricane. Meteorologists can now do little more than stress the importance of all available warnings and wait. Despite extensive hurricane preparation, Hurricane Katrina demolishes nearly one third of the Gulf Coast area and kills hundreds of Gulf Coast residents making her one of the most dangerous storms on record in the United States.

On August 28, 2005, officials confirm their plan of evacuation; it is the largest evacuation plan since the 1930s. As the mandatory evacuation begins, 400,000 citizens prepare for the long journeys ahead of them. The evacuation area stretches from Louisiana to Mississippi and even to parts of coastal Alabama. However, as most are desperately fleeing from the infamous Katrina, many cannot afford to evacuate. It is believed that nearly 150,000 citizens living within the evacuation area are unable to leave; many of these citizens are simply too poor to leave and do not possess any means of transportation. The survival of those who are left depends on the shelter of their choice; for many, this haven is the New Orleans Superdome. Thousands of residents cram into the massive structure more tightly than packaged sardines. The Superdome, once viewed as a haven, quickly becomes an uninhabitable pit of hell; nonetheless, it is nothing compared to the raging Katrina, who is racing toward the Louisiana coast.

On August 29, 2005, Katrina throws another surprise; she unexpectedly veers east, her eye just missing New Orleans. As she shifts her track, she also drops from a category five hurricane to a strong category four. Nevertheless, Katrina slams into Louisiana’s coast at precisely 6:10 A.M. The city of Buras-Triumph is the first to feel the full brunt of her fury. Buras-Triumph and the other areas, including southern Mississippi and coastal Alabama, are swallowed by Katrina’s swirling winds and colossal storm surge. The winds reach sustained speeds of one hundred forty miles per hour, shredding buildings and tossing objects as if they were merely toys. Nevertheless, the winds are not the worst of Katrina’s wrath; along with her arrival, Katrina brings a thirty-foot storm surge. The angry sea spills onto the shore flooding cities and neighborhoods many miles inland. Her ravenous waves eat away the coastline and everything else in their path. As Katrina continues her assault further inland, survivors can hardly fathom the wreckage left behind.

With Katrina gone, her victims begin to fully perceive the magnitude of her destruction. Buildings are demolished. Cities are flooded. People are dead. The relief effort takes days to arrive. Katrina’s victims are completely stranded without even the most basic necessities—food and water. Where are the disaster relief crews? Why is it taking so long to receive help? What has happened to all of the careful preparation and planning? More and more citizens die each day; shelters are disease-harboring deathtraps, and many of Katrina’s survivors are dying of thirst. Nearly a week later, disaster relief organizations begin arriving. Pandemonium is ubiquitous as distressed victims demand answers and supplies. Katrina has left billions of dollars worth in damages in her wake and has taken at least 660 lives; she now moves further inland and begins to dissipate.
As Katrina reaches the Great Lakes region, she finally relinquishes her deadly grip on the United States. The ocean returns to its hypnotically rhythmic state, gently lapping at the scarred Gulf Coast like an animal cleaning its wounds. The sky is the clearest blue, and the cotton-like, cheerful cumulus clouds reclaim their sapphire thrones.

Such peace seems surreal when compared to Katrina’s devastating aftermath. Katrina has proven that disaster relief programs need to be revised and reformed. As a result, each state needs to develop more advanced evacuation plans and natural disaster relief programs to prevent dangerous storms, such as Katrina, from causing extensive deaths and suffering in our country’s population. Citizens and officials alike now realize the dangers of taking such storms lightly and the importance of enforcing proper natural disaster preparation in the future.
The guests slowly gathered as what seemed to be a celebration for my beloved grandmother began. The room began to fill with so many people that a certain uncomfortable feeling raced through our uneasy bodies. These people had gathered to wish this precious, old lady a new life, which would hopefully bring newfound happiness and joy. As I searched the crowded house, I saw no happy faces; sullen looks and frowns swept over everyone. My grandmother had no expression. She seemed as though maybe she were searching inside herself. As I sat on the hard couch, voices echoed at low levels, so as not to disturb anyone. I would soon find out what had brought me to this aged house on this particular autumn day.

Throughout my grandmother’s difficult life she had strived to be her best. She never showed any weaknesses in her emotional or physical being. As with many elderly people, change was not welcomed. I could tell that something was changing in her life. I could not figure out what was wrong with my grandmother. She did not speak at all. Maybe something had happened and broken her fragile heart. She had worked thirty-seven long years at the local run-down hospital taking care of sick children each day. I knew it would take something overwhelming to subdue her spirit, after such a life as she had lived.

As the time quickly began to fade away, more and more people began to fill the room. Then, silence fell. I noticed an old man get up. He crept to the front of the open room to be beside my adored grandmother. As I watched in awe, he belted out a heartfelt song. This was puzzling to me. I could not seem to grasp why a man, whom I did not know, was singing at my grandmother’s house. I did not speak at all. Maybe something had happened and broken her fragile heart. She had worked thirty-seven long years at the local run-down hospital taking care of sick children each day. I knew it would take something overwhelming to subdue her spirit, after such a life as she had lived.

As the haunting day continued to grow darker, the grim crowd began to diminish. One by one elegantly dressed friends and family members crept to my despondent grandmother. The door opened and closed quietly as they left allowing the calming air to begin to flow. I received numerous seemingly loving hugs and well wishes from the visitors. The hugs seemed bitter; I knew something had to be wrong.

Finally, everyone was gone, except the closest members of our family. We were now making our way outside. The day was beautiful. The cool air blew through our hair, and the rustling leaves fell beside our feet. The birds chirped as if something joyful were occurring. The curving streams nearby continued to flow, and the frogs were splashing in and out of the neighboring brook. I stood beside my still mother. Tears fell from her round hazel eyes. I took one final glance at my emotionless grandmother. Then as I began to jerk my head back, I saw it; she finally let her tears flow. The strong grandmother that I had once known had finally cracked and her moments of being unemotional were gone. I had never seen my grandmother be emotional, but she was crying. As my mother, grandmother, and I stood in this beautiful scenery of nature, my grandfather’s body was slowly placed into the damp earth. He was the one who had always talked about how much a house was not a home. Now he could finally go to his eternal home.

Photo by Austin Gaston
Oil Pastel by Kelly Porter
Four years ago, Mark and Lynette built their dream home on a lake near New Orleans. Now their dream squats in the lake.

Still, there’ll be no whining, not from them or their three children. They made it. Sure, they lost their furniture, photographs, computers and clothes, but not their lives. “Our things can be replaced,” Lynette says. “This family can’t be.”

Lynette was a computer instructor at a school in New Orleans; Mark was an engineer with NASA. He was also a National Guardsman, and he was called to serve at the now infamous Superdome.

After his family left to stay with relatives in New Roads, Louisiana, he entered the place he calls “the last resort.” The people who went there, he explains, had no food, no cars, no money, and no options.

In spite of the chaos and mess of life in the Dome, Mark saw some shimmers of hope: A woman gave birth to a child while a few in Mark’s unit assisted, trying to offer a wall of privacy for the birthing woman and waiting to see if everything was all right.

It was. Mark looked at the father’s face as he watched his child enter the world in this crowded, desperate place. “He had this joyful look on his face,” Mark said. “Just like I did when I saw my babies born. It didn’t matter where the child was born, just that she was healthy.”

She was.

There were other affirmations, too. One of Mark’s Guard members was a nursing mother who’d left her baby behind with relatives. She sat on an overturned box, pumped her milk, and gave the life-saving nourishment to desperate Dome mothers who fed their hungry babies.

When food and water finally arrived, Mark still felt helpless. The sight of so many children crying broke his father’s heart. “All I could do was hug them,” he said, “just like they were my own.”

New Orleans 2005
by Beth Thames

His own family was safe and fed and dry, but Lynette cried too, for Mark, for the people, for all of the desperation she read on their televised faces. But she cried in the shower, not in front of the children. “They never knew,” she said, “how sad I felt.”

But she knows they are luckier than most. They have temporary jobs, children already in good schools, and Red Cross help with essentials: sheets, shampoo, shoes.

If anything good comes out of this, she says, is that people are doing what they are meant to do: help each other. At the Red Cross Center in Huntsville, socks are piled in a white mountain; men’s dress shirts, still in cardboard packages, stand in line on a shelf; men stand in line to get them.

Someone needs a tie for a job interview. Someone needs a suit. A child bounces a basketball on the floor of this place he’s never seen before in a town which may be his home for a week or a year or forever.

He may grow old here and tell his grandchildren about the great flood of 2005, where he slept on the floor of a place they called the Superdome. It was a place where people died and were born, a place where life, even in those shabby quarters, pushed forward, insisting on itself.

Photo of New Orleans courtesy of Gill Rice-Duncan
Graphite Drawing by Terri Cameron

Photo by Brandi Harbin