To our greatly appreciated readers:  

Collage has provided some great experiences during my involvement in the production process over the past six semesters. I have been given the opportunity to collaborate with others and have met some truly amazing friends. Collage has been very rewarding because it requires a lot of hard work and creative thought and results in a quality product of which one can't help but feel proud.

The people involved with the journal and the production process make being a part of this team feel personal, fun, and welcoming. Collage always trends toward the top of my priority list, as it is not only fun, but also provides a service for our community, however small that service may be. With much pride and excitement, I present to you the Fall 2011 edition of Collage.
In this special edition of Collage, we have included a timeline to track some of MTSU’s most interesting facts, advancements, and success stories in honor of our university’s one-hundredth anniversary. We invite you to journey with us through a century of achievements in art and literature in this one-of-a-kind issue.
He slammed his laptop screen shut as he had done countless times before, tossing it aside like a piece of raw fish in the final stages of spoiling. The device made a hollow thumping sound against his carpeted floor. He wished it would have landed upon the tile and shattered into 18 trillion pieces, for all he cared. The apathy invaded him, filling him with a vicious limestone—concrete—lead amalgamation that planted him firmly in his spot upon the bed.

He was a captive of his own body.

He wanted a cigarette. He wanted to write. He wanted to put on a heavy metal record and forget about obligation or drive or the dim, blunt ache of his artistic cramping.

He slouched.

The torture was too much to bear. The blank indifference of a white screen, which did not care whether or not it was filled, flashed across his eyes like a holograph. This venture began (and ended) as all of his seemed to. He thought he might sit down and write about not writing. About his frustrated heart. About his apparent lack of everything he claimed to be.

Instead, he slouched. The pillows behind his head were arranged in such a way that he would have neck cramps within the half hour. And he planned to stay there for a while. There was no sound—no echo, save for the vibrato of his reckless heart, beating with the fury of a house of thunder gods to expel the virus plaguing his bloodstream.

The sloth had invaded. The world had won. Art had died, to be revived and martyred again another day.
upon his mind: to drive a gracious dagger of inspiration unto the boy's jagged cranium. To split him open and shout inside the words that he could not muster on his own.

He saw, from behind his eyelids, a golden-haired sea woman with eyes of coral and teeth of stone, protecting the sunken treasure of his mind with chains heavy enough to bind even the great Atlas down. The waters of his skull have grown murky with pollution; not even the fishes swim there. They have long since migrated back to the shores, flopping aimlessly about upon sands of pure glass.

A black-feathered star used to hover there, illuminating the greatness within, keeping the waters warm. But it has long since extinguished itself, leaving behind nothing but fragile single feathers, oily and orphaned: mere reminders of what once used to be.

But not now.

Now there was nothing within him that he could reach. The greatest parts of him had dived deeper, as deep as they could, into his very center, to escape the light of day, it would seem. It was as if every creature or symbol or idea he had attempted to bear hid its face in shame, crying: “Not yet, not yet! I am not beautiful enough!”

And yet he wanted to thread them from his very bones and scream, “But you are! You are, and everyone must know!”

These inner dialogues were not uncommon. They festered in the crannies of his jaw until he began to ignore them, as usual. He wanted to speak, but he could taste only ash and dust and dead remains of revolutions never properly incited; of love songs too vulnerable to sing; of epics cast into the fire around which they should have been celebrated. This riot was his own to bear. Body against body. Self against self.

He paused his contemplation, reaching for his laptop once more. He yearned to hang up his head and dive mindlessly into the soothing waves of the Internet. He yearned to tumble along as the man with the paged face and the little blue bird bombarded him with comforting uselessness.

But no, he thought. Nice try, but not this time. This time, I will bleed.

“We must suffer, you and I,” sang the mermaid in his head. “We must first suffer and learn to despise the truth before we may emerge to tell our wonderful lies.”

He felt the dark heat of a familiar entity bubble up from within the great lake of his mind. This sudden visitor was no intruder; the boy smiled as the warmth of a dark, burning star began to stir the oceans once more. He smiled, and the light burst forth from his thorned throat, engulfing the entire room. The words slid across his tongue and past his shimmering teeth with the extravagance of a musical orgy; the bells, the chimes, the whistles, the cymbals—they all cried at once: “I am ART, and you will soon know me!”

The black-feathered star shone on in resplendence.

From sea and star, ART was born anew upon the shore. And as he strolled, he saw a boy as adventurous as he: a boy who laughed and churned the sands with toes of innocent glee.

“You will soon know me....” 🌌
PATIENCE
ABIGAIL STROUPE

Patience is a bitter brew
Burning my throat as it goes down
warm and bubbling in my stomach—
and I’m—stumbling around—and fumbling—
around in the dark for something stable
to hold on to
But I might have given up on that
ages ago
with my bruised shins and sloppy mouth
throwing another back

blurring vision and spinning and vomit
but always Patience my drink of choice
just the same, no matter how I hate the taste
or unsettling its influence on my body
—my tear ducts

And isn’t it ugly how it just rips right through me—
too much of a good thing gone sour
churning like a ((((((shaking)))))) washer/dryer
with too many of my dirty clothes inside—
only in the morning do I realize
I should have called
“when”
long before now.

INK AND BLUE
(digital photography)
RACHEL NOKES

The Todd Library (now known as the art building) opens, housing books for seven surrounding counties.
Walking through your neighborhood.
The gray powerlessness of city streets
encompassing life and living all in one.
Here we stand in suspended disbelief,
nodding once or twice to prove we’re really here
and not somewhere, or someone, else.

“You’re an exact replica of a figment of my imagination.”

A vast and sudden sadness hits us
with a cold breath of wind and disappears, along
with our animal longing for home.

Fakery becomes truth, and we hit the concrete realization
that we survived the leprosy of doubt and doubters, and instead
are carried upwards toward the ceiling of beyond.

Tell me once, tell me twice, and call my name
so I remember how to breathe:
who I was and who I am.

I hope you can see me.
I’ve been here all along.
TREE OF LOST SHOES
(digital color photography)
ELIZABETH LOOSE
Ema cried softly beneath the wooden floorboards. She prayed to God, begging for Him to save her and her family. Sobs and shouts from above were the only answers she received. A gunshot fired and a loud thump was heard. One of her parents was dead—or little Emil. Ema cried harder, wanting to push the floorboards up and crawl out from under the bed to her parents.

“Please, God, please!” she whispered softly, clutching at her dress. Her pleading was in vain. Ema heard three more shots and the sound of bodies crumpling to the floor. Hearing a dog bark, she gasped loudly.

“Take a look around that room again, Faust,” she heard one of the Gestapo say. Ema covered her mouth, trying to silence her cries as she heard the door open. The only thing separating her from the Gestapo was Ema heard the bed being pushed away toward the wall. Ema cried softly beneath the wooden floorboards.

ten seconds had passed. she would die the same horrible fate as her beloved family...
“You should sleep,” Faust murmured.
“I’d rather not,” Ema replied softly.
“You suit yourself.”
The harder Ema fought sleep, the sleepier she became.
She finally gave into her exhaustion and dozed off.

The vehicle was slowing down, and Ema was jostled by the change of terrain. Her eyes bolted open in fear. The vehicle came to a halt, and the engine was silenced. Faust removed himself from the vehicle and entered the pitch-black night. He opened the trunk and pulled out a gas jug. He was going to set her afire. She began to harass herself mentally for allowing herself to feel at ease around this murderer. Her father would have been so disappointed.

Ema then noticed he was just filling up the gas tank, and she released a sigh of relief. A light suddenly flashed over the vehicle. Ema tensed and looked towards where the light had come. It was a German jeep. She held her breath as the vehicle slowed to a halt directly in front of her. Two mean appeared from the jeep.

“Car trouble?” One asked.
“No, just filling up the tank,” Faust explained.
“Where are you coming from?” the other man asked.
“Berlin,” Faust lied.
“What brings you to the coast?” the man interrogated.
“I was told Major Wirth was looking for a new pet,” Faust spoke as if it were the truth.

The two men from the jeep laughed and nodded. After half an hour of being jostled about, they finally reached the beach. They were meeting someone here she assumed. Faust slowed the vehicle and turned off the road and onto a hidden dirt path.

“Where are we going?” she asked curiously.
“No questions, Ema,” he answered.

They drove in silence for another hour before the scenery changed. The open fields were suddenly thick forests. Faust slowed the vehicle and turned off the road and onto a hidden dirt path.

“Is that you, Everard?” a masculine voice whispered from one of the figures.
“Yes, it’s me,” Faust replied, glancing at Ema.
“Touk you long enough,” a female figure teased.
“Minor setback,” he explained as he and Ema reached the man and woman.

“Who is this?” the woman asked curiously.
“We only have room for one more! The boat is too full as it is. She cannot come,” the man hissed angrily.

“Just a moment, Ema,” Faust said as he led Ema away from the group. She heard hushed, unhappy whispers, but her mind was elsewhere. Everard Faust. She knew the name. Everard Faust—he was from her school! He had always appeared as if he had something to say to her but could never bring himself to say it.

“Everard?” Ema whispered.
“What?” Everard turned his head angrily, but then it hit him; she knew whom he was. He quickly turned back to the group, pulled something from his pocket, and gave it to the woman. He hugged her and gently kissed her cheek. He then walked toward Ema. “They’re going to take you away. They’re going to keep you safe. I promise,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she smiled as tears ran from her eyes.
Ema hugged him tightly with gratitude.

“We have to go!” the man shouted.

Everard walked Ema to the raft. The man and woman were already waiting in the raft. Everard helped Ema into the raft and kissed her hand. “Auf Wiederschen, meine Liebe,” Everard murmured with a smile.

“Everard, you aren’t coming?” Ema asked worriedly.
“I cannot,” he answered as he turned and walked back to his vehicle.

“Everard!” Ema stood and shouted.

“You stupid girl!” the woman hissed as she pulled Ema back down to the raft. “You will get us all killed with this shouting.”

Ema heard the motor of his vehicle start and saw the headlights come on. Her heart broke with sadness. He had risked his life to save hers; he had committed treason against his country. Ema would never forget Everard Faust, the man who saved her life.

For 35 years, the art department was housed in the Art Barn, a barn that was previously used for the agriculture department’s cattle.
If the sun were a shadow, and we never grew eyes
And sight never knew of your beauty disguised
And if sound never crossed any mortal man’s ears
And we walked in a void where all sense disappears
Then that same force attracting, like magnets, our hearts
Would possess my mute flesh, as God’s breath imparts
I’d evolve a new sense, a new sense for you
And I’d treasure your presence, same as I now do.
Words mean so much, yet so little.
On paper they last a lifetime, but their true destiny is in the mind,
Simply communicating for emotion.
The System works amazingly, without flaw.
Until the moment when there are no words;
Emotion is too great.
This is when words become their author’s handicap,
Their enemy.
It feels much like a wall,
Separating two people from each other.
This is when we as humans become helpless,
No longer able to communicate with others.
And it is out of pure fear
That our emotions begin to
Speak.
HOW HARD IT IS TO WRITE A SONNET
CHEYENNE PLOTT

Such hard work can a sonnet be to write.
Why not a limerick or a cinquain?
Waking me up in the midst of the night,
Tossing and turning and racking my brain.
Looking and rhyming and finding the words,
Ten syllables per line makes for a task,
I am starting to think, This is for nerds,
Is a simple rhyme scheme too much to ask?
My brain wants to wilt, my eyes want to bleed,
Three quatrains, a couplet, what does that mean?
My Algebra book I would rather read,
Or dissect a slimy specimen green.
Writing a sonnet is such sweet sorrow,
I think I will wait until tomorrow.
HIDE-AND-SEEK
LA KESHA JACKSON

In the tunnel, my favorite spot, I hide
Because I refuse to swallow my pride
I just know it won’t find me here
That’s what I think as the sound of footsteps draws near

Anxiously I sit, engulfed in darkness, debating
On if I should take action or continue waiting
While I hear a scream, a shriek, and a squeal
Others getting tagged makes my fear even more real

A sudden silence makes me uneasy, and it is right there
At first the sight of It gives me a little scare
Then my adrenaline starts pumping
And I get up and start running
I look over my shoulder, and Its speed is stunning

Tired and out of breath, I naturally slow down
If I would have picked a better hiding spot, I would have never been found
After scurrying around the playground aimlessly, I face the inevitable
Who knows? Maybe it could be incredible

ALEX MEETS THE OWL
(watercolor and ink on watercolor paper)
JOSHUA PETTY
INNOCENCE
(watercolor and colored pencil)
KELSI CARTER
THIEVING

ABIGAIL STROUPE

My pockets were lined only with lint and lost paper clips, nose pressed to the window; lips pushed against the glass, the sweat of my palms suctioning my body in place like a kid tormented by the candy store. Eyes melting with want, hands shaking with premeditated commitment.

I would steal a kiss.

I imagined with girlish giddiness the surprise of it on my mouth. Would it erupt with immediacy into an overwhelming Pop Rocks sensation? Or would it begin imported, Swiss chocolate that melted into silent satisfaction?

My mouth gone slack envisioning the slow encounter of every sticky sweet part—taking in every crevice and line—savoring and memorizing the motion of it all.

Would I steal a second? A fifth? Twenty more, thus beginning my kiss thieving crime spree? Well, may I never be brought to justice! A bandito of the sweetest confections of affection—a modern day Robin Hood stealing the richest kisses for the kissless poor. I would rifle through my exploits to taste each one, leaving half-tasted sloppy and garlic-flavored ones in my wake.

But I’ve heard that thieves go to hell... Which led me to wonder, If instead of accumulating charges You could be so won over as to kiss me—
A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY
JENNA RUSSELL

A golden opportunity you are;
There’s no telling where or when
You’ll show up—
But when you do,
You shine and sparkle from a distance.
“Look at me,” you demand.
“I am the muse,
The beginning of a musical score.
See all those slight marks
And dents of each line?
Those are notes of a song
Waiting to be written.
So write it....now!”
How true that is.
If I wait until later,
I may forget all about you,
Or worse,
I might—for whatever reason—start to doubt.
I won’t let that happen.
However, I find you unexpectedly
When I’m headed for the next class
Or driving somewhere,
And you just happen to land right on my windshield.
Why must you arrive at the most inconvenient time?
At a time and place where
I won’t be able to take note of you?
At this fleeting moment
You could easily slip from my grasp.
If I lose this inspiration for a melody,
Someone else might find you
And keep you for good,
And I will regret it.

MOOSEMEN
(digital photography)
JESSICA CAVENDER
May 2009

“Are you in love, or are you in pain?” asked my shrink, his pen poised midair.

The room grew still. I shifted in my seat to avoid the late afternoon sun cascading through the bay window behind Dr. Williamson’s desk.

I hate questions that have no answers...

The storm came on an afternoon like any other as I was sitting at the kitchen table absent-mindedly finishing my homework for the day. A key turning in the lock signaled my father’s arrival home—unusually early, meaning almost certainly bad news. My father, glancing dejectedly at my mother and me, informed us that there was going to be yet another two-week shutdown at the riverfront foundry where he worked and that, until it reopened, there would be no more smokes for him and certainly no more trips to Dairy Queen for me.

My father sighed and began to outline our new and unimproved state of affairs when his tired eyes suddenly caught sight of a grocery receipt that lay forgotten on the kitchen table, just inches from my spelling book. He gingerly lifted the white slip of paper and shook his head in utter disbelief.

My father’s normally bright eyes visibly darkened, a sure sign of the impending storm. “Goddammit, Mary Rose!” He thundered repeatedly, knowing how much my devoutly Catholic mother abhorred hearing God’s name used in vain. “I’m fixin’ to be laid off till the end of the month....”

Earlier that day, my mother had spent $12.62 at the IGA—breaking my father’s draconian ten-dollar budget. She had been strictly ordered not to exceed this meager grocery allowance, but my mother loved to test the limits of my father’s patience: adding a cut of meat here, a few stalks of fresh asparagus there....It almost always resulted in a brutal shouting match laced with profanity when my father inevitably found out. Insults and empty threats where just a part of the vernacular in my home, but things always returned to what passed for normal. Things always calmed down. But not today.

Predictably cursing everyone from my mother and the IGA to God, my father slammed the incriminating sales receipt onto the laminate kitchen table while glaring ominously at my mother, sending my neatly stacked homework flying to the floor. My mother returned fire with cold silence as she backed her wheelchair out of the kitchen and toward the narrow hallway at the back of the house. I closed my spelling book and bent down to pick up the loose sheets of paper that had fallen from the table, desperately hoping that the worst was over.

“How many times have I told you...not one penny over ten dollars,” bellowed my father. His face, already flushed with anger, reddened further as he approached my mother’s wheelchair. His jaw was set now, and so was our fate.

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Clutter and condiments spilled onto the torn flooring as I scurried to a safer corner of the kitchen. My mother, realizing a moment too late that she’d picked a bad day to stand her ground over a cheap piece of meat, wheeled her chair further back into the hallway.

Meanwhile, the harsh injustice of an existence that could no longer afford a pack of Camels, much less steak, finally boiled to the surface amidst a fresh round of profanity as my father again cursed my mother, the IG A, and God while punching another hole through the wall that separated the kitchen and the bathroom.

My mother, already crushed by the weight of her own broken dreams and now furious about the damage done to her kitchen, finally retaliated the only way she could—by launching a volley of acerbic, demeaning insults at the man she believed responsible for all the wrongs in her life.

From amidst the wreckage, my father gazed intently at me, his eyes rimmed with dark, vacant circles of loss and guilt. The kitchen chairs, flung almost indifferently into the wall just a moment earlier, revealed the adjacent bathroom. A gaping hole between the two rooms revised the floor plan considerably.

“You’re going to have to pay for this damage...I mean it, James...I’m calling the police, and you know what they told you the last time.” Hazel eyes, bitter from too many years of deprivation, glared at my father, now completely spent.

Everything paused: the hole in the wall; the broken chairs scattered about; my mother’s scathing indictment of a guilty man already serving a life sentence behind the bars of poverty; and me, sitting on the floor. Waiting—for what, exactly, none of us knew. As a family, we were way past our expiration date. We were more like three residents doing time in the house of numb, waiting...hoping...to be released from its death grip. And then, just seconds later, after so many years of waiting, the house of numb finally came tumbling down with the sudden impact of a fist.

My mother must have sensed the impending explosion—she had, after all, lit the fuse with her vitriolic remarks about my father’s chronic failures. But instead of moving back, she suddenly lurched forward in her wheelchair, right into the storm, to stop my distraught father just as he took one final swing at what remained of the pressboard wall, causing him to miss and instead glance my mother just above her eye. Quickly recoiling from the blow, she groaned loudly and shouted for me to call the police immediately. The storm ended as quickly as it began.

I stood tentatively and wiped a few strands of matted hair from my eyes, the rhythmic tick-tock of the kitchen clock calming my unsteady legs. I felt a desperate need to start cleaning up the mess. It usually took less than fifteen minutes for the cops to show up. So I told myself I had to get moving as I reached for the telephone and dialed the operator.

Sure enough, exactly ten minutes later, the police were pounding on our back door. My father, now slumped into one of the chairs he’d tossed earlier, remained motionless.

I moved gingerly toward the door and then stopped, realizing that if I answered the door, bad things would happen—but if I didn’t, bad things would still happen. My head felt like it would explode as I agonized over the least bad thing to choose. In the meantime, none of us moved; we were mute hostages waiting to be rescued.

Finally, my father, looking more calm and collected than I’d seen him look in weeks, resolved the dilemma by opening the door and confessing to the two policemen standing before him.

The handsome blond officer standing nearest the door reached for his handcuffs, his steady blue eyes never leaving my father as he reprimanded both parents as if they were disobedient children. When he was sure my father was safely cuffed, the police officer glanced in my direction and continued his stern lecture.

After my parents had each told their own version of the truth, the two officers escorted my father to their waiting squad car, and I followed from a distance, hoping to hug my father goodbye before they left.

Halfway down the sidewalk, I turned around and looked back at our tiny, dilapidated blue house, where my eyes came to rest on my mother’s helpless form, now sitting in the doorway, the metal from her wheelchair reflecting the late afternoon sunlight. She had packed the dish towel with ice to ease the pain in her swollen eye and was holding it tightly to her face. To the untrained eye, my mother appeared impassive, almost saintly. But I knew better. Beneath her pitiful facade, I could see the fury building. I realized, seconds too late, that I should not have walked with my father to the police car. From where my mother sat, I had betrayed her.

It was at that moment the truth struck me like a sharp blow to the gut: if they took my father away, I would be left completely alone with my mother and her rage. I overheard the older policeman talking to my father. “This time, you’re gonna have to stay in jail, Jimbo, even if it was an accident.” Their visits to our house were so frequent that several of the older cops had actually taken to calling my father by his nickname.

My chest constricted; it was difficult to breathe. Panic threatened to swallow me whole. Suddenly, the late-summer air felt incredibly heavy and moist, its weight crushing my heart and lungs. There was no way I could survive my mother without my father. The lights from the squad car flashed eerily across my mother’s face, blending together with the warning lights emanating from her own eyes as she glared at me from her place in the doorway.

“My chest constricted; it was difficult to breathe. Panic threatened to swallow me whole.”
“We’re just doing our job, Bridget Marie,” replied the policeman, who sat three pews up from us at Mass on Sundays. He opened the back door of the cruiser. “You go on back inside, now. Be a good girl, and help your mother.”

I ignored the cop’s directive and instead flung myself to the ground and, with hands outstretched, grabbed my father’s pant leg just as he entered the backseat of the squad car. With my entire body weight deployed to my hands, my father was suddenly unable to move. For a moment, everything stopped. But it was no use. The police officers, anxious to make their daily arrest quota, were not amused by my histrionics.

Once settled into the back of the squad car, my father summoned me to his side and quietly apologized for the mess he’d made. He told me, with an odd mix of regret and relief, that he just couldn’t take it anymore. He gently stroked my cheek with the back of his cuffed hand, smiled sadly, and turned away.

My father did not look back at me after the squad car pulled away from our driveway, and in less than a minute, the cruiser turned the corner onto Highland Avenue and disappeared from sight.

Life after the storm, it turned out, was pretty much the same as before. Except that I never saw the brilliant rings of Saturn again.

May 2009

“Are you in love, or are you in pain?” repeated Dr. Williamson, as if the correct answer to his earlier query might inspire a breakthrough or perhaps undo the damage, or even give my story a happy ending. The steady tick-tock sound of the wall clock snapped me out of my reverie and returned me to the present.

“Is there a difference?”

RITUALISTIC
(black and white film)
MALINA CHAVEZ-SHANNON

CONFESSIONS OF VANITY
JOSEPH LAMPLEY

Retreat into the Second Self—an Electronic life found in these engines of the mind—churnings behind the Glass Wall. Conflicts of Voodoo science and your Genetic Destiny—I am.

A product of these fasting Girls—the Life Pulse of quixotic beauty, of women and madness and when the body says NO—I am there.

I am the invisible plague—a betrayal of Lust. Of desire to be lusted after. The Empty Promise of all things Common: mirror—mirror, on the wall...

Am I the lesser Evil?
February's Dirge
Jared Burton

This is no world for dreams
For the awakened won’t stop weeping
As tragedies like rain
Come drown dreamers who are sleeping

Who knows when waves will rise?
Once caged rivers swell with flood
When morning comes again
Once white knights lay choked in mud

This is no home for heroes
Who in daylight brave the dark
Who, once when day’s wars have been won
Feel night’s flood snuff their spark

This is no world for dreamers
Not for Lincoln, not for King
For their world lies in skies designed
Beyond the cold rain’s sting

Haitian Family
(micography)
Kelsi Carter

Art Professor John Gibson’s “Rites of Passage” is installed on campus.
COSMIC MEANING IN TINY BEINGS
KAITLIN JONES

Green acorn by the crack,
Next a stretch of reaching grass,
Luminescent against the paved sea of black.
With your cap still on, you look sharp as a tack.

Why did you wander so far from the tree?
Surely this isn't where you expected to be.
I'd have gone east to the pond, you see.
I'd have played with the swans, if it were me.

So why endeavor on such dangerous travels?
What mysteries were you hoping to unravel?
In a place where living things know to skedaddle,
You rolled forth without even a paddle.

Brave, adventurous acorn are you.
To restriction and fear you say adieu.
Though most would merely pass, I stop to stew
And reckon on a lesson learned by so few.

THOUGHTS THAT CONSUME ME
(oil on canvas)
GRACE SUTHERLAND

James McBride is the first author to speak at a Convocation. His book, The Color of Water, was the 2002 summer reading.
“Sing to me,” she said as she gently squeezed his hand. Even now, his touch still excited her. Sean smiled. He leaned across the bed and kissed her cheek.

“What shall I sing?” He knew the answer, but he always asked.

“I Believe in You.”

“Again?” He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead pretending it would be a burden to sing that song once more.

“Yes, again,” Leah softly answered.

He picked up his guitar, tuned the strings, and started singing. The lyrics were etched on his brain. As he serenaded her, she sighed with contentment. The combination of his velvet, baritone voice and that melody always brought tears. Not from sorrow or fear. She was past that now. She closed her eyes and let the music carry her away. Away from the hospital. Away from the pain. Away from the cancer.

She fell asleep with a smile on her face. A single tear streaked her cheek.

Sean put his guitar in the case and turned off the overhead light. He bent down and tenderly kissed her.

“I love you, Leah,” he whispered in her ear. “I believe in you.”

The evening charge nurse, Sarah, entered the room.

“How is she?”

“She’s sleeping now. I think this round of chemo has been the worst yet.” He swallowed hard, forcing the tears to stay away. He had to be strong.

“She’s a fighter. I haven’t seen many cancer patients with her strength and determination, and I’ve been a nurse for 15 years. If anyone can beat this, she can.”

“Yeah, I believe he is,” said Leah with a British accent. “Just call me ‘Queen Leah.’”

Julie gave a slight curtsy. “Well, ‘Your Highness,’ I need to take some of your blue blood.”

Leah laughed and said, “Which arm you want?”

“Whichever one they didn’t stick yesterday.”

“Three years from the date they discovered his tumor,” she answered.

Sean didn’t say anything. What could he say that she hadn’t already heard? He gave her a hug instead.

“I know he’s in a better place now, and I believe with all my heart that he’s no longer in pain.” Sarah took a deep breath and stiffened her spine. “Got to get back to work.”

“Goodnight, Sarah. Thank you for taking such good care of Leah.”

It was Wednesday morning, and that meant a trip to the bookstore. Leah loved to read, and every week he made sure she had a new book for her collection. He and the staff at Bella’s Bookstore were on a first name basis now.

“There’s my hero,” Leah said as Sean walked into the room. He reached into the bag and pulled out a new book. “Marilyn said you’d love this one.” He leaned down and kissed her.

“She hasn’t picked a bad one yet, but you shouldn’t spoil me. I won’t be fit to live with when I get home.”

“You know, you’re right. Give me that book.” He reached for it, but Leah moved her hand away.

Giggling like a little girl, she said, “Nope. When you give a gift, there are no take-backs.”

“I see your man has bought you another book,” said Julie, the day nurse, as she entered the room. “Must be nice to be pampered. Foot rubs, serenades, chocolates, new books.” She looked at Sean and asked, “You think you might be creating a prima donna?”

“Yes, and you are?”

“I’m Misty Henderson. I was hoping you could give me voice lessons. I understand you once taught at the university.”

“That was a long time ago. I’m not coaching anymore.”

He was closing the door when she said, “When you give a gift, there are no take-backs.”

He stared at her. “What?”

“I said, ‘There are no take-backs.’ Once, you gave your students a wonderful gift—your time and talent.”

He continued to stare.

“I know you have suffered a tremendous loss, but I believe you still have much to offer—especially to students like me who need your help and guidance.”

Sean motioned for her to step inside. His manners were a bit rusty. “What makes you think I want to help you?”

He cut all ties from family and friends and lived like a hermit for almost a year. Then, one afternoon, he heard a knock at his front door. He decided to answer it. A lovely young woman stood there smiling at him.

“Are you Professor Sean Anderson?”

“She laughed as a soft yellow light enveloped her. He watched—dumbfounded—as she slowly changed.”

“Yes, and you are?”

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Intending to spend as much time with Leah as possible, Sean took an extended leave of absence from his job as voice coach at the local university. He was faithful. The days turned to weeks and the weeks into months. He tried to be strong for her sake, but when he sang her favorite song, he didn’t always succeed. More than once, tears escaped his eyes. Three months later, after he finished singing, Leah quietly slipped away from him, and his world ended.
“You probably don’t want to help, but I’m asking anyway.”

She was a cheeky chit. “So, what do you like to sing?”

“I love the sentimental stuff, like ‘Hero,’ ‘I Will Always Love You,’ ‘How Do I Live,’ and ‘Unchained Melody’.”

“All great songs,” Sean said. A hint of a smile lit his face.

“Yes, but my favorite is ‘I Believe in You.’”

His heart skipped a beat as the color drained from his face. He had neither heard nor sang that song since Leah passed. Suddenly, he was angry. “Get out!”

“What’s wrong? What did I say?”

Sean ignored her questions as he ushered her toward the door. “Leave. Now.”

Misty sighed as she walked through the doorway. She turned around and said, “I’ll be back.”

He shut the door in her face.

Misty returned to his house every day for a month. He had to admire her tenacity. Every morning at 10 o’clock, she would be on his doorstep, holding a sign: THERE ARE NO TAKE-BACKS! She would picket for 30 minutes, and then he would open the door and say, “Go away.”

“OK, but I’ll be back tomorrow,” she’d say with a smile.

In an odd way, she had given him a reason to get up every morning. On day 30, Sean once again invited Misty into his home.

“I was beginning to think I would grow old before you changed your mind,” she said as she strolled into his living room. “Can we begin the lessons now?”

“You have exactly one hour to prove you’re not wasting my time.”

“An hour is all I need. Will you play my favorite song?”

A wave of nausea roiled through the pit of his stomach. He tamped it down and seated himself at the black baby grand. Her voice was hauntingly beautiful, and he struggled to keep the tears contained.

Follow your heart / let your love lead through the darkness...
There’s nothing that you cannot do / I believe, I believe, I believe in you.

As she sang, the stress slowly leached from his body. It felt good to play again. When she finished, he was momentarily speechless. He couldn’t believe his ears. Her voice was powerful and clear. Her pitch was practically perfect.

“That wasn’t a total train wreck,” he managed to say.

She laughed as a soft yellow light enveloped her. He watched—dumbfounded—as she slowly changed. Misty vanished, and Leah appeared. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come.

“You’re my hero, Sean. Never forget that. Heed the words of my favorite song and keep them in your heart.”

She gently squeezed his hand. “And I, you.”

Tears of anguish flowed freely. He grabbed her and held tight as he rained kisses over her face and neck.

She’d never forget how good it felt to be in his arms. There were so many things she loved about him—his sensuous kisses; his clean, masculine scent; his wonderful humor; his gentle soul. While he held her, she whispered sweet, loving words in his ear.

Later, when he was calm, Leah passionately kissed him and then stepped back from his embrace. “I love you, Sean. I believe in you.”

She disappeared just as a knock sounded at his door.
The Honors College begins funding College, saving it from termination due to budget cuts.

The Paul W. Martin Sr. Honors Building is dedicated.
SO TURNS THE TIDE
JOSEPH LAMPLEY

You and I—
Our names are written in waters.
Some are Lakes—
Some, a Hard Rain on a Cross.
Some lap the shores of Bittersweet Memory—
Where I cannot tell if I am
The Tide or its Taker.

You and I—
We are the brine in the sea breeze.
Some are Tears—
Some, the Morning Dew on a Night’s passion.
Some is the salt of your brow—
Citrus and Copper.
I never tasted the Cotton Dust.

You and I—
Ours are the shorelines of globe-flung atolls.
Some are mere steppingstones—
Some, the new soil of a Volcanic Eden.
Some are the shores of Bittersweet Memory—
Where I cannot tell if the Separating Waves
Are of a Vast Droplet or a Thimble’s Ocean.

For I am a grainy ribbon twixt Land and Sea—
Gazing toward your distant Charcoal Beach.
Tight little islands caught
In the Heart’s Continental Drift—
So turns the Tide....
I remember being broken. The night I was robbed of my innocent glow was my first taste of true pain. He held me down and took what was mine, leaving his evil filth inside me, engraving the dark image of his face into my soul, my heart, my mind. His drug and his crime were excruciating—they turned my family against me. Those who had once loved me assumed his filth was my filth, too.

“You're what?” Daddy’s face turned green. Never before had the word “stupid” slipped from her tight, religious, proper lips. “The very thought of you being with a boy behind our backs!”

Daddy and Momma couldn’t see the drug and crime. They couldn’t even see that filth can blossom into something beautiful. Instead, they threw me out with nothing but a suitcase, a car key, a Bible, a slap in the face, and a “never come back!” It was raining that day, nothing but a suitcase, a car key, a bible, a slap in the face, and a “never come back!” It was raining that day, but I went straight to the Rock.

I remember being hated. Word travels like wildfire in a town as tiny as that one, so it wasn’t long before showing my face in familiar places meant forcing a hard dose of humility down my little throat and washing it down with the meager remains of my dignity. Shame filled my life as neighbors, peers, and friends would scoff, glare, and hate. Their judgment nearly smothered my life, but I never before had the word “stupid” slipped from her tight, religious, proper lips. “The very thought of you being with a boy behind our backs!”

"Yes, Coleman is my big brother," I told the frowning nurse, who glanced at my belly every few seconds. She shook her head and closed the door behind her. My parents would not claim me? My brother would, but his blackened eyes were closed, and his hesitant breath was shallow. Doctors rushed in all at once after a page was mumbled through the hospital’s speakers. Coleman’s heart was tired; my heart was breaking. I pounded my fist against the door. I locked eyes with Momma through the window and caught her hateful glance. I shot it back at her. Someone shut the blinds. I stumbled away and ran to the Rock. I remember being alone. I was alone on the apartment’s cold doorstep when they took away my roof because my throat was closing, and my heart was breaking. I pounded my fist against the door. I locked eyes with Momma through the window and caught her hateful glance. I shot it back at her. Someone shut the blinds. I stumbled away and ran to the Rock.

I remember being afraid. My water broke, and I somehow got myself to the hospital. The delivery rooms were full that night, and over the fearful drumbeat of my thumping heart, I heard some crazy old woman say:

“Babies just love to arrive on snow-white winter evenings like this one! They ride in on the snowflakes.”

I remember being speechless. They placed a bundle in my arms, and assured me that he was healthy. The filth had vanished forever, for this living piece of joy was flawless! Was this treasure truly mine? My armband read “Summit, Dinah” and his read “Summit, Baby Boy.” The filth had indeed blossomed into something beautiful. But he wasn’t snow-white. His bronze skin, his midnight eyes, his deep-black hair—all beautiful and mysterious. He had my name; he had my eyes. His skin and his hair were his own, a breathtaking creation that sprang up from a heartbreaking crime, a destroyed innocence, one night long ago. I loved his beauty; I loved his mystery.

“What’s his name?” asked the nurse—a new nurse with a friendly, snow-white smile.

Name? I hadn’t thought about this before. I searched my soul. There was only one right name for this one right moment.

“Peter,” I whispered. Rock. ♠
clicking pens and rustling pages
pounding heart, awake for ages; for me, midnight is when my mind leaves any hope for sleep behind. setting sun and frenzied fingers sensations of the music lingers. I cannot sleep for fear of losing the blissful phrases known prior to snoozing. pages of ink, eyes longing for rest slumber would be a welcome guest; characters bound in weary spines, raging emotions between the lines. closing eyes and aching limbs, blooming thoughts and countless whims battle it out for that tempting repose, until my eyes shut and my breathing slows.
HARVEST HOLOCAUST
JESSICA RUSH

The leaves are the persecuted.
The average lawnman, Hitler
Collecting the dispersed leaves
Bagging, burning, crushing and composting to an untimely death.
Imprisoning the leaves from the very place they belong.
All for the sake of a yard
Free of tarnish
A proud territory pure and uniform.

DEPTHS
(digital photography)
NOELLE ANDERSON
SERPENTINE SKY
ARI CONSTANTINE

Great Serpentine Mother,
The spinner of sky:
She devours creation while churning the seas,
She squirms beneath mountains, uprooting the trees.

On one end: the other,
The other: the end.

She blinks and bears planets,
Her breath ignites suns,
Her throat condemns as her gullet-hell churns,
Flecking honest ears with her vile forked tongue.

On one end: the other,
The other: the end.

I stand before lavender,
Clothed in satin sin,
The natal, pale skin, the blood-flushed cheeks,
I engorge upon the table laden with the feast
of the deepest fruits of the universe.

I am the talon and the tail,
The product and consumer,
The wafer and the guilty sinner,
The savior and the self-salvation.
I am the scale caught forever between
The unshakable union of
Low heaven and high hell.

I am the bending of the mind,
The marble between the Serpent’s eye,
I am the milk, the form, and the will,
And when I speak the world shall shudder,
and bones will be shaken from their very flesh.

On one end: the other,
The other: the end.

She will slither ever onward,
the Immaculate Serpent Queen.
And I, in the sacred space untouched
between beginning and end, will guide her.

I will slither ever onward.
About Collage
Collage is a biannual production of the Middle Tennessee State University Honors College. All submissions are reviewed anonymously and selected by a student editorial staff. The materials published by Collage do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Collage staff, Honors College, MTSU student body, staff, or administrators. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form without written permission from either the editor or adviser of Collage. Inquiries should be addressed to Collage, Middle Tennessee State University, 1301 East Main St, Box 267, Murfreesboro, TN 37132.

To Submit to Collage
Collage accepts submissions year-round. Submission forms and guidelines are available at www.mtsu.edu/~collage. Creative work such as art, photography, prose, and poetry may be submitted digitally from the website or may be turned in at the Collage office, Honors 224, along with a completed hard copy of the form, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Creative works are accepted from MTSU students and alumni.

Policy Statement
Collage, A Journal of Creative Expression, is an arts and literature magazine featuring top-scoring submitted work chosen by a volunteer staff in a blind grading process. The staff attempts to choose the best work without regard for theme or authorship.

Although Collage is a publication of the University Honors College, staff members and submitters are not required to be Honors students. Staff members are selected each semester from a pool of applicants and must have at least a 3.0 GPA and two letters of recommendation.

Creative Expression Awards
Each semester the Collage Faculty Advisory Board selects submissions to receive Creative Expression Awards, one from each major category: art, photography, poetry, prose, and alumni. Literature winners receive the Martha Hixon Creative Expression Award, and visual winners receive the Lon Nuell Creative Expression Award. Winners receive $50 awards.