

2018 Young Writers Award

Winner 15-17

These Broken Souls of Ours

by Helen Yesberg

She visits after midnight. I see her from my window, waiting for me just beyond the garden at the edge of the yard. It is easier than breathing to tiptoe through the doorway without waking Mary, slip down the stairs and out through the kitchens, and meet her by the fence.

“Alice,” I whisper.

“Hello, Bonnie,” she says with that playful little smile. My breathing hitches and I twist my fingers in my nightgown.

For a moment, grass grows and the earth turns and we don’t need to say anything. But moonlight glints on the fence running between us, a solid iron barrier I will not cross, not even for her, and too soon the moment is over.

“You haven’t visited for some time,” I say.

“Why, Bonnie,” says Alice coyly, “you hadn’t forgotten about me, had you?”

Her presence is soaked into the walls of the bedroom I now share with Mary, branded on the floors of the long hallways and carved into the very foundations of the building. When the bells ring at midday, I hear her voice.

“No,” I say. “I haven’t forgotten.”

The wrought iron fence casts long, thin shadows across Alice’s face, but I see her teeth flash in the moonlight. “Who’s your new bunkmate?”

“Mary-Mary-off-with-the-fairies,” I sing. It’s a little joke of ours – Mary is practically a vegetable. I guess they wanted me to have a docile roommate, after the Alice incident.

A night bird calls in the distance and the corners of Alice’s lips turn down. “It feels wrong. We should be together, Bonnie.”

“We should,” I agree.

My wordless accusation settles between us like a cobweb.

“It can be that way again,” she says. “Come with me.”

If only I could. Cool night air whispers over my skin and I shiver, shaking my head.

Alice slams her hand against the fence. The rattle seems to ring on and on into the night, but the explosion of rage is over just like that. Her voice is calm, coaxing. Enticing.

“You don’t have to bear it, Bonnie. Give in. Come with me.”

She seems paler, somehow – less corporeal. The fence is still vibrating gently between us. My hand hurts.

A light appears in a window behind me, illuminating the institute grounds, but Alice is like a star before dawn, fading in the brightness. I can’t bear for her to go.

“Why did you leave me?” I scream. “Why, Alice? Why did you jump?”

I hear Sister Dorothy open the front door– I know it’s her, she’s the only one who ever notices my late-night episodes – and light floods across the garden toward the graveyard. In the brightness I see Alice the way she looked when she landed on the bricks, neck twisted some way it shouldn’t be, and my heart splinters.

“They’ll give you more pills,” she says sadly.

Sister Dorothy grabs my arms roughly from behind, ignoring Alice completely, muttering about the foolishness of building a mental institution next to a graveyard, how it gives us ideas. It sure gave Alice ideas.

“Don’t leave me,” I plead, as Dorothy marches me toward the building, away from Alice. She watches dolefully, broken fingers resting on the iron fence.

“You know how to be with me,” says Alice, my star before dawn – and then she’s gone, like she was never there at all.