

# *SCOP*



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**COVER DESIGN**

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The cover features white cherry blossoms, green leaves, and twigs in the foreground, and a blurred swing set in the background. White text at the top of the picture reads "SCOP," and a white textbox at the bottom of the picture reads "Volume 49" beneath SBU's logo.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Writing Contest: Poetry.....</b>	<b>3</b>
“PAPERY BIRDS” — JULIA MUNTON, 1 <sup>ST</sup> PLACE.....	3
“MISSING IN THE MAIZE” — JOSEY MURPHY, 2 <sup>ND</sup> PLACE.....	5
“DYING FLOWERS” — TATUM BELL, 3 <sup>RD</sup> PLACE.....	6
<b>Writing Contest: Short Stories.....</b>	<b>7</b>
“STITCHED” — JOSEY MURPHY, 1 <sup>ST</sup> PLACE.....	7
“FORGIVENESS, THE BIGGEST PUZZLE OF ALL” — TATUM BELL, 2 <sup>ND</sup> PLACE .....	14
<b>Writing Contest: Non-Documented Prose .....</b>	<b>19</b>
“BEING AN INCOMPLETE ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS OF FEBRUARY 4, 2022” — JULIA MUNTON, 1 <sup>ST</sup> PLACE .....	19
<b>Writing Contest: Documented Literary/Linguistic Essay.....</b>	<b>25</b>
“REALISM: THE ORIGINS AND WORKS OF THE ERA” — SARAH TEUBNER, 1 <sup>ST</sup> PLACE.....	25
<b>Author Submissions .....</b>	<b>32</b>
“I, FRANKENSTEIN” — TAYLOR BROWN .....	32
AUTHOR FEATURE: TAYLOR BROWN .....	33
“MY WATERFALL” — BRIAN PURKAPLE .....	34
AUTHOR FEATURE: BRIAN PURKAPLE .....	34
“EARTHBOUND” — JOSEY MURPHY.....	35
AUTHOR FEATURE: JOSEY MURPHY .....	35
“SEASONS OF LOVE” — JESSICA VOEPEL .....	36
AUTHOR FEATURE: JESSICA VOEPEL.....	37
“SUMMER” — BETTY LIU .....	38
AUTHOR FEATURE: BETTY LIU .....	39
“HER THAT MAKES ME SMILE” — JOHN MBURU .....	40
AUTHOR FEATURE: JOHN MBURU.....	41
“WHAT TO WRITE” — GABRIEL LONG .....	42
AUTHOR FEATURE: GABRIEL LONG.....	46
“HOW TO WRITE A POEM” — TAYLOR BROWN.....	47
AUTHOR FEATURE: TAYLOR BROWN .....	50
“FINALLY, HOME.” — HOPE.....	51
AUTHOR FEATURE: HOPE.....	59

# Writing Contest: Poetry

“Papery Birds” — Julia Munton, 1<sup>st</sup> place

I gasp paper dust  
into crowded lungs  
until a library  
could be opened  
inside me.

I feel the words of The Bard  
pressing against my ribs,  
like hooves printing into the earth.

My skin bulges with Dickenson,  
and bristles  
with the feathers  
of hope.

My heart beats  
to the tattoo of Poe;  
battering wildly,  
as if caught under floorboards.

My hair swirls  
in the breeze of Homer,  
as I set sail with Nobody.

My tongue caresses  
the words of Tolkien,  
and I taste  
the acrid flames  
of red-golden Smaug.

I feel Moore words,  
pressing into my palate,  
sharp and new.

My eyes feast  
on the words of Lewis,  
as if starved of light—  
drinking in  
the Lion-like-a-rising-sun,  
mane glorious and shining-fair.

Books nestle in my soul  
like papery birds  
who settle into a nest—  
with a flicker of pages  
and the dry rustle  
of well-loved ink.

“Missing in the Maize” — Josey Murphy, 2<sup>nd</sup> place

A puzzle of paths,  
cutting through  
row upon row—  
winding, twisting,  
ending, never ending.  
Lost to the crop,  
my scream falls  
on deaf ears.  
How long has it been?  
Ahead, another dead end—  
or is it the same?  
Every kernel, every cob,  
even the sun—  
all blurring to create  
one final truth:  
*yellow.*

## “Dying Flowers” — Tatum Bell, 3<sup>rd</sup> Place

The days passed in a flaming blur.  
Porch swings and sweet tea,  
Talks in the starlight,  
Our daily bliss for two sweet months.  
Now we pack up our joy  
And store it on the top shelf of the closet.

We open our backpacks,  
Disrupting their dust collection,  
So we can fill them  
With all the supplies on our school list.  
We replace ice cream and outdoor concerts  
With school lunches and crowded classes,

Fireflies and fireworks  
With passing notes and band recitals.  
I miss dancing in my sundress,  
Our arms entwined,  
Humming sweet melodies.  
We found summer love and lost it quickly.

The flowers you placed in my hair  
While stargazing in the open field  
Are now left dying on my bedside table

# Writing Contest: Short Stories

“Stitched” — Josey Murphy, 1<sup>st</sup> place

On June 8th, Charlie Moore breathed his first breath. His mother, Amelia, held him close, and his father, Walter, beamed stoically from her bedside. Charlie was, undoubtedly, loved.

How unfortunate, then, for him to have been born into a Stitched family, despised for their surnames beginning between A and M. Forbidden to speak by the Unstitched –those with names after M– the Stitched are forced to have their mouths closed after their first words. Charlie, only minutes old, knew nothing of this practice, nor why it existed. Then again, no one else knew, either. *“It’s tradition,”* was all anyone could say. *“It’s just the way things are.”*

Unaware of his fate, Charlie made the mistake on his first birthday: *“Ma...ma,”* he blubbered innocently. *“Mama!”*

His first word. On what should have been a day to celebrate, Amelia and Walter were filled with dread. The two shared a knowing glance with each other and wept silently. They knew what needed to be done.

The next day, Charlie was brought to the doctor to have his mouth sewn shut. He cried the entire time, fighting with as much vigor as a toddler could muster. His mother held onto his hands, tears welling in her eyes, but she didn’t stop the doctor. She only kept the child still.

Charlie, with his new nylon strings, had joined the muted ranks of the Stitched.

As Charlie grew, his mouth was restitched every few months, then every year, then every few years. Between toddlerhood and childhood, he grew to despise his forced silence. He hated that he couldn’t sing along to



his favorite songs, cheer for his sports teams, or tell his parents how much he loved them. He wanted the silence to end.

Charlie wanted to speak.

There was nothing he could do, though. This was the way of the world, and Charlie slowly came to accept his bleak future.

\*\*\*

High school was especially horrible for Charlie. He couldn't introduce himself to his classmates without a piece of paper around. To make it easier, he started wearing his name on his clothes; his mother sewed *Charlie* onto the left shoulder of all his school uniforms. However, despite that, not everyone called him Charlie. Several of his Unstitched classmates enjoyed referring to him as "Rag Doll" –the same as they called many other Stitched, since they didn't care to learn their real names.

Charlie couldn't stop the Unstitched from doing this. He had no authority over them, and the teachers that did, viewed Charlie the same way. To them, he was worthless, a pointless creature. Day after day, Charlie was persecuted by his classmates and teachers.

Lunch, though, was the worst of all. What should have been a break during a hard day was instead a prime time for bullying. It came as no surprise, then, when Charlie was confronted one day during lunch.

With heaviness, Charlie dragged himself through the lunch line. He grabbed a juice box of blended fruits and vegetables –the only option for Stitched– and headed for an empty table. The drink looked disgusting and tasted even worse. It made him gag, but he continued to sip it through the loose corner of his mouth, using the juice box's little straw.

Just once, Charlie wanted to try the pizza offered to the Unstitched. If it tasted even half as good as it smelled, then he would be in Heaven.

However, Heaven never seemed farther away than when a familiar male stalked up to Charlie, his eyes narrowed. Reginald Zenith – the school's

resident “tough guy.” Charlie swore the only reason Reginald had any popularity was because of his “Z” surname –the most coveted of all the names. The bulky senior constantly taunted Charlie for his sewn mouth. Of all the bullies in the school, Reginald might as well have been Charlie’s personal one.

Lifting a brawny hand, Reginald squeezed Charlie’s juice box while the Stitched was drinking. The greenish liquid shot through the straw and exploded across Charlie’s face, dripping down onto his school clothes. Charlie breathed in sharply. He stood up quickly and grabbed at the napkin dispenser on the table. Reginald watched, laughing heartily at his work.

“What, scared of a little fruit juice?” he taunted, a devilish grin on his lips.

Charlie ignored him, instead focusing on drying his clothes.

Reginald’s laugh soon faded. He took a step closer, bumping into Charlie and causing the Stitched to stumble. “Hey, why aren’t you talkin’?” the bully sneered with bitter irony.

Charlie froze. His face burned hot with embarrassment and anger. For a moment, he thought about squeezing the rest of the juice box onto the bully, but if Charlie retaliated, then he knew only he would get in trouble. The teachers always forgave the Unstitched for their grievances, yet readily convicted a Stitched for any wrongdoing. Charlie, lowering his head, knew he couldn’t do anything.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

Charlie heard Reginald utter a sudden *oof!* and the Stitched looked up, confused. In front of him, Reginald was now doubled over, and a dark-haired girl stood rigidly beside him, an inferno blazing in her eyes. She glanced over at Charlie but said nothing. She couldn’t – her mouth was sewn shut.

Charlie stared, amazed. She had stood up to an Unstitched – and it had been Reginald Zenith, of all people! Charlie took a dazed step towards

her, but he was interrupted as the teacher on lunch duty clapped her hand against his shoulder.

"Moore! Adamms! To the office!" Ms. Sanchez barked, glaring daggers into their skin. "You should be ashamed! *Go!*"

Indignation arose within Charlie. He hadn't done anything! However, he didn't argue. How could he? Instead, Charlie hesitantly accepted his fate –just like always.

Charlie turned from Ms. Sanchez, only to see the girl –Adamms– already stomping towards the principal's office. He followed, his indignation morphing into nervousness. Thoughts of expulsion made his stomach churn. He had never been in any real trouble before.

Their sentencing was quick. Once they reached the office, Ms. Sanchez informed Principal Whitney about the incident. Whitney only heaved an apathetic sigh and suspended Charlie and Adamms for a week.

With his head bowed, Charlie took his punishment. He didn't argue – he knew that would only cause more damage. The girl, however, thought differently. Charlie watched, wide-eyed, as Adamms unleashed her temper. With a throw of her arms, she stood up, stamped her feet, and slammed her hands against Whitney's desk, all while furious tears streamed down her face. Behind her stitches, muffled noises strained to be heard.

Awed, Charlie felt his heart skip. At that moment, he found Adamms absolutely *beautiful*. Not because of her stringy black hair or the emotional reddening of her face, but because she had the courage to argue with an Unstitched – courage that Charlie had never mustered before.

The visit to Principal Whitney ended with Charlie walking out, while Adamms had to be dragged away. Charlie's suspension continued to only be a week; Adamms', on the other hand, had been extended an extra week.

Charlie didn't mind the days off, though. He just kept thinking about Adamms and her courage. He admired it. How had she not been afraid? Charlie wanted to be brave like that – like her.

\*\*\*

Two weeks passed before Charlie saw Adamms again. He spotted her and sat with her at lunch, and instead of eating, the two slipped notes to each other. Charlie first thanked Adamms for defending him against Reginald. In turn, she gave him her first name: Dahlia.

A friendship quickly blossomed, and a lunch period of writing turned into a week.

Through their notes, Charlie learned how similar he and Dahlia were – especially about their feelings towards their muted voices. They both felt inferior and incomplete, and the two soon came to a realization: they would do anything to talk.

It was Dahlia who proposed the idea: during lunch, they would sneak into Ms. Sanchez's room and cut their stitches with her scissors. *For choosing Reginald over us*, Dahlia explained in her note. Charlie was hesitant, but as the plan continued to fester inside of his head, he finally gave in. He hoped agreeing would make him feel brave –but it only made him terrified.

The day soon arrived. Charlie and Dahlia broke away from the lunch crowd, hiding out in bathrooms before meeting outside of Ms. Sanchez's closed classroom. Ducking, Charlie craned his neck to peer through the door's small window. To his relief, he saw nothing but desks and chairs in the dimly lit room. He tried the door handle. It opened with ease, and butterflies took off in his stomach. The plan was working.

Pushing the door open, the two Stitched entered and sprinted for the teacher's desk, forgetting all their concerns. With a buzz of excitement and nervousness, Charlie and Dahlia rummaged through the desk drawers.

Finally, Dahlia found a pair of scissors, and she lifted them triumphantly, shining with the pride of a treasure hunter.

The lights flipped on.

"What are you doing?" The voice was a growl, coming from the open doorway. *Reginald*.

Charlie straightened up; his eyes fixed on the intruder. Instinctually, he took a step back.

Reginald's gaze bounced between the two *Stitched* before landing on Dahlia. "*You*." He pointed at her, scowling. "You *humiliated* me! *Everybody* knows I got punched by a *Stitched*." As he spoke, he drew closer to Dahlia, clenching his fists. "Do you have *any* idea what that did to my reputation?" He started drawing his arm back. "You—"

Reginald never finished his sentence. Charlie, noticing the fist, tackled him to the ground. Charlie just couldn't let Reginald hit Dahlia. The boys became a flurry of arms and legs, kicking and punching whenever they could. However, it was soon clear who was losing – Charlie, who had never thrown a punch before, was outmatched. Reginald eventually broke free and stood, and as Charlie struggled to do the same, a horrible smile broke out across Reginald's face. With a wild flame in his eyes, Reginald kicked, and Charlie collapsed. Again, and again, and again. Weakened, Charlie tried to grab Reginald's foot, hoping to stop him, but he couldn't. He—

"*Stop it!*" The yell was raspy, emotional, and broken. Charlie, though, had never heard anything more angelic.

With swollen eyelids, Charlie moved his blurred gaze to the source of the shout. There stood Dahlia, the scissors still in her hand –but now, she had snipped strings hanging off her lips. Her mouth, having always been forced into a tight line, now sneered ferociously at Reginald. "I won't let you hurt him anymore!" Dahlia pointed the scissors' blades threateningly at him.

From the floor, Charlie stared in awe. His guardian angel! No longer bound, but free! Shakily, he started to stand back up, praying that his knees wouldn't buckle beneath him.

Bewildered, Reginald stumbled away from the Stitched. "You... you can't do that. You shouldn't be talking!"

Dahlia's eyes narrowed further. Her grip tightened on the scissors. "Stop me, then."

Reginald hesitated. Was there anything he could do now? Slowly, a sly smile crawled its way back onto his face. Of course there was. He was an Unstitched.

"Hey, help!" he cried out, feigning an appalled tone, "Some Stitched are stealing stuff from Ms. Sanchez! One of them just attacked me! Help, over here—!"

Reginald bolted out of the classroom, looking for a teacher to buy his story.

Once Reginald disappeared, Dahlia lowered the scissors. However, instead of running away, she hurried to Charlie's side. "Charlie? Are... a-are you okay?"

Charlie, battered and bruised, looked over at Dahlia, and the two shared a silent gaze. Charlie then held out his hand.

Dahlia tilted her head, yet somehow, she understood. She placed the scissors in his palm.

With a confident air around him, Charlie lifted the scissors and, in one motion, cut his stitches away.

It was Dahlia's turn to stare. "...Charlie?"

He smiled. "Dahlia, I've never felt better. I'm not afraid anymore."

## “Forgiveness, the Biggest Puzzle of All” — Tatum Bell, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

Georgie was only five years old, but he understood that Father was a bad man. There were many nights Georgie spent his free time in his room with his head under the covers to protect himself from the monster living in the house. The screams, crashes, and curses drifted upstairs and crept into Georgie’s room, making sleep impossible. Georgie spent most of his time in bed praying and hoping that the evil would leave Father and they could be a happy family.

Father was not always a bad man. At least, not to Georgie’s knowledge. However, two years ago, when Georgie was three, Father lost his job and turned to alcohol as the solution. It was that same night, Father yelled at Mother for the first time. Mother had made a silly mistake with dinner, but Father did not find the matter funny. While Georgie did not understand what was happening, he knew that Mother was sad. Since then, Georgie always tried to keep Mother from feeling sad, but Father ruined any good mood.

Father mostly just yelled at Mother - and lately, Georgie - but then Georgie found a bruise on Mother’s arm. It was a bruise that never disappeared and never stayed in the same place. Georgie knew Father gave Mother that bruise.

While Georgie was never physically injured by Father, Georgie was hurt on many occasions by Father’s words. Father made mean comments and always told Georgie that he needed to grow up. These comments always made Georgie cry, only leading to more harsh words. Mother tried to console Georgie, but this led to Mother being in trouble. And Georgie didn’t want Mother to be in trouble with Father because then she would be sad. Georgie learned to go to his room first before any tears came.

Georgie was ten when the first hit came. Georgie came back inside too late after playing with the neighbor, and Father had already been drinking for a few hours. When Georgie entered the house without a good excuse, Father decided that deviant behavior was worth a slap.

After many years of mean comments and loud yelling, Georgie had learned to stop crying so much. But the slap brought tears quickly. This only earned him a second slap.

Lying in bed, Georgie decided to run away.

He had no plan and nowhere to run, but he was tired of Father's bullying. While Georgie didn't want to leave Mother, Georgie felt he had no choice. If he didn't leave now, he never would. He took out the school supplies in his backpack and replaced them with his favorite toys. Georgie looked around and tried to think of anything else he may need. Quickly grabbing his piggy bank, Georgie left his childhood bedroom in search of something better.

Georgie didn't get very far before Mother caught up. Georgie had left the house while Mother was watching a show in the living room, so she saw him depart without saying a goodbye. Mother followed her son with no hesitation. Mother didn't punish him, but she did give Georgie a tight hug. Mother knew why Georgie left, and she understood that Father was not a good man. *Georgie deserves better*, Mother thought.

Mother led Georgie back home with the promise that better will come.

Georgie was twelve years old when Mother finally left Father. Father had broken Georgie's arm in a fit of anger and didn't let Mother take Georgie to the hospital immediately. When Father finally passed out from the amount of booze he drank, Mother rushed Georgie to help.



While at the hospital, the doctor asked what happened. Instead of telling a lie like she usually did when she came for her broken limbs, Mother answered honestly. Many questions came next, and soon the police and others were also asking questions. Mother did her best to answer them, but she didn't let them talk to Georgie. Mother wanted Georgie to have some peace before their lives changed forever. She knew Georgie would have to give his side of the story but not yet.

At the age of fifteen, Georgie participated in his first fight. The school bully was picking on a skinny, quiet freshman, and Georgie remembered what it was like to be around a bully. Georgie surprised the bully with a quick punch to his face and a promise that Georgie would do worse if the bullying continued.

The school suspended Georgie and the bully for a few days after the incident, and Mother was very disappointed. While she understood why Georgie did it, and she was glad he was protecting someone, Mother did not want her son to become violent like Father. She wanted her son to learn peaceful responses and loving ways to handle difficult situations. Mother hoped living with Grandmother for the last few years would have helped, a few states away from Father. Grandmother let Georgie help in the garden, and he seemed to enjoy the plants. She even bought him his own houseplant to take care of. Georgie loved that plant and took great care of it. Mother and Grandmother thought this was a good sign that Georgie would grow to be different. But maybe the damage was done, and nothing would help Georgie regain the peace he had as a baby.

A letter showed up at Grandmother's house when Georgie turned eighteen. It was from Father, after years of no contact. Father wanted to wish Georgie a happy birthday and to share some good news. For the past three years, Father had been attending AA meetings and had been sober for two full years.

Georgie was both happy and angry at the news. While he wanted Father to stop drinking and become a better man, Georgie was angry that Father waited so long to choose sobriety. If it had been sooner, maybe they could have remained a family.

Georgie didn't want to share the news with Mother, but she walked into his room while he reread the letter for the fourth time. Mother seemed to have the same feelings as Georgie, a mixture of negative and positive. Neither knew what to do next. *Do I respond? Do I even want to hear from Father?* Georgie thought. Georgie decided to bring it up in his next counseling appointment.

He had been seeing a counselor for about four years now. Mother thought it was a good idea after the fight at school. The counselor was a very sweet woman, and she understood what Georgie was feeling. He had told her all that he could remember of Father, and it really helped to share that with someone else. The counselor encouraged his plant hobby, knowing that caring for living things may bring the peace Georgie needed after his childhood. She usually didn't ask about Father unless Georgie brought him up first, but she would want to know that Father contacted him. She would know whether Georgie should respond to the letter.

Three days later, Georgie met with the counselor. The appointment began with typical pleasantries, but Georgie could not hold in the news any longer. After sharing the letter with the counselor, Georgie sat waiting for wisdom. In typical fashion, the counselor merely asked what Georgie was feeling and what he wished to do. *You were supposed to tell me what to do,*

Georgie thought. He took a minute to ponder and told the counselor of the emotions he had been juggling, happiness and anger. She understood why Georgie felt this way and validated his feelings. She told him her thoughts, that he should reach out only if he felt Father was sincere in his sobriety. However, she didn't assign it as homework, like she would do occasionally. It was merely a suggestion. A suggestion Georgie decided to take.

Six months later, Georgie waited at a restaurant table to meet with Father. They had sent a few letters back and forth until Georgie decided to give his phone number to Father. From there, they set a date and time to meet. While Georgie felt Father was sincere and genuine, that Father was actually sober, Georgie still had doubts. Georgie remembered the bruises encasing Mother's body. He remembered crying every night and struggling to sleep from the screaming. He remembered going to the hospital with a broken arm.

Father hurt Georgie severely. Father hurt Mother even worse. While Father being sober would not erase his wrongdoings, this may be the start of forgiveness. There had been time to heal away from Father, and now may be the time to heal with him.

Georgie knew he could leave at any point. If Father began to yell or didn't look sober, Georgie would get up and walk away. Georgie was prepared for the exit.

Thankfully, Georgie didn't need his escape plan. Father came, and the two had a peaceful meal. Both left hoping to see each other again soon.

# Writing Contest: Non-Documented Prose

"Being an Incomplete Account of the Events of February 4, 2022"

— Julia Munton, 1<sup>st</sup> Place

Things seem remarkably clear when you're staring into the eyes of someone who wants to die.

When you are holding a kitchen knife between a dryer and the wall of the yellow laundry room; while cold seeps into your shins from the concrete floor that is covered by thin, ugly linoleum. Your body shakes, but your voice remains steady, firm, as you stare into eyes that look back with all the hurt and reproach of a lifetime of pain. You speak with the operator on the other side of the line. This is a normal Friday night for her. This night is embedded forever in your memory and your shaking hands.

"911, what is the location of your emergency?"

"1623 South Pike Avenue."

"Okay, and what is the nature of your emergency?"

"My friend is trying to kill himself."

My friend is trying to kill himself, and I'm holding the knife where he can't hurt either one of us.

The cold wind blows in from the still-open door. Was it only two minutes ago that you came into the laundry room, because you thought something was wrong when he didn't answer your text?

(Thumbs up?)

(*Thumbs Up?*)

"If you let go of me, I'll give you the knife."

You wrench the knife from his loosening grasp because you can't take the chance he will try again. You hold his arm so he can't stab either one of you. You hold it parallel to your forearm, blade pointed *away*. You hold onto it because you are confident that he cannot rearm himself from you.

"I have the knife," you report to the operator.

You scoot, undignified, to the door and tap it to close it, but it slams, like always, in a great gust of wind and noise and kinetic reset. The cold will not do either of you any favors, and you are shaking, shaking, shaking, shaking.

There is a cat. Three-legged, stark black, *mrt*-ing in a rasp, like she smokes a pack a day. He smokes. Maybe that's where she gets that from.

He curls around her in defeat, and cries.

You think he would have killed you. Had you not struggled to get the knife behind the dryer, to get his arm extended in a way that ensured no motion could happen, trapped in the narrow space between wall and laundry appliance, and your inexorable grip on both his wrists—one to hold the knife, and the other to stop whatever bleeding that would run down his already scarred wrist—he would have buried the knife in your belly and watched you bleed. The eyes don't lie.

You see police at the door and crawl on your knees to give them the knife. Evidence, you think, and evidence he cannot grasp to try again. "He tried to kill himself with this," you say. He tried to kill himself, with the knife pointed perpendicular to his wrist. That doesn't make sense; a wrist cut

perpendicular is painful, but not deadly. He knows this. You know he knows this.

You stay kneeling on the cold floor, head bowed before him, wiping tears with shaking, shaking hands as words wash over you. Your legs go entirely burning numb with the cold and the strain of kneeling on them for so long. You accept it as your due, your penance for pushing him to this point.

You bow your head under the pleas and the tears and the lash of shame and guilt. This is your fault, you think. This is all your fault. If you had just kept your mouth shut and suffered in silence, *'throw-up-the-anxiety-into-the-toilet-and-flush-away-the-evidence-of-terror-and-fear-and-the-strain-of-middle-class-manners-in-a-cheap-brown-out-apartment,'* silent, none of this would be happening.

He leaves. Eventually, he leaves, borne away by an officer to sit in the back of a squad car with his three-legged cat, and the promise of a 72-hour psychiatric hold. The other officer stays with you, in that drab, yellowed laundry room, with its stark fluorescents that soften the room, but highlight the ugliness of the night. He asks you what happened. He asks to see your ID, and you pull out the wallet you forgot you had on you with hands that still shake. You can't get your ID out of its cloth prison because your hands still shake.

The officer gives you back the knife—the knife that was yours, that was stolen from your cutlery drawer for a purpose, the knife that you can no longer bear to look at, or use, or touch.

You take the knife and go back to your apartment.

You set the knife on the coffee table.

You sit on the couch. You pet your dog when she nudges your arm with her wet nose. You clip a leash to her collar when she whines and paws at your knee and take her outside into the cold. These are normal things, things you do every day, but today is not normal, is it?

You call her, your friend, the one he introduced to you before he moved. You tell her what happened. She is distraught. It's understandable. You're still shaking.

You call your mom. She wants to come to see you, help you calm down, help you sleep tonight, if you can.

You tell her no. You tell her you will be fine. You tell her you are so exhausted you'll fall asleep as soon as you touch your bed.

You don't touch your bed. Instead, you call the hospital. You ask if it's okay if you bring his many, many medications to him, so he has them, so the hospital cannot give him the wrong ones like they have so many times before, so you can give him the cat carrier so the doctors can work without the smokey *mrt's* at their ankles.

They say yes.

It is midnight, and you are outside your apartment, locking your door with shaking hands. One of your neighbors ambles down the sidewalk in a bulky security guard jacket that, for a minute, you think is yet another police officer, coming to ask you more questions about what happened tonight.

"Long shift," he says, incongruous of anything that has happened ten feet from his front door today and wanders into his own apartment.

You pick up your friends' life and put it in your car.

You text your boss, to tell her you won't be in to work tomorrow, and a little bit of why. You hope she won't ask questions.

You drive slowly. You take every turn with caution, you wait longer than you need at stop-signs, you are careful.

You end up in a ditch anyway.

Your hands are still shaking.

It is 12:28 am. You call your brother. He doesn't answer. You call his wife. She answers and puts him on the phone. He comes to help you get out of the snow-covered ditch. You wait in a cold car for half an hour, smiling past the panic and the anxiety and the sheer exhaustion of the day—the day that isn't over yet, not by a long shot—at everyone who passes and stops and asks if you're okay. You tell them that you're fine, you just drove off the road like an idiot, your brother is coming to help you.

He can't get you out of the ditch.

"We'll call a tow truck in the morning," he says, and takes you and your shaking hands home.

You get inside your house. You change for bed. You get in bed. You're still shaking. You can't get warm. Your dog and cat both cuddle with you. You feel like ice has moved inside your skin and is fighting a war with your muscles, and you're still shaking.

He texts you. They're discharging him from the hospital. It's a mandatory 72 hour hold for a suicide attempt, and they're discharging him after 4 hours of weeping and getting stuck and staring down the blade of your own kitchen knife that sits, still, on your coffee table. Your car is still in a ditch, waiting for a tow truck in the morning, you still have knives in your apartment that he now knows the location of, this friend who is asking to stay the night with you, after taking your kitchen knife to his wrist in a cruel way to get back at you for refusing to let him settle into your home like he



lives there and expecting you to take care of him, when you're a college student who just turned in your two-weeks' notice for your part-time, minimum wage job that didn't pay for everything *anyway* and you're *still shaking*.

You tell him this, send him \$150 for a hotel, and turn off your phone.

In the morning, you will rage. In the morning, you will cry in your mother's arms. In the morning you will pack his things mechanically, send them off with your brother to drop off at the hospital. In the morning, you will pack your things, chase your cat into his crate, clip a leash on your dog. In the morning, you will listen to the lies he told your brother, and you know they're lies because you were there when what really happened, happened. You will ask yourself what else he lied about.

In the morning, you will go to your parents' house, where they will cocoon you in love and support and such careful, awful, understanding. You will almost prefer censure to this careful eggshell that will be placed over your body until you are isolated with guilt for the love you receive that he will not.

You will be given tea and a blanket, and when you fall asleep on the couch out of pure exhaustion and drop your now-empty mug of chamomile on the floor, your sister-in-law will take your glasses from your face and set them on the side table and will tuck you in with another blanket. You will watch your niece play, and you will build a snowman with your nephew, and you will be okay.

But tonight, it is 4:27 am, and you are still shaking.

# **Writing Contest: Documented Literary/Linguistic Essay**

"Realism: The Origins and Works of the Era"

— Sarah Teubner, 1<sup>st</sup> Place

William Dean Howells, a famous realistic author, describes Realism as "...nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (qtd. in Perkins and Perkins 1047). Expanding Howells' definition, Sister Mary Slattery, a literary historian, says, "In every instance of realism...there is some reference made. It is by its nature referential, and its particular brand of reference seems to be that of correspondence...with the mundane or at least with accessible things, familiar to us from our habituation to reality" (56). In simpler terms, Realism relates the unfamiliar to the familiar to present reality through fiction. Realistic authors do not include fantasy or impossible elements into their writing. Authors may include excessive hyperbole and exaggeration but only if the fantastical elements are expressed by the characters rather than the writers. Using this loophole, realistic writers capture the realistic natural tendency in humans to exaggerate. By writing their characters as real people, the authors also allow themselves some liberties in storytelling and humor. As a facet of the faithful retelling of the facts, Harold Kolb, Jr. says, "While the realists do not achieve... absolute objectivity, they do strive for the illusion of objectivity, an illusion that was ignored by many eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novelists" (170). When authors present their characters realistically, they also encourage objectivity in their readers' opinion of the heroes, villains, and side-characters. Whether they despise the hero and support the villain

or vice versa, the readers are encouraged to make the choice without the author's influence. This shift in literary style is a dramatic change from the Romantic Era of the antebellum America.

Realism began soon after the Civil War. Perkins and Perkins in *The American Tradition in Literature* consider 1880 through 1920 as the years when Realism flourished (1047). However, in his book *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*, Phillip Barrish says, "...realism rose to eminence as the cutting edge of literary innovation in the United States and enjoyed arguably its high point of critical prestige and creative productivity: from about 1865, when the American Civil War ended, to about 1914, when the First World War began" (195). The chaos of the Civil War and its technological and social changes gave birth to Realism. Before the war, inventors were still perfecting mass printing which would give the common man access to literature. Barrish writes again, "It wasn't until the middle decades of the century that technological innovations...allowed books to be produced quickly and cheaply enough, and in sufficient quantities, that they could begin to be purchased by consumers in large numbers, which allowed for the possibility of meaningful profits both to publishers and (at least in theory) to authors" (8). In conjunction with the technological advancements allowing Americans easier access to literature, the social and cultural whims of Americans had begun to shift. Following the Civil War, Americans were disillusioned with the fanciful musings of the Romantic Era, and the great writers of the Romantic Era and Transcendentalism had passed their prime. Perkins and Perkins say, "By 1865, Irving, Cooper, Poe, and Hawthorne were dead. Melville... wrote one masterpiece, *Billy Budd*, a book that...remained unpublished into the twentieth [century]" (1047). The combination of technological advancements and social changes created the perfect environment for a new era of literature, written by new authors. From its origins after the Civil War, Realism experiences several changes

during its time. Goodman references Nancy Glazener, a leading authority on Realism, when he writes:

[Glazener] identifies three separate periods of discourse in the history of realism's production and reception: in mid-century as a uniquely democratic form devoted to the representation of the previously underrepresented working classes; at the end of the century as a bastion of professional authorship; and in the first part of the twentieth century as a genteel and elitist occupation. (520)

After the invention of the printing press, the working classes discovered the easily accessible literature, and Realism appealed to them because it portrayed life as they knew it. Seeing the popularity of realistic writing, many authors took this opportunity to publish unique works. One authorial example would be Mark Twain. Robert Weimann says, "Mark Twain points beyond not only the hopes and illusions of the gilded age, but also the humor and realism of the frontier, and he anticipates some of the profoundly ironic parabolic forms of twentieth-century realism" (201). Mark Twain started writing before the Realism Era and pushed the literary world towards Realism by introducing the working man to relatable literature. By the time Realism had come into full swing, many famous writers specialized in Realism, including William Dean Howells who "was firmly established in serious literary opinion as the foremost man of letters of his generation in America" (Perkins and Perkins 1077). During the middle of the Realism Era, Stephen Crane established himself as a writer in the Realistic tradition and dabbled in Naturalism and Impressionism before his untimely death at the turn of the century. Towards the end of the Realism Era, authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Charles Chesnutt became key figures in society and spoke out about cultural wealth and social injustice.

Charles Chesnutt wrote "The Passing of Grandison," a short story that demonstrates the first facet of the comprehensive definition of Realism which is the accurate presentation of events. Chesnutt tells the story of the slave Grandison's escape to Canada from the point of view of Dick Owens, the son of Grandison's master. Dick has been courting Charity Lomax for a year, but she says, "I'll never love you, Dick Owens, until you have done something" (Chesnutt 1311). To win her hand, Dick schemes to release one of his father's slaves. As part of his plan, he takes Grandison north with him and, when Grandison refuses to run away, Dick leaves him in Canada. Because she believes that Dick kept his promise to free the slave, Charity reluctantly agrees to marry him, but soon after their marriage, Grandison returns to a hero's welcome. Chesnutt writes, "The colonel killed the fatted calf for Grandison, and for two or three weeks the returned wanderer's life was a slave's dream of pleasure. His fame spread throughout the country, and the colonel gave him a permanent place among the house servants..." (1320). Despite his appearance of loyalty, Grandison soon disappears again with his family and returns to Canada. Mark Madigan aptly describes the story as "a burlesque of the slave narrative and cunning evisceration of the 'contented slave' myth promulgated during the antebellum period" (169). In this story, Chesnutt uses realism to dismantle a popular myth about the happiness of slaves and accurately portrays the real views of the slaves who want freedom. Even though his master gave him everything a slave could ask for when he proved himself loyal, Grandison wanted freedom with his family above all else, a common feeling among American slaves.

"The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane demonstrates the second facet of Realism which is referencing something well-known to the common man to explain something foreign. By connecting the unknown to the known, the writers promote understanding and ground their writing. Referential writing turns the fantastical into the realistic. Using this technique, "The Open Boat"

is the story of a group of men who are stranded in the middle of an ocean storm after their ship sank. Crane writes:

A seat in this boat was not unlike a seat upon a bucking bronco, and by the same token a broncho is not much smaller. The craft pranced and reared and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high. The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and, moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily these problems in white water, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave requiring a new leap, and a leap from the air. Then, after scornfully bumping a crest, she would slide and race and splash down a long incline and arrive bobbing and nodding in front of the next menace. (1353).

Crane artfully associates the ocean in the middle of a storm, something to which his readers may not have been exposed, to a horse, an animal far more familiar to the average person. The association between the storm and a bucking horse allows a clear, realistic image to be in the minds of the readers while presenting the situation as wild, chaotic, and dangerous as a storm in the middle of the ocean would be. "The Open Boat" becomes accessible to the common man because Crane uses the referential facet of Realism.

"Editha" by William Dean Howells exemplifies the third facet of Literary Realism, objectivity. Howells tells the story of a young southern belle, Editha, who insists her lover, George Gearson, go to war to be worthy of her love. Editha herself writes to George, "I shall always love you, and therefore I shall never marry anyone else. But the man I marry must love his country first of all..." (Howells 1082). George bends to the wishes of his lover, takes command of a unit, and goes to war. As a result, he is killed almost

immediately upon reaching the front lines. Gearson's mother is furious with the girl; nevertheless, Editha only grieves a short time for her lover before she "began to live again in the ideal" (Howells 1088). "Editha" realistically portrays a young woman with no understanding of the real world. Editha lives within a romantic bubble about what a man should do to win her affections while the world around her does not obey her romantic fantasies. In the end, Editha does not learn a lesson from her mistake, but continues to live in her perfect world which is a realistic end for Editha. Howells' does not blame or exonerate Editha for her actions. Rather, using a key facet of Realism, he merely relates them accurately and leaves the reader to form their own, objective opinions of Editha and her behavior.

The authors of the Realism Era transitioned the literary world between the Romantic Era of the early nineteenth century and the Literary Renaissance of the early twentieth century. By representing the real world through their writing, the authors embraced the world for what it was with all the good and bad aspects. This era re-defined how authors and readers approached literature, pulling the literary world away from the fanciful imaginings of the Romantic Era and preparing readers for the varied literature that would appear during the twentieth century.

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# Author Submissions

"I, Frankenstein" — Taylor Brown

Precious dream,  
A breaking levy,

Distant, damaged drums.  
No comfort here, no peace,  
Only a nighttime ritual of gravedigging  
To bring back dead things forgotten.

Cold dirt, allowing frostbite  
To claim aching fingers.

A headstone ripped from its place,  
There are no more dead things here,  
I can put you back together again.

My scarecrow,  
My beastly, shaking thing,

You will be whole again.

You will,  
You will,  
Anew, anew,  
I will make you anew.

**Author Feature: Taylor Brown**

Taylor Brown is a junior English Education major at SBU. She loves to read, write, listen to cool tunes, and watch under-rated movies. After graduation in Spring 2023, she hopes to move back home to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to begin teaching high school English and working towards her master's degree.

## "My Waterfall" — Brian Purkaple

If but my heart could sing like water down a fall  
For now my mind is quick and strong  
And towards my body I have not shame  
But these cannot compare to greater hope  
That someday I may cry a true refrain  
Which finds its roots alive within my soul  
And goes express to Him on high.  
More still that one such plea could multiply  
Until a day when each, like water drops  
Would join in uniform cascade  
And roar with shouts of praise  
Assuredly, I am only dirt and rocks: a bed  
By all my striving, I cannot make a drop  
Yet rains come, so I strive to carry them on  
I hold together and help them flow through me  
His grace alone fills me up  
So the fall to which my heart so longs  
The shouts of praise the world should hear  
Can only begin where I step down

### **Author Feature: Brian Purkaple**

Brian is a Junior at SBU majoring in Mathematics and Christian Studies with minors in Statistics and Biblical languages. He writes poetry as a way to express frustration and passion with and for the Church because he so often is not bold enough to communicate in person the depth of his investment and concern for the way people are living.

## “Earthbound” — Josey Murphy

For stars to die—  
to burst into glorious novas  
of dust and rock  
is to send their souls  
scattering across the ether  
on rays of cool light.  
To Earth, many fall;  
those, I collect.  
My bottle of starshine—  
to have a lick, a sip,  
is to taste their freedom:  
floating, escaping,  
swimming through galaxies  
on their endless journey,  
no longer bound to a rock  
as I am.

### **Author Feature: Josey Murphy**

From the tiny town of Long Lane, MO, Josey Murphy currently attends SBU as an English major with a minor in Writing. After graduating with her bachelor’s degree, she intends to publish more short stories, poems, and even a novel. Murphy has been writing consistently since the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and she has already won 1<sup>st</sup> place awards for two of her short stories, “Bonfire” and “Stitched,” as well as a 2<sup>nd</sup> place award for her poem “Missing in the Maize.”

## “Seasons of Love” — Jessica Voepel

Love comes in seasons.

Spring is how we start,  
just starting to get warm.  
Flowers begin to be planted  
and bloom within us.

Summer is not far behind.  
The sun shines brightly;  
it's so full of life.  
We pray it lasts forever  
because it never stays as long as we hope.

Autumn comes next.  
It's such a bittersweet time;  
it begins to become cold again.  
The world around us  
begins to disintegrate and dissolve.  
The end is nigh.

Winter lurks in the shadows.  
What once was, is no longer.  
There is only a cold, cold death  
that never seems to want to leave.

**Author Feature: Jessica Voepel**

Jess Voepel is a junior at SBU and is currently studying social work. She has published two poetry books and one children's book prior to this. Her author's Instagram page can be found by searching @jessvoepel.

## "Summer" — Betty Liu

Warmness was throughout the country.

A blanket of joy floated into our hearts.

The grass fields waved back at me.

Fresh dew of rain fell, splattered,  
on the edge of my face.

Whether it was tears or not,  
comfort was there.

The meaning of a breath –

being able to live –

being able to smile –

being able to cry –

all was worth it.

The Sun right by my side,  
vanish every ounce of darkness.

I'm finally free

Foreign to pain

Perfect peace at last.

**Author Feature: Betty Liu**

Betty Liu, an SBU freshman from Oregon and Hong Kong, has been writing poems and pieces of literature for as long as she can remember. She has loved creative writing to the point that she would like for people to relate deeply and find comfort in that no one is alone. This poem is one of the pieces that took Liu a while to write. She wasn't in a good place when she started it, but through perseverance and hope, she was able to finish it. She hopes this piece is able to bring a sense of relief. She would like to continue to help people through her poems. Liu believes words have a crucial impact on a person's life.



## “Her That Makes Me Smile” — John Mburu

Her brazen beauty, her cheerful smile  
Her cheerful smile, her glistening eyes,  
Her glistening eyes, her amazing style,  
Her amazing style, her love in disguise,  
It is her that makes me smile.

I first saw her merry in her street-looks,  
In college, hard on her books,  
I smiled at her outlooks,  
My heart, fell on her crooks,  
I knew it was her that would make me smile.

Look at us, sitting here in love,  
It is what I first said,  
My heart felt white as a dove,  
Her love, gay in my head,  
It was her making me smile.

Three years, my heart with her felt the same,  
It was her that was to blame,

My love for her, a Picasso to frame,  
It was true love after all, one that made my heart flame,  
Still today, it is her that makes me smile.

**Author Feature: John Mburu**

John M. Karora grew up in Kenya, East Africa. He moved to the United States at the age of 17 years to pursue his undergraduate studies in Biology at Southwest Baptist University. He faced difficulty fitting into a completely new environment, and as a result, he found his way into poetry. John enjoys writing poems from random trains of thought and from his experiences while living alone in the United States. He resides in Bolivar, Missouri, with his wife, Ta'mirra, where he works as a sous chef. "Her That Makes Me Smile" depicts John's love at first sight when he met Ta'mirra for the first time.

## “What to Write” — Gabriel Long

I am not a writer. At least, I am not a writer by trade. I was not gifted with an extensive vocabulary or deep, sensitive insights into the minds and hearts of men. However, I am a student, and good students do as they are told. I was told to write, so write I shall. The question is what to write.

Perhaps I could write something sad. I could write about the deep melancholic happenings of life and bring some form of catharsis to my mind. I could write with the saddening hindsight of someone with a hundred years more experience to reflect upon. I could try to move everyone who read my lament to tears. I would make them feel pity for me and for themselves when they relate to the pain I have felt. I would make something useful of those ugly happenings I have been through.

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Woe is me, for I am to leave the land I love. Me and mine are relegated to the life of vagabonds and wanderers. We cannot rest or lay down roots. I am forced to say goodbye as soon as I greet friends new and old. I leave behind those who I spent my boyhood with: my friends, my family, and no small part of myself.

I must venture forward on the dark unknown path without a single companion. I do not even have myself for company. Only the dark road before me and the shadowy uncertainties to keep me company. I would weep, but no one would hear me. I would sigh, but I cannot show my unease. I can only put one foot in front of the other because to collapse would be slightly more useless.

No-one could possibly understand this pain, loneliness, and fear. Though all are born alone and all die alone, I am destined to walk life's road

alone as well. Woe is me, for I have a long, dark road to travel with no-one but the stranger in myself for company.

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On second thought, I had best not write about sadness. For one, it seems to be bad for my own mind, and it may be bad for the mental state of others. Life is already full of enough shadows for each man. Who am I to paint them even a shade darker? Who am I to say my life has been harder than my brother's? Life is a cruel master that tortures every man with his own worst fears. Let me move past the common ground of pain and towards something that is more desirable.

Perhaps I could compose a romance, something that speaks of the longings of the heart. I could write of clandestine meetings and sweet nothings whispered between lovers. I could write of the deep indescribable feelings that deify the object of affection in the eyes of another. I would make concrete the abstract fire of affection. I would write about the greatest romance ever seen.

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Oh, that I could be with the one I love. I would not need the sun if only I could stay in the light of their company. It is as if my entire life has been spent walking in twilight until I met her. I did not know it was dark because I had no knowledge of light. Then I met her, and it was as if I were watching the sun rise for the first time. All the muted colors of night gave way to the vibrant dawn. I was stunned and bewildered at first, but as my sight adjusted to her brightness, I beheld the most beautiful creature ever made by God.

I wanted to know this bright stranger, but how could I approach someone so beautiful when I was so helpless and pitiful? However, before I

could steel my nerves or make up my mind, she took notice of me. She came close and smiled, and oh what a smile it was. It was as if her beauty grew from the dawn to the strength of the midday sun. I found that she was not only bright and beautiful, but warm and kind as well.

From that day forward, my vision of the world changes. All the flowers seemed more vibrant, and the birdsong seemed a little sweeter. I wished never to go back to the twilight before I met her. I wish I could spend all my days with this beautiful woman and her warm smile, and if I did nothing else, it will have been a life well spent.

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Uggh! I am not writing that. That is mushy, gushy, and embarrassing. Half of romance is hyperbolic, but those who write it interpret it literally. I cannot show that to other people, much less my classmates. I would be more of a laughingstock than I already am. Puppy love is best left to pups, and romance is best left to the lovers. As for me, I will write something else.

Perhaps both of these are beyond my ability. Maybe I should instead look to a simpler style since I am a simple man. I could write something humorous. After all, time is never wasted when taken to make someone laugh. My writing does not have to be lofty or epic. I need not write in the style of great authors. Instead, I could write simple things that even a child could enjoy. I could simply aim to lighten a small part of someone else's day. I could give the gift of a little bit of nonsense:

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On a beautiful day, I rested my backside near a bough of beautiful blossoms. It was there that I beheld a bunch of bees. Of these bees, there were two bands: the buzzing bees and the bumbling bees.

The buzzing bees went boisterously about their bee business, busily bussing between blossoms. After absconding with the bounty of the buds and buttercups, the busy, buzzing bees would bring their booty back to their abode. Here, they would brew bright, abundant batches of bodily fluids called honey. It is for this byproduct that some believe that the buzzing band is the more beneficial of the bees, but the fact of the matter is not so barefaced.

The bumbling bees were the bigger bodied of the bee bands. They blundered about between blossoms with their bulbous bottoms bobbling in the breeze. They too bussed bright bundles of pollen between the bushes, but they tended to be more beneficial to their botanical brethren. Bereft of these bumbling, bobbling bees, the blooms, berries, and bushes would not have been as bountiful or as bright. Thus, this band of bees, though they do not bless us with the bounties of their brew, are buy-in-large to better and more benign bee band.

So, if you feel as if you do not offer the world any boon, bounty, or benefit; if you feel as if you can only bumble despite your best efforts, remember the bees. Not all of them are blessed with the ability of bestowing their bright byproduct, but even the bulkiest and bobbling of the bunch can give the best benefits simply by being their best, busy, bumbling, bee selves.

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Yes, that is what I will do, a simple approach. It is both novel and witty, and I enjoy writing things of that nature. In fact, I consider it better than higher, more traditional writing styles. After all, work that is enjoyed is some of the best work there is. While some may be blessed by the muses in crafting laments and sonnets, I am content to write simple things. Why? Because it is what I prefer to do.

I may not be a writer, but I still must write. Therefore, if I must write, I might as well write what I want. Some may prefer solemn subjects or romantic writings, but I am drawn to more lighthearted lines. As to what that means, I, and many others, would call it simple, silly nonsense.

**Author Feature: Gabriel Long**

Gabriel Long is the son of Baptist missionaries. He was born in Springfield, Missouri, and spent parts of his childhood and adolescence in Scotland, France, Madagascar, and Kansas City, Missouri. Gabriel accepted Christ at a young age and is now going to school at SBU in hopes of becoming a missionary.

## “How to Write a Poem” — Taylor Brown

### Step 0:

Do not put pen to paper, fingers to keys, magnets to fridge. Wait. Wait. Wait some more. Wait until you feel as though you absolutely must write or you'll die.

### Step 1:

Experience something—preferably something as a child, or at a young age. Be very sad at 14, 15, 16, 17, and so on. OR be very happy. See this experience in deeper, fuller colors than anyone else. Talk to your friends, your mother. When they say, “I don’t remember it that way...” smile, nod, and plug your ears. It doesn’t matter because that’s how you remember it. Put on those rose-colored glasses (or black dahlia-colored glasses, depending on the tone you’re going for) and wear them proudly.

### Step 2:

Wait! Don’t start writing yet! We aren’t quite there. This is a crucial step. Doubt. Doubt. Doubt. Think those intrusive thoughts. Feel the anxiety bubble and build in your throat. Think to yourself, “I’m not good enough. Nothing I write will ever be good enough.” Meditate in that. Feel it good and fully.

### Step 3:

Go outside. Take a walk, a hike, a drive. Cry because it really is so pleasant out and aren’t the trees just lovely this time of year? Breathe and try to remember simple, important things. Put earbuds in. Listen to sad indie music, or happy alt-rock, or introspective classical, or calming lo-fi. Your music tastes ebb and flow and rise and fall, so anything will work really.



Think, what would Mary Oliver do? Watch a body of water. Watch the geese. Put yourself in their shoes (or wings?). Picture yourself flying away with them. Picture an entire life in which you are a goose. Give your goose-self a story that justifies your aggression towards humans. Maybe your mate was killed in a hunting incident, or maybe all of your goslings died in a late freeze. Actually, scratch the goose thing. It's getting too sad. Keep watching the water.

#### Step 4:

Let metaphors form in your head. Use your senses. Does the flap of wings remind you of a heartbeat? Does the murky, unclear water make you think of blindness? What does the blindness represent? Build the metaphors up and break them down until you have some that work, even partially. Think of them, but not too much. Metaphors are sensitive creatures. Tend to them gently. They can become violent if not cared for properly. At this point, your doubts will still be there, but they are no longer the primary. Think of your life as a whole, then think of your life in specifics. (I'm talking loose-thread-on-your-favorite-sweater, peephole-in-your-apartment-door, you-and-your-father-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin specific.) What hurts there? Does anything? If so, grab hold of the hurt by the tail, and don't let it go. This hurt is what we will work with.

#### Step 5:

Build the metaphors into a structure of some kind: chapel, cathedral, castle, cottage, coffin, etc. Anywhere that the hurt can call home. This isn't assigning blame for the pain; this is the act of taking ownership. Find the personal in the universal, in the mundane. Pull at that thread in your sweater. Unravel it and see where it leads. Don't worry about getting lost. The beauty of the thread is that it leads both away and back home. Bread crumbs, bread crumbs.

#### Step 6:

You're almost ready. This step is hard, I won't lie to you. You're going to have to open yourself up. Peel back the groaning, grown-over layers of you. You must do this if you are ever going to write anything honestly. It's going to be painful but don't worry. The form, metaphors, and words, they will act as armor. By the time you're finished, no one will ask, "Where did these feelings come from?" or "Is everything okay?" because they'll be too busy oohing and awing at your beautiful words. This is good. This is what we want.

#### Step 7:

Before you start writing, keep in mind that the words could start to flow and it could be very difficult to make them stop. They might take over completely. Your pen, your keyboard, your magnets. They are just a means to an end. On the flip side, the words could in no way, shape, or form flow. Blockage could occur. They might take some more time, some more meditation, more tearing down, and rebuilding. In any case, I take no responsibility for the thoughts and ideas that might occur through this process, as radical and life-changing as they may be. You may fear them, but don't run from them. Embrace them, confront them, write about them.

#### Alternative Step:

Disregard every previous step. Use one, two, or none. The steps don't matter much. Write what you want, how you want. Just write something. And for goodness sake, be honest.

**Author Feature: Taylor Brown**

Taylor Brown is a senior English education major from Springdale, Arkansas. She loves to read, write, bake, and watch movies. After graduation, she plans to pursue her master's degree in English from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. This is her second time being featured in *SCOP*.

## "Finally, Home." — Hope

*"A tree says: My strength is trust...I trust that God is in me. I trust that my labor is holy. Out of this trust I live. When we are stricken and cannot bear our lives any longer, then a tree has something to say to us: Be still! Be still! Look at me! Life is not easy; life is not difficult. Those are childish thoughts. Let God speak within you, and your thoughts will grow silent. You are anxious because your path leads away from mother and home. But every step and every day lead you back again to the mother. Home is neither here nor there. Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all."*

— Herman Hesse, *Bäume: Betrachtungen und Gedichte*

*I trust you*, I vowed, as I sat before him vulnerable and honest. Him—my Maker, my friend, my God. I am home; this trust gives me life.

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I have told few, but too many, that I have been homeless. It seems a truth I cannot believe; a truth I don't feel worthy enough to claim. I was homeless at age eight, age twelve, age fifteen, and nearly once more at age twenty. I may not have been without a physical shelter at all these times, but I was homeless in heart.

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The breeze blew the musty scent of decaying leaves and bark into my lungs. I inhaled deeply, savoring the familiarity of the air, finding comfort in the sound of rustling and groaning limbs overhead. The shadows and outlines of these trees had never frightened me by appearing as phantom claws reaching towards me to snag, grab, pull me into the woods like I read in fairy tales as a child. No, the things that could have hidden behind the

trees frightened me, gave me nightmares, though they never existed. Werewolves, tigers, vampires, the devil himself were apparitions who would terrorize me if I ventured off the porch and too far from home in my dreams. Reclining on my blanket, I mentally dusted my mind from the memories of those haunting feelings and looked up towards the stars. *I will not fear. That was never real anyway. I'm safe here.*

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I trusted my father to serve as my best friend. I saw him as my peaceful, secure rock to rest on every evening at age five when I would lay curled up tight between his chest and the red and green western styled cushions of the couch. We watched America's Funniest Home Videos religiously and called to my mother when we thought a clip extremely entertaining. This place that smelled of musty peppermint shaving cream and unbaked Pillsbury crescent rolls felt like home; I trusted this warm, solid place. I felt indestructible, even when my father's chest shook me as he shouted, "Awe no!" at the ridiculous failure worthy of evening television.

I traded that home between the cushions for home between the trees in the August after my eighth birthday. I remember running. Running as fast as I could, faster even as if the speed of my feet would wipe away the gnawing wrongness in my chest. I remember denial. Surely my father, my secure rock, had not lied to me as he said he never would. He had lied when he said he would stop drinking so he would act nicer at night and we could again find our place on the couch, watching *Dukes of Hazzard* while mom made dinner. Home was trust and home was broken, but those trees were green like my dad's left eye and those branches stretched out like arms to embrace me.

But when night fell and the embrace of the trees turned to shadows hiding evils behind their wide columns, I walked towards the glowing house

sitting in the middle of the clearing. My house, but as I looked from the outside in, it seemed alien; I did not know where this structure, the man who built it, and I stood. I felt like a stranger intruding into the life of a girl now lost. I continued walking, grass protesting in a rhythmic *whoosh-crunch, whoosh-crunch, whoosh-crunch* as I trampled it beneath my feet. I thought, *this place is just a shell, a husk. I'll live here a little longer until I grow out of this shell and find one bigger, more loving, more free.* I pasted on a smile like a mask and wore it past the strangers who didn't know how to trust themselves.

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I easily found my favorite constellation as I reclined in the bumpy bed of my 1999 Chevy Silverado. Cassiopeia always hangs overhead, perpetually chained to her throne, though right side up this night. The "W" shape of stars shimmered as I stared intently at the throne. *Where were you when I called?* I continued to watch the heavens, so distant, so beautiful, so loving and majestic, as I waited for an answer.

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I trusted my grandfather to live forever. During the unflattering phase of late childhood, the porch swing beside Grandpa became my safe place, free of judgement or striving. I found home in the weightless moments when I rocked back and forth next to his right side as he would call out to the bullfrogs and birds across the pond. His mimicking noises were always answered back, as if he and the critters had a secret language. I trusted him to stay long enough to teach me that code. I felt special in that place between the steady puffing of his oxygen tank as it forced him to inhale, *exhale*, inhale, *exhale* and the constant creaking of the hinges. I felt wise beside the man who spoke to the woods.

Too soon, I traded that presence of tranquility for survival amongst crumpled tissues and unfamiliar shadows in the February after I turned twelve. I remember crying. Sobbing until my nose felt too stuffy to breathe and my throat burned from unspoken anguish. *Was this how he felt those twelve years beyond what he expected to live? Constantly waiting for the next breath through a stuffy nose and burning throat?* The man beside who I could find what it meant to be myself had left, and he would no longer teach me how to voice my thoughts to the wild. So, I did not speak. I made the silence between four walls of an unfamiliar bedroom my home, and I did not trust myself to have enough strength to hold in my anguish and tears if I left. I felt like a stranger in my own body, unsure of what to do with so many emotions and nobody to trust them with.

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I felt a quiet rage at the silence. A bat flew over my vision. I felt no fear. Still, I wondered, *where you absent? Or was this your plan all along?* Again, the bat circled, diving low to catch a late season mosquito. I blinked. I waited. The wind stilled; the rustling of dried leaves ceased. I only felt a pool of bitterness sink low in my core.

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The time between my grandfather's death and the period when I was physically homeless remains to me a blur. I do not trust my own memories of that time; they roll through my mind like a photo album or home video fast-forwarded too fast. A plate shattered against the wall, gore from uneaten spaghetti splattered red against white, screaming and leaving and a late night at Sonic, just Mom and me. There was Christmas, a tree overflowing with red bows and apples erected too late to spread gifts under and left up till June. A smell like soured laundry, men in Hazmat suits saying we needed to find another place to live, smoke. There was a yard filled with

our belongings, unsafe to touch until we cleaned them in vinegar and bleach, until we killed the mold spores that exploded through my home during a hot, humid summer after the basement flooded. I looked at four now familiar walls which I had made home and yet again did not trust myself to have enough strength to leave. There was anger, bitterness swelling up inside my husk of a body, demanding release I could not give until I was far out between the trees, razor or rock or anything sharp in hand. There was a trailer, violently shaking with every creeping step in the middle of the freezing Ozarks night.

*Where was the trust that I had in myself to be strong and sweet?  
Where could I tell my teachers was home?*

Rather than returning to my make-believe home in the woods which I had always trusted, at age fifteen I turned to my hot pink MP3 player loaded with Black Veil Brides and Falling in Reverse. I let the rebellious melodies and voices crying out for help drown out the unexplainable rage inside myself. I trusted those strangers to explain home to me while I stared at the picture of the underside of the sky, framed by bare branches. I trusted time to bring me home.

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Resolute. I was resolute. Yet I felt uneasy thinking of the distance I was putting between my heart and his. There sat a kernel in my core like a crocus flower in early spring: it blooms in all its beauty not knowing if it will survive the frost. With the moon as my light, I studied the shapes of the bare trees, thinking *what if there is more for me than what I know now?*

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Time did not fail me. I smiled, laughing exuberantly at our inside joke as I strode down the hallway with my friend, Josie. She had just stolen my



backpack, lunch bag, water bottle, jacket, and everything else she could grab while I used the restroom and hid them everywhere: my water bottle in the sink, my lunch bag on top of the hand dryer, my jacket hooked across the mirror, and my backpack in another bathroom stall, dangling precariously over the toilet. I had taken a video to show my boyfriend Elijah, our mutual friends Alyson and Jayden, and the rest of our group later as we would gather around our lunch table in the upperclassmen side of the commons. In the April before I turned seventeen, life was perfect. I had trusted time and it did not break my trust, and my roots with these friends grew deep.

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I saw a shooting star. It shot fast overhead, just past the skeleton treetops, almost too fast to identify, the trailing firelight behind the bright core. I felt overwhelmed with joy- it was Him. I had never lived closer to God than under that clear night sky when the stars seemed to surround me, so near I could almost reach up and touch them like the glow-in-the-dark adhesive stars that I decorated my childhood bedroom ceiling with when I feared the dark. Cassiopeia's throne still sat upright, yet her stars winked as if sharing the secret of the origins of that lone shooting star, winked just as my family would when sharing a secret message of love.

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I trusted God to give me a family. Before I graduated high school, I envisioned this family to consist of some of the friends Elijah and I had gathered. During my early years at college, I began to see my church friends as part of this family. Hopeful realities backed my trust: Thanksgivings were full, twelve or more of us gathered around the grey painted table heaped with our feast, laughing, and telling stories. It was like a dream for me- everything I wanted. I had trusted God, and already he had given me what I

longed for. Then, my plans for family and home were changed, swept out from under me like the fallen leaves of a tree are from a patio.

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I never got to spend enough time with Elijah's father outside of our holiday gatherings. He always worked, laying wood flooring Monday through Sunday until he finished his project. I stood at the island in their family's kitchen eating blueberries on a warm April day when Dad walked in with a bruised forehead and nose. He had walked into the corner of his work truck's door he said chuckling. He hadn't felt the best lately and that was one of the numbered mishaps he committed. His nose would not stop bleeding, and a few days later he went to the dreaded doctor's office to get it checked out. His diagnosis said leukemia. I did not believe it. He was the healthiest man I knew, full of life and love. He would be my family; God, whom I trusted deeply, would not allow this sort of terror into our dreams- it was a nightmare apparition, false, just trying to scare us. Nothing could tear down the home I built while I still laid the foundation, not in the summer Elijah and I were to be engaged. On a May morning just before I turned twenty, I sat on the carpet in front of my window watching the trees bud with hopeful promises and opened my leather journal to a blank page. In the golden rays of light, I wrote "I fully believe you will heal him. When I try to think of a different way, I just don't see it." I wrote with blind trust, yet it remained true. Dad, before I could truly call him Dad, died not of leukemia, but of septic shock. And once again, I felt homeless.

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Two weeks after Elijah's dad passed, my phone rang just as I dressed for the day. I ran down the driveway and through the forest between my house and the neighbors. A yellow and red ambulance sat parked in my grandmother's carport. I asked the first responder standing outside the back

of the truck if I could see my Mamaw, my closest friend, before they left for the emergency room. I climbed the steps into the ambulance to find her laying on a stretcher, moaning from pain and bleeding from the vein a paramedic had tried to put an IV in. "I love you," I said to her, but she didn't hear me. She had not put her hearing aids in before she fell. "Hi Baby, I love you," she told me, only seeing my smile. A month later I sat with her in the ICU and soaked a sponge with water to moisten her tongue while she moaned and cried, "Please God, please God, please God," as sepsis shut down her organs one by one. Through those long hours I trusted God to hear my calls for mercy, mercy. Then as I held her baby-soft, limp hand a final time, all I wanted was to go back to our home nestled in the Ozark trees and wake from this dream, this nightmare.

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The wind picked back up its mighty *whoosh*. I could not, would not forsake my God. I still had no answers, no explanation, no apology. But I did not have to- those would never be enough anyway. So, to the wind and to the trees and to the sky with all my strength I said, *God, I know I have distanced myself. I miss you. I want to come back home.* I smiled. Just like the snapping of a stick between a hiker's feet, I understood that to give Him my hope, my story, and my trust would take me back home. I laughed, having no answers and still not feeling His presence, yet finally free. *I trust you*, I vowed. The future was still foreign, but trust remained the only thing I owned when life tore everything sacred from my home.

**Author Feature: Hope**

Hope is the penname of an emerging writer at SBU. Her memoir, "Finally, Home," is a story she hopes will inspire those in difficult situations to stand firm in their faith in God as Job did, without understanding the reason for their situation but holding fast to a faithful Lord nonetheless.