

Edisto River Review 2025



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Edisto River Review 2025

Claflin University

Orangeburg, South Carolina

Volume X

Editor: Nick Robinson

Associate Prose Editor: Dennis Bormann

Associate Poetry Editor: Astrid M. Beckers

Cover Design: Laya Kelly

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FROM THE EDITOR

Over the past nine plus years, in my various roles at the *Edisto River Review*, I've been able to read prose from brand-new to award-winning student-writers, I've supported visual artists and emerging writers through Claflin's annual contests, commissioned works of photography and painting from student-artists, come across essays, poems, and stories that make me both weep and laugh aloud in pleasure and envy. Yes, every year the submissions, even on the umpteenth readings and viewings, blow me away. What a privilege this job is.

This year is no different. The work, the artistry of Claflin's student body continues to soar. The core theme for this, the 10th edition of our *Edisto River Review*, was, My Body, My Choice—True or Not and Why? In line with this theme, Laya Kelly's first-place prize-winning journal cover offers a visceral rendering of puppet strings controlling female reproductive organs being cut; the back cover, an ankh, the ancient Egypt symbol of life within which a fist represents the fight for control over one's own destiny. The winner of this year's nonfiction contest, KA Kennedy's "Survivor," takes readers on a personal struggle with rape, a possible pregnancy, and survival. While Genesis Shackelford's First Place winning fiction, *Love Lost in Time*, is a groundhogs' day story of love and betrayal. Our winning poetry submission, Diamond Pearl Jones's, "Girls," celebrates females as torches of the world, "torches of the future."

We hope you are moved by the unique and original works of this edition as much as we have been. As I've previously noted, movement in the form of change is at the core of art. You consume an essay, a poem, story, or a painting, and it alters you, sometimes for a short while, but often enough permanently and in ways you may not even be aware of on a conscious level. And isn't change what it means to be human, including being in debt to people you don't know and that you can never thank enough? But today, I'll try to express the editors'

appreciation. Thank you, Laya; thank you, KA; thank you, Diamond; thank you, Genisis; for your moving contributions to the Claflin community and to the world at large!

As I shifted gears and considered themes for our 2026 *Edisto River Review* and this year's contests, what occurred to me is that wars surround us: wars of creeping scope and scale and consequence, wars of a seemingly unprecedented depth of death and devastation Wars between countries and political parties, wars between individuals, the purported good against evil, the unambiguous right versus wrong. And like the sun interrupting a cloudburst, the theme for this year declared itself to me: "Love in All Its Manifestations!" The editors want to hear your thoughts, ideas, and experiences about love for your parents, siblings, and children. We want poetry, stories, essays, and art manifesting love for your bestest friend, your favorite pet, your good neighbor or cherished country. We want your experiences with deep romantic love, burning sexual love, and determined self-love. We want to know your love for humanity. You may know that we've significantly increased the first-prize cash payout this year: \$500 for first place in all four categories, and with \$100 for second place winners, and \$75 for third. For more details on the contests, look for this flyer in Claflin's Monday Communications email, and then email me your work at Nrobinson@claflin.edu.

In closing, if this is your first time with our journal, with *your* journal, thank you in advance for cracking the covers. If you've been with us before, thank you for coming back. Good reading!

Nick R. Robinson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English

Editor, *Edisto River Review*

2025 Department of English Creative Writing Awards

Clafflin University

Cover Art

First Place: Laya Kelly, Front Cover: *No Strings Attached*, and Back Cover: *Go Green*

Non-Fiction

First Place: KA Kennedy, *Survivor*

Second Place: Aditi Patel, *The Journey of an International Student*

Third Place: Genesis Shackelford, *A Personal Journey Through Peaks and Valleys*

Honorable Mention: Faith Jenkins, *Isn't He?*

Fiction

First Place: Genesis Shackelford, *Love Lost in Time*

Second Place: Gabrielle Wiggins, *Butterflies*

Poetry

First Place: Diamond Pearl Jones, *Girls*

Second Place: Gabrielle Wiggins, *In the Fire, I Wait*

Third Place: Kamya Haynes, *A Volcano Ready to Explode*

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KA Kennedy

Survivor—FIRST PLACE WINNER

Nonfiction

“I didn’t ask for this!” “I know. You didn’t, but you are a survivor.”

~

It was time for my last class of the day, History of Women. I had a love hate relationship with this class. I loved that it was run by a teacher, Ms. Wolovich, who was not afraid to have difficult raw conversations with her students. I loved that her class was chill, and she also happened to be my favorite teacher. I hated, however, that her homework assignments consisted of readings that were sometimes over fifteen pages, and that she would never let me get some shut eye. I would go up to her after class with a “Hey Wolves!” and be met with “I’m not happy with you. You didn’t participate, and you slept in my class.” It was a routine. Every other day I would show up late, take a nap, and then annoy her after, but this day was different. I went up to her during class and asked her if I could go take a walk around the building. This wasn’t too out of character for me as I struggled with anxiety, and being in class when I was anxious was overwhelming. I left class, took a walk and a few breaths, and came back before the class ended. For some reason the walk didn’t give me the breath of fresh air that I needed it to. Whatever I was holding on to was like a weight pressing on my chest that I needed to get off.

It was now 2:49 pm. The bell rang, and we were dismissed for the day. I joined the flock of students into the hall and headed to the senior locker room. The locker room was always busy with loud conversations, laughter, and napping seniors. The locker room was

absolute chaos, but I tuned everything out. It was like my physical body was there, but I wasn't. I was lost in my mind. Desperate to avoid an anxiety attack, I needed to talk to someone. "Ms. Wolovich, can I talk to you please?" She met me in the History Resource Center.

"What's up? Why did you leave my class today?" she asked.

"It's highly unlikely," I said.

"Okay," she responded.

"It's highly unlikely," I repeated.

"Kym, I heard you. It's highly unlikely. What is it? You're making me nervous." She said, sounding slightly brittle.

Too afraid to say it out loud, I opened the notes app on my phone and typed it out. The words "I might be pregnant" were written across my phone screen. I handed her the phone and looked away. She put the phone down and looked at me with what I thought was disappointment. Afraid of what she might say, I blurted out, "I'm not sexually active." This left a look of confusion on her face. "It wasn't consensual."

Her look of confusion was replaced with pity and shock.

"Kym."

The next few minutes were filled with questions and shallow responses.

"When did this happen?"

"Almost a month ago."

"A month? Did he use contraceptives?"

"No."

“Who did it?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“What do you want to do right now? Cry? Scream?”

“Disappear.”

~

That conversation led to conversations with my parents, conversations with a detective, tests for STDs, and a pregnancy test. I was forced to recall the moments where the last bit of my innocence was stripped from me by a complete stranger. I didn’t have a choice with him, and I didn’t have a choice with the detective. I tried so hard to suppress the memory, but the memory wasn’t just stored in my mind, it was in my body too. If someone grabbed my arm, I would be brought back to when he grabbed me to stop me from walking away. I would remember how he then pushed and pinned me against the wall. When a friend would whisper something in my ear, I would remember the feeling of his breath against my neck. I would remember him telling me not to scream, that no one was there to help me. I would have dreams that played it out like a movie.

I’m at church on my way to the bathroom when I see a guy standing by the bathrooms. I say hello and keep going, but he stops me to have a conversation. I try to walk away, but he grabs me and put me against the wall. He took, and took, until he was satisfied then left. He left me there to pick up the scraps of me that were left over; whatever part of me that he didn’t deem fit enough for him to devour. I used the bathroom, composed myself, and went back into the service like nothing happened.

~

A survivor is someone who is still alive following an awful event in which others have died. I am still alive, but am I really a survivor if part of me has died? I died when that man took from me. I died when I had the conversations with my teacher. I died when I had to tell my parents. I died when I had to talk to the detective. I died with each panic attack and every dream. I've died, so how can I say I survived?

Gabrielle Wiggins

Butterflies—SECOND PLACE WINNER

Fiction

I was never fond of butterflies. Their delicate wings always seemed so fragile and bug-like, too fleeting, like they could vanish at any moment. Yet now, I see them everywhere-fluttering past me when I least expect it, resting on a ledge as it waiting for me to notice. It's strange how something so small can leave such an imprint-a quiet reminder of what was once held close, now distant, like a whisper in the wind.

We were inseparable once, sharing those afternoons after school, walking home with the crunch of leaves beneath our feet, racing to see which one of us could make it home first. Those were the moments that made the world feel small, like we had all the time in the world to simply be, to exist together.

I don't remember when the shift happened. Perhaps there was never a shift, but a quiet unraveling, stretched over years of moments too countless to hold. Maybe it was the slow trickle of unexpected exits, or how conversations began to feel like chores. Our paths have long since diverged, yet I find myself still holding on to fragments of who we once were, trying to bridge the distance with memories and words that cannot leave my mouth.

The last time we met, I was so uneasy. I did not know which version of you I was conversing with, but I knew that we were still connected. There was no shared nostalgia, no inside jokes that once would have sent us into fits of laughter. Just two people who had known each other for a lifetime, who had meant the world to one another, but were now only connected by the ghost of a sisterhood that had faded into the background of time. It's strange how we grow, how we change, how the smallest things-the flutter of butterfly wings-become the things

we seek, the things we grasp for when we don't know what else to hold on to.

You loved butterflies. Though I never shared your appreciation, and you never understood my disdain, I find myself searching for them in everyplace I go. They are a quiet reminder of something beautiful that once felt so simple.

And now, I see butterflies not just as a creature with delicate wings, but as a piece of you, fluttering in and out of my life when I least expect it. Perhaps you were always like that-elusive, beautiful, carrying bits of your spirit wherever you went. Like the way you loved them, I find myself seeking them out, drawn to their gentle grace. They are reminders of who you are, of what you meant to me, and of the way we once danced through life together. Though our bond has stretched, you will always be that butterfly in my heart, a symbol of something beautiful and fleeting, something I will carry with me wherever I go.

Aditi Patel

The Journey of an International Student: A Story of Longing and Resilience—SECOND PLACE WINNER
Nonfiction

Leaving behind the warmth of home in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India was one of the hardest decisions I have ever made. Life in India was a comforting rhythm of family, friends, and familiar routines. I still remember the comforting aroma of my grandmother Kokilaben's cooking filling the home, the echo of laughter during family dinners, and the warmth of festivals that united us all in joy. Every meal was a feast filled with love and tradition. As a vegetarian, I never had to worry about what I could eat. Life felt secure and my future seemed bright. Yet, deep down, I knew that staying in my comfort zone would limit my potential. The dream of studying in the United States, in a land of endless opportunities, pulled at me. Little did I know, the journey ahead would test me in ways I had never imagined.

I will never forget the day I left my home on 17th December 2023. The weight of my suitcase was nothing compared to the heaviness in my heart. My family stood at the airport from 2:30 p.m., trying to smile through their tears. My grandmother, who had always been my biggest source of comfort, held my hand a little longer before letting me go. It was the hardest goodbye of my life. The excitement I had once felt about studying abroad was now clouded by fear. Still, I reassured myself that this was the path to a better future.

When I arrived in the United States, reality hit me hard. My first struggle was food. Before this, I never had to think twice about what to eat. Every meal was filled with the flavors which I loved, made with care. But here, as a vegetarian, I felt out of place. The cafeteria had many options, very few I could eat. "How am I going to survive this?" I thought with every bite of bland food, longing for just one meal from my grandmother's kitchen.

It was not just the food—the language was another challenge. Even though I can speak English, people talked so fast, and their accents were difficult to understand. I would nod my head, pretending I got it, but inside, I felt lost. In class, I hesitated, afraid that speaking would make me stand out. "What if they don't understand me?" Every word felt like a marker of my difference, making me feel more isolated.

Adapting to this new world wasn't just about food or language—it was learning to navigate a completely foreign place. Simple things like grocery shopping or taking the bus felt overwhelming. Earlier everything was familiar, but here, every step reminded me of how far I was from my home. Each day felt like I was learning to walk all over again in a world that wasn't mine yet.

The loneliness soon turned into constant anxiety. Every call from home was bittersweet. Hearing my family brought comfort, but it also reminded me of how far away I was. The distance felt unbearable, and I whispered to myself, "I miss you all more than words can say."

Despite the emotional toll, I have found ways to cope up with these things. I have learned to cook some of my favorite dishes from back home. While they don't taste exactly like my grandmother's, they bring me a sense of comfort. I have also made friends who understand the struggle of being far from home. Together, we share our stories, our fears, and our hopes, finding strength in the fact that we are not alone in this journey.

This ongoing journey has tested me in ways I never expected. It has been filled with loneliness, anxiety, and moments of overwhelming homesickness. But it has also taught me resilience. I learned that the place does not give happiness but people around you make a difference. The challenges are still ongoing, and the road ahead is uncertain, but I am growing stronger with every step. I know that every step I take is bringing me closer to the person I want to become.

Diamond Pearl Jones

Girls—FIRST PLACE WINNER

Poetry

"Who runs the world? Girls!"

I'm pretty sure that's what Beyoncé said.

I mean yeah, she's rich and "beautiful"

So, I guess you can call her the head

But why don't we applaud the women with little money

Trying to save their children's lives

Or the ones who are CEOs of big businesses

Or even the overlooked housewives

You see I am an African American female, and I am trying to find my place in this world.

Cuz all attention goes to the boys,

And society just overlooks us girls

The black girls

Some Hispanics

And even some whites too

But as young black female, I'm going to explain my struggle, to you.

There are endless derogatory statements that are thrown at me as a colored girl

I'm not a thot or a trick, I shine like diamonds and glow like pearls

You boys come up to me with every compliment written in this made-up book

Trying to get into my pants, giving me a lustful look

But I am not a sex slave

And I am not putting this aside

Cuz are all girls thots?

No, we are women, bonafide

So come along females

Let's step up and show some pride

Through the way we walk
And the way we talk
Because don't forget, we're a prize!
See a man will not see what he has lost until she is gone
And he'll try to get her back singing some stupid love song
Cuz Every man wants a "hot chick"
But nobody wants a lady
They want to have sex
But they don't want to take care of their baby
So, where are my ladies,
The ones who show classiness and pride
The ones who don't mind fighting for what's right
Come, let's take this outside
Cuz I'm tired of being expected to have a "good shape" and big butt cuz
I'm black
Or be able to dance, nah, cuz now I guess I'm whack.
How about when they assume you can Twerk the butt you don't even
have
Or wear the most expensive weave and be oh sooooo bad
No shade cuz look at me, I do wear weave too and It's not a big deal
Because I'm proud of who I am
Whether I'm the darkest or lightest on the color wheel
You see I'm all for black power
Don't you see I'm at CU
but these protests were just for men,
Shouldn't we be fighting for women too?
What about the countless number of rapes that have been happening to
girls
All those female students captured in Africa used for sex, look around
the world
Lena baker, a female slave, was raped by her master for years

Then one day, it was self-defense and that brought everyone to tears
She killed the man, and they killed her because murder is a crime
But they found out what happened, and her case was pardoned, in just a
matter of time.

Protesting, boycotting, not taking the bus
Has this all gone to waste, what has America done to us
What happened to that fire that burned deep within our soul?
When the torch of the future was our one and only goal
But how can you give up after protesting for one day
Unless you make the rules in America, this is the only way
So come on just listen to what we have to say
Cuz we are the torch of the future
We are the light that that darkness dreams of
We are the hope that the NAACP speaks of
The black leaders tried. Let's pick up from their start
But don't you use a torch to see in the dark?
So, we, the youth of the black community,
Need to take charge and join in unity
Cuz we will be that light needed in this dark world to lead the way
to finally reach that light, on a brighter day.
So yes, I am taking in an awful lot of pride
That same pride depicted from Maya Angelo's still I rise
Pride in being American, being black and being a girl
I have to say this, Beyoncé was right, we do run this world

Genesis M. Shackelford

A Personal Journey Through Peaks and Valleys—THIRD PLACE

WINNER

Nonfiction

No one's life is perfectly good or perfectly bad. Life is a series of highs and lows. These fluctuations are what make us unique as individuals, shaping our personalities, our perspectives, and the way we interact with the world. Essentially it is what makes you, YOU. However, for some people, these emotional swings are far more intense and often occur without any apparent reason. This is the case for those with bipolar disorder, a mental health condition characterized by extreme mood swings between manic episodes, where individuals may feel euphoric or excessively energized, and periods of deep, debilitating depression. At a young age, these symptoms became apparent in me.

In the United States, approximately 2.8% of adults have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and of these, the majority will experience depressive episodes. Bipolar disorder is characterized as a mental condition where one may experience extreme mood swings. It can be further broken down into two common types. Bipolar 1 disorder, involving more severe manic episodes to occur. And Bipolar Disorder 2, causing more depressive episodes. I know from my own experiences, I am a type 2 as throughout my life I can recall struggle much more with depression than what is common. The depressive episodes can lead to withdrawal from social activities, forming important relationships, and understanding emotions. Many people with bipolar depression also find it challenging to maintain employment due to the unpredictability of their mood swings.

Throughout my life, there were subtle signs that something wasn't quite right, though I didn't fully understand it at the time. As I grew older, these mood shifts became more pronounced, leading me to experience extended periods of depression, often without knowing why. I remember my mother, even when I was a teenager, expressing her concern for me, sensing that something was off. However, at the time, I was unsure myself. I was able to tell that something was wrong but not able to find a cause. This would end up creating a hole in our relationship, which was the last thing either of us needed. Looking back, it's clear that my struggles with bipolar depression affected many aspects of my life. My confidence took a serious hit, and it became harder and harder to motivate myself or think positively.

The depressive episodes were particularly difficult to manage. At their worst, they left me feeling trapped in bed, overwhelmed by an inexplicable heaviness. Like most cases of extreme depression, I was left with many suicidal thoughts and though I never once attempted suicide, the thoughts did weight heavy and were constantly draining. My inability to cope with these feelings caused me to miss a significant portion of my high school years up to half of my days simply because I couldn't gather the strength to face the day. These feelings of despair weren't something I could easily explain, nor could I simply "snap out of them." Instead, I was left grappling with a complex, often misunderstood condition that left me feeling isolated and disconnected from those around me.

Often, individuals suffering from mental disorders experience significant challenges in connecting with those around them. Mental illness can be deeply isolating, not only because of the symptoms that create barriers to social interaction but also because of the belief that continues to surround mental health issues. People with mental health

conditions may feel misunderstood or judged, leading them to avoid social situations. This sense of alienation is compounded by the fact that many mental disorders are interconnected. For instance, depression often coexists with anxiety disorders, and it is not uncommon for someone diagnosed with one condition to be diagnosed with another later on. In fact, research suggests that more than half of people diagnosed with a mental disorder will eventually be diagnosed with a second or third condition over their lifetime. This phenomenon, known as comorbidity, can make diagnosis and treatment more complex as each disorder can exacerbate the symptoms of the other.

The link between mental illness and social anxiety is well-documented. According to research, individuals with mood disorders, such as bipolar disorder or depression, are at a higher risk of developing social anxiety disorder. The two conditions often feed into one another, creating a cycle of avoidance and isolation that becomes increasingly difficult to break. For me, this cycle was deeply ingrained by the time I reached my teenage years. Social situations were no longer just uncomfortable, they became a source of genuine fear. I often felt paralyzed, worrying that my mental health struggles made me “different” in a way that others could see or judge. As a result, I withdrew even further from social interactions, which only intensified my sense of isolation and contributed to worsening anxiety.

In my case, the difficulty in socializing stemmed from that slight but profound difference I felt from others. While I was surrounded by peers, I often felt disconnected, as though I was watching life from the outside. My struggles with bipolar disorder, particularly the depressive episodes, made it hard to relate to others or engage in social activities. This sense of separation left me feeling isolated, which only deepened my feelings of inadequacy. As I grew older, these challenges in

socializing worsened, eventually manifesting as severe social anxiety. This anxiety became a significant obstacle, making even casual conversations with friends or family feel overwhelming. Simple tasks, such as attending social events or initiating a conversation, began to feel unbearable, and the fear of judgment or rejection kept me in a constant state of apprehension.

Social anxiety continues to affect me today. While I've made progress in understanding and managing my mental health, the anxiety remains a persistent hurdle. Even now, I often find myself hesitating before engaging with others, second-guessing my words or actions. Although I am learning to cope and build my confidence, the journey has been long, and overcoming social anxiety remains one of the more challenging aspects of my mental health journey.

These years weren't entirely consumed by sadness either. Bipolar disorder is not just characterized by depressive episodes; on the opposite side is mania, a state of heightened energy and euphoria. Although I experienced mania less frequently during my childhood, when it did happen, I would describe it as an exhilarating, almost "high" feeling. During these manic episodes, I felt a surge of creativity and boundless energy. My mind would race with ideas, and I would often immerse myself in new hobbies. Whether it was painting, gardening, or another creative outlet, these moments felt like a burst of inspiration, as if I could achieve anything I set my mind to.

Mania, for many individuals, can feel empowering. The National Institute of Mental Health explains, that during manic episodes, people may feel unusually creative, productive, or even invincible, often leading to impulsive behavior or the pursuit of various activities. For me, these periods of heightened creativity allowed me to create small talents, many of which I still value today. Arts, crafts, and

gardening, in particular, became therapeutic outlets, helping me express myself in ways I often couldn't verbalize.

However, these moments of heightened creativity came with challenges. Growing up, I often felt that when I tried to express myself during these manic episodes, I was met with dismissal or disapproval from those around me. Instead of being encouraged to explore my creative impulses, I was shut down, as if my excitement or energy was too much for others to handle. As a result, I would quickly retreat back into a quieter, more subdued version of myself. This repeated experience of being silenced had a profound effect on me. Over time, I began to internalize the idea that expressing myself was wrong or that my feelings didn't matter. This would eventually be one of the main causes for my social anxiety and add more reasonings behind my depressive episodes.

As I furthered on into my late teenage years, I realized myself that I was not getting the proper help I clearly needed. I started to do my own research and started seeking out professional help to get medically diagnosed with the help of my mother. With all of my work it had become apparent that I was and had been suffering from a mental disorder. With now knowing this I was able to learn coping strategies in order to help myself become better. I also started taking the time to reflect on my own life and look at some aspects of it where things possibly might've worsened my case. I am still on this path trying to find myself after being lost for so many years. Though challenging, I strongly believe that soon I will finally be able to live a life where I am truly joyful.

I firmly believe that mental health among young teens and growing children is not taken as seriously as it should be. Adolescence is a critical time in an individual's development, and the mental health

challenges faced during these years can have lasting impacts if not properly addressed. Unfortunately, mental health services for young people are often underfunded and understaffed, leading to a widespread lack of access to care. Globally, over 70% of people with mental illness do not receive treatment from healthcare professionals. This treatment gap leaves millions of young people without the support they need during a crucial stage of life, contributing to long-term consequences for their well-being.

For me, seeking help was an especially difficult task. I chose online therapy because I was too afraid to speak out and seek help from my family. This fear of judgment or misunderstanding is common among those with mental health conditions, particularly in environments where mental health is not openly discussed. Online therapy allowed me the privacy and safety I needed to start addressing my mental health without fear of stigma. It also provided flexibility, which was important given my fluctuating moods.

In treating bipolar disorder, several approaches have proven effective. Medications such as antidepressants may be prescribed, but they are typically used in conjunction with mood stabilizers or antipsychotics. Antidepressants alone can sometimes trigger manic episodes, making mood stabilizers or antipsychotics essential in preventing this and maintaining balance. Personally, when it comes to my mentality, I chose to stay away from medicine with the idea that if I am going to find happiness, I can do it on my own. In addition to pharmacological treatments, psychosocial interventions like support groups and family therapy play a vital role in helping individuals cope with the social and relational challenges that come with BPD. These interventions can provide emotional support and help people build healthier relationships, which are often strained due to the unpredictable

mood swings associated with the disorder. I joined and am still a part of many online therapy groups and chat rooms where people with similar stories to mine can seek advice from others.

I sincerely hope that in the future, mental health becomes a more widely discussed and understood topic, particularly for not just young people like myself, but people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages. Despite modern advances, mental health is still treated poorly across the globe. The stigma surrounding mental illness especially within the black community remains a significant barrier to seeking help, and until mental health is treated with the same seriousness as physical health, many will continue to suffer in silence. Mental health education, access to treatment, and open conversations are essential to changing this reality. If we can create a world where young people feel supported and empowered to seek help, we can prevent countless individuals from enduring unnecessary pain and isolation.



Courtesy of—**Symone Gidron**, *Cherry*—

Faith Jenkins

Isn't He?—HONORABLE MENTION

Nonfiction

Being a father doesn't automatically make you a dad. A dad requires more consistency and being there, plus so much more. Growing up without my father has been one of the most defining aspects of my life. His absence left a void that shaped my experiences, emotions, and the person I have become. While navigating life without his presence and guidance was challenging, it also taught me resilience and self-reliance. But I always wondered... Did I do something wrong? Was I not good enough? What could I do better as a daughter to make him stay? The countless times that eight-year-old girl thought, *He isn't coming, is he?*

On October 5, 2005, I was born into a world filled with love and attention. I was the first daughter to my parents, the first granddaughter to my grandparents, and the first niece to my aunt and uncle. You can imagine the overwhelming affection that surrounded me. Yet, to a newborn, the only people who truly mattered were my mom and dad. Growing up, my relationship with my mom was strong, while my bond with my dad felt more like a balancing act—50/50 at best. As a child, everything felt like a blur. Whenever I heard, I was going to see my dad, my face would light up with joy and eagerness. Deep down, I longed to be a daddy's girl, but I never quite had the chance to experience that fully.

I remember my eighth birthday as a turning point. That day, I felt things starting to change; my dad was no longer the figure I thought he was. I sat in the car, waiting to be surprised by the gift my mom had planned: a trip to get my nails done. My dad arrived at the salon to surprise me but left almost immediately. During the pedicure, I couldn't

help but wonder: “Would I see him again? What does he think of me? After today, we’re going to have the best relationship.” At least, that’s what I hoped. Sadly, after that day, I didn’t see my dad again until I was thirteenth. In the years that followed, I tried not to dwell on him too much. I would constantly wonder, “Is he coming?” From the age of thirteen to nineteen, I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen my dad. I wish it could be more, but I’ve come to accept that’s just how life is.

On graduation morning, May 29th, I hadn’t heard anything about my dad coming. I pretended to be indifferent whenever my mom asked how I felt, but deep down, behind closed doors, I cried and prayed that he would show up, to prove that he still loved me, just one last time. As I walked across the stage, proud of my accomplishment, a part of me still hoped he would appear out of thin air to watch his little girl take this important step. But as I turned back after walking, I reverted to that eight-year-old girl who realized, “He isn’t coming, is he?” He didn’t. He never came.

Now, as a nineteen-year-old, I’ve finally accepted that my dad will not return. I have grown, and I’ve come to terms with the end of my efforts to build our relationship. The little girl in me still longs for her dad, but I believe everything happens for a reason, right? I’ve gone through life without a daddy-daughter dance, brunch with dad, or the comfort of running into his arms when thunder claps too loud. I’ve missed out on having him in the stands at my high school cheer competitions, cheering me on.

Now in college, I realize there are many lessons a father is meant to teach his daughter that I’ve missed. Yet, despite all this, I wholeheartedly forgive my dad. I’ve always forgiven him, regardless of the circumstances. I don’t hate him, nor do I blame him. I simply wish I

had a present dad like every other little girl. Although I know he still loves me, there's a part of me that realizes, No, he isn't coming, is he?

Gabrielle Wiggins

In the Fire, I Wait—SECOND PLACE WINNER

Poetry

You infuriating, brilliant, impossible idiot.

I have spent a lifetime trying to outrun you. Trying to outshine you, outpace you, leave you behind in the dust where I thought you belonged.

But you never stayed there, did you?

No matter how hard I fought, no matter how many times I pushed you away, you kept coming back—rising, burning, shining in ways I refused to admit made my chest ache. And I never knew why.

I hate you for it.

I hate how you wrecked me.

How you took every wall I built and shattered it with nothing but your stupid, stubborn heart.

I hate how you make me soft when I should be steel. How, with just one look, you turn my world into something I never thought I deserved.

I still don't think I do.

But more than all of that—more than the frustration, the fire, the years of fighting against gravity itself—

I love you.

I love you like an explosion loves oxygen, like a storm loves the sea.

Violently. Uncontrollably. Completely.

And if it took a lifetime to reach you, I would wait.

If the universe pulled us apart, if years passed and we became strangers,
I would still be here, standing in the wreckage, waiting for you to come
back.

Because you always do.

And I always will.

You are the only person who has ever seen every jagged, broken part of
me and refused to flinch.

The only person who could stand in my fire and refuse to burn. And I—

I would destroy anything that tried to take you from me.

So take this. Take me.

Every sharp edge, every unspoken word, every ounce of love I don't
know how to say without my hands shaking.

Because if there's one thing I know, it's that I would set the world
ablaze before I ever let you go.

Yours, in fire, in time, in forever: waiting.

Yamara S

Family Discontinued

Nonfiction

I knew from a very young age that my family dynamic was different. I never had real parents and very rarely knew my siblings, but despite it all, I kept a smile. My favorite foster home was with a man and woman by the names of Justin and Christine. I was four when I first arrived at their house and my eyes went straight to this little black, orange, and white creature on all fours: a calico with big, beautiful eyes and white feet. I was scared to approach the animal but was soon comforted by her warm, fluffy fur. The house was very nice, a two-story South Florida home with a bedroom for my brother and me. In a few short years, this was going to be my family forever, or so I thought.

Life was great. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a real home. I had been bouncing from foster home to foster home, and now my little brother and I could grow up like normal kids. My new father was a nice man. He couldn't have any kids of his own, and my new mother wanted children so badly. Adoption seemed to be the best route for them to take. They welcomed so many kids into their home, and I gained so many more siblings. I was so excited.

I was adopted on March 18, 2012. I was six years old, and that day my name changed to match my new family name. But shortly after that day, I started to notice some changes. My dad was getting angry with my mom and me, and his breath always smelled of what I thought at the time was hand sanitizer, but later I learned it was alcohol. The smell always confused me. It smelled terrible. I found my young mind always asking why someone would want to fill their breath with that stench. This same smell would soon come to haunt me and continue to haunt me as I progressed into my teenage and young adult years. My

mother had a diagnosis that limited how much intercourse she could have with my father. His predatory tendencies, along with his alcohol-induced episodes, caused him to find the next easiest target in that home to prey on, me. She knew what was happening but chose to sit back and let it happen to me. The sexual abuse started when I was six years old and would not end until I was nearly thirteen years old. I truly believe it stopped because all his drinking made him very overweight and very weak. The same disgusting smell that inflicted so much pain upon me could have just saved me at the same time. I always tried to think of the cat every night when he entered my room. I tried to think of how warm she felt, how comforting she was. This creature, who could utter no words and provide no protection, saved me time and time again. These disgusting encounters made me hate myself and my life, and I started threatening my own life once I reached second grade.

The most dangerous suicide attempt in my life was on September 19, 2022. I was 16 years old, and after years of receiving no help, I had had enough. In this time of crisis, I tried to find the same sense of comfort I had as a little girl. I needed my “cat.” That person was my aunt and uncle. After leaving the hospital, I knew that to live a fulfilling and less painful life, I needed to move from the very place where I was hurt. Hurricane Ian had destroyed the surrounding area and left so many devastated, but I was ready to start a new life. On October 20 of that same year, my life changed. I left behind my friends and family and moved by myself to live with my aunt and uncle in Greenville, South Carolina.

It felt crazy to say it, but a few short months after moving states, I felt a sense of belonging. All the bad things that had happened to me didn’t matter anymore. This was the place that I would soon come to forever claim as my home. In a single year, my aunt and uncle, my true parents, showed me what it meant to be loved unconditionally. They

provided me with the resources to push past my limits and learn about who I am. Because of them, I want to live and share my story. They are my warmth. They are my comfort. They are my life.

Toluwalope Awoleke

Journey of Discovery: From Medicine to Computer Engineering Nonfiction

In my early junior high school years, I often declared my aspiration to become a doctor. The allure of caring for others' well-being was deeply appealing to me, influenced by the fact that both my parents were esteemed professionals in the medical field. Witnessing the respect they garnered for their expertise left a lasting impression on me. Additionally, my mother was a strong advocate for a medical career, citing its job security in the country as a compelling reason.

As I progressed to senior high school, I faced a pivotal moment when I needed to choose courses that would shape my academic path. I opted for science courses, including Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. During my study of these subjects, I noticed a peculiar trend – I derived greater joy and performed exceptionally well in subjects requiring calculations. I did not give this preference much thought, assuming it was merely a positive outcome of my abilities.

It was not until my first year of senior high school, when a new English teacher joined the faculty that a shift occurred. This teacher, who would later become my “school mother” took a genuine interest in my academic journey. During one of our discussions in my final year of high school, she inquired about my favorite subject. At that point, I could not pinpoint one. However, I mentioned my earlier fondness for Physics during my first year.

I explained that while I excelled in Biology, I did not find the same passion for it as I did for Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics. Although I maintained good grades in Biology, I opened the textbook solely for assignments and tests. I was more inclined to tackle problems in Physics, Chemistry, or Mathematics and potentially fall short rather

than delve into explanations of biological processes or anatomical functions.

My English teacher, a source of inspiration and guidance, posed a thought-provoking question: “Have you considered a career with a strong mathematical component?” She suggested engineering as a potential path. I told her I had initially toyed with the idea of engineering but dismissed it, assuming it entailed construction and drawing, a skill I did not particularly enjoy, except when it was obligatory. I was under the impression that I needed to excel in Technical Drawing, a subject most prospective engineering students took in my school, to pursue engineering. My teacher and I embarked on online research and discovered that Technical Drawing was not a prerequisite for engineering programs.

Her words of encouragement sparked a new possibility in my mind. To fulfill the criteria for engineering, I had to enroll in Further Mathematics, a course I had previously dropped. Determined to catch up, I engaged in extra classes, and late-night study sessions, and faced some initial challenges with a teacher whose subject I had to drop to pick up Further Mathematics. However, I persevered and when the final exams of high school approached just five months later, I emerged with an outstanding ‘A’ grade.

The pivotal moment arrived when I had to decide my academic path. Initially, I was resolute in my choice to pursue a career in medicine. However, fate had a different plan in store for me. My application to the medical program at my preferred university in my home country did not yield the desired outcome.

This unexpected setback prompted a candid and soul-searching conversation with my parents. During this discussion, my father presented an intriguing proposition: if I was willing to explore the field

of engineering, he would let me if it was something related to Information Communication Technology. Then, a new horizon awaited me. The wheels were set in motion for a relocation to the United States.

At this juncture, I cannot confidently proclaim that I have a precise vision of where my chosen path in Computer Engineering will lead. Nevertheless, I am filled with excitement and anticipation about the boundless opportunities for critical thinking and problem-solving that lie ahead.



Courtesy of—**Amanda Roberts**, *Kansas Summer*—

Kamya A. Haynes

A Volcano Ready to Explode—THIRD PLACE WINNER

Poetry

I look like a normal person
One who does all the work
Yet I feel like I'm failing
And I hide behind a smirk

People do me wrong
Yet I still have a big heart
Give them chance after chance
While I'm being torn apart

Does anybody know the pain I feel?
I've been betrayed so many times
Yet when I speak up
It feels as if I'm committing a crime

One day I'm fine
The next I'm ready to crash
I can do so much for someone
Then I receive the backlash

So yes, I'm ready to explode
Because I can only take so much
Everyday when I wake up
I feel as if my feelings are already crushed

Nathaniel Preston

Last One Standing

Nonfiction

Freshman year at Mayo High in Darlington, South Carolina, began like any other, with familiar faces from middle school, but something felt different—it felt more uncertain. Lyla, my best friend since 6th grade, and I were excited for what we believed would be a fresh and new start. Everything about high school felt like a new beginning. And for a while, it was.

It wasn't long before our duo became a trio when we met Ash, asophomore, in Spanish 1. We clicked instantly, like we had all been waiting to find each other. Despite the world going virtual, our bond felt real. We created a group chat where we shared everything, and when we weren't messaging, we were hanging out at each other's houses, laughing, making plans, and imagining the future. Everything felt right—almost too perfect.

On November 19, 2020, my world shattered. I logged onto the Zoom call for class, expecting the familiar presence of my friends, only to find the screen starkly empty. An unease crept in as I dialed Lyla's number repeatedly, each unanswered ring amplifying my anxiety. Then, I called Ash, and she picked up almost instantly. But the moment she uttered, "She's gone," a chilling realization swept over me. My heart sank; I understood all too well what she meant. My best friend since sixth grade had taken her own life. The weight of that loss was unbearable, and in that moment, neither of us knew how to process the profound grief that enveloped us.

In the aftermath of such a deep loss, one tries to adjust, but the void never truly fades. After finishing my freshman year, I slowly began to come to terms with Lyla's passing. Ash and I drifted somewhat, yet we remained friends, finding comfort in our shared memories. We even tried out for the cheer team together and both made the squad. However,

each subsequent year felt different without Lyla's vibrant presence. As I entered sophomore and junior years, Ash found herself in a relationship with a man whose lifestyle raised concerns for me. Despite my reservations, they stayed together, even after Ash graduated in May 2023, and they welcomed a beautiful baby boy into the world.

I thought everything was going to be fine as I started my senior year. It was going great—I had even made co-captain of the cheer team and was actively involved in the community. But then, on February 12th, everything changed. The phone call came in, and I could hear Ash's mom screaming through tears, "Ash has been shot!"

The details were brutal and heartbreaking. Ash had been caught in the crossfire of her boyfriend's dangerous world, and in an instant, everything I held dear felt like it was crumbling again. The weight of that news shattered me, yet I pushed forward, knowing deep down that she would want me to keep going. But the ache of losing her felt all-consuming, a heavy reminder of how fragile life truly is.

They say the second time is easier, but it never truly gets easier. Instead, you learn to navigate your grief and grow into a deeper understanding of yourself while honoring the wishes of those who have passed. I carry Ash and Lyla in my heart, forever grateful for the impact they had on my life. They helped shape me into the person I am today, and the memories we created together remain a cherished part of who I am. In their absence, I've found a sense of peace, knowing that I can honor their legacies by living the life they would have wanted for me.

Swikriti Neupane

When Everyone I Loved Was Gone

Nonfiction

What do you want to be when you grow up? That was the question I could never quite answer. Growing up in Sombare, a small town in Nepal, my world was not defined by grand ambitions or distant dreams. My life, at the age of fifteen, revolved around the simple joys of home and school. Home was filled with warmth, love, and the familiar comforts of everyday life. The smell of my mother's curry with freshly ground spices, the teasing from my brother, who is just a couple of years ahead of me, and the laughter that echoed through our walls made it a place I never wanted to leave. School was another source of happiness. It was not just a place for lessons but for friendships that felt like they would last forever. I had four close friends—Yunisha, Kritika, Swastika, and Neha—who were always there for me. I could trust them with anything; they listened without judgment, making me feel understood and never alone. In those moments, life felt complete. Everything I needed, everyone I loved, was right there. But, in 2019, that sense of completeness began to unravel.

Swagat, my best friend and partner in all our childhood mischief, left for the capital to pursue his higher education. Even as I watched him pack his bags and say his goodbyes, I stuck to the hope that nothing else would change. I went on preparing for the new school year, excited for fresh notebooks and pens, expecting to see the same friends in the same familiar places. On the first day of ninth grade, I walked into a classroom that did not feel like mine anymore. The bench where my friends once sat was empty; my four closest friends were no longer there. When my class teacher told me that Kritika, Neha, and Swastika changed the school and Yunisha moved to a different place that was 245 miles away from Sombare, I was speechless. The laughter

and excitement that had always filled the room were gone, replaced by a strange, heavy silence. I had never imagined going to school without them, without the comfort of their presence.

Lunchtime, once my favorite part of the day, became the hardest. I had no one to sit with or share my thoughts. Sometimes, past memories brought tears to my eyes, but there was no one to comfort me. At home, my brother's absence created a deep void. When I struggled with homework, I instinctively looked for him, only to remember he was not there. I felt truly alone when everyone I loved was gone.

For months, I struggled with this loneliness. It took me six months to accept that I could not change what had happened. Slowly, I began to realize that holding on to the past was not going to bring my friends back or fill the silence in my home. My friends had left to pursue better opportunities, and it was time for me to grow, too.

At first, it was difficult. Focusing on my studies felt like an impossible task, but little by little, I began to find peace in being alone. In that solitude, I started to discover who I truly was. I had always been an average kid, but as I focused on my studies, I uncovered my potential and became the top of my class. I found joy in solving math problems and realized that math was my favorite subject. I became my own friend. I listened to my problems, solved them, and for the first time, felt strong enough to stand on my own. The pain that had once overwhelmed me became the driving force that pushed me to succeed.

That year taught me the biggest lesson of my life: everything happens for a reason. I might never have discovered my strength if I hadn't been forced out of my comfort zone. I might never have learned what I was capable of achieving and I might never answer,

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

KA Kennedy

Black Girls Must Die Exhausted

Poetry

You are born at a disadvantage

With two strikes against you

Black and Woman

You are predisposed to struggle and exhaustion

And as said by poet Kai Davis,

You're "too black to be a woman, but not man enough to be black"

You carry the weight of black men on your shoulders

Just for them to disrespect the same shoulders they are standing

You are trendsetters who have somehow never set trends

You are businesswomen who somehow don't belong in business

You are valedictorians who are somehow not victorious

And might I add you are somehow a loud ghetto black girl constantly
popping gum

But yet You stride in the midst of adversity and stereotypes

You wear the title of a black woman proudly

And pour that same black pride onto little black girls who can proudly
say

I Have Black Girl Magic

You are constantly proving that you are more than just

Your bonnets and braids

Your melanated skin

The racism and sexism you face

The pushback you get from your own

Constantly proving that

Black Girls

Must Die

Exhausted



Courtesy of—**Bethany Major**, *drawingbree*—

Genesis Shackelford

Love Lost in Time—FIRST PLACE WINNER

Fiction

Time. A gift so precious, yet so easily taken for granted. We live our lives oblivious to its passing, until it's almost gone. Lying here now, on what I can only assume is my deathbed, I wonder what I could've done differently.

Then I remember her.

Her soft brown skin, her long flowing hair, those eyes that once held my future, Maria. The love of my life, back when I was young, in my twenties, before she was taken from me. Taken because of me. How could I have let her die?

Growing up, I was always surrounded by trouble. Ciudad Juárez, my birthplace, wasn't kind to the innocent. But I didn't stay there long. My family moved to America when I was young, but the lure of easy money pulled me back into the shadows, back to the gangs I'd once known. I told myself it was for my family, for survival. My mother at the time as also growing increasingly sick and my family didn't have the money for proper treatment. The weight of all my stress was slowly crushing me, killing me, slowly. Then I met Maria. Her beautiful brown eyes, dark hair, and the most sincere smile. A girl any man would turn to look at. She was my escape from the chaos, the one bright spot in my world. We made plans to leave it all behind, to start a life far from this small town, far from the violence. But I made a mistake. A fatal one.

I tried to leave the gang, tried to break free. And the cost was everything. I found her, my love, lifeless, on the bed we once shared.

They killed her to punish me, to send a message. I knew it was my fault. Before I could even get my grip on the situation, they then came for me.

I felt the sharp impact of something heavy against the back of my head, felt death creeping closer. I closed my eyes, waiting for the darkness to swallow me whole.

But then...**Ring, ring, ring.**

“Babe, wake up! You’re almost late for work,” Maria’s voice called out. I gasped, drenched in sweat, my heart racing. Her voice, it was so real. My mind struggled to comprehend what was happening. It couldn’t be. I reached for my phone, my eyes locked on the date. A week. A week before it happened.

I was given a second chance.

“Sorry, rough dream,” I muttered, trying to steady my voice. “I’ll get going.”

We were still planning to leave, to escape this place. I had some money saved, enough to start over, at least temporarily. But now I knew what was coming, knew what I had to stop. I headed to the local bar to meet with my crew, Kevin, my best friend, among them. I remembered this day. It was the day I told him about our escape plan, the day I asked him to cover for me. Kevin was a high-ranking member, and he’d protected me before. He also had secrets of his own, he’d been skimming money from the bosses. When I told him I was leaving, his face hardened.

“Come on, man,” he said. “Leaving the gang is a death sentence. You know that. They’ll come after you. You know too much.”

He wasn't wrong. I knew the risks. But he agreed to help, he always had my back.

But something nagged at me. I replayed the events of my past life, trying to piece together who had betrayed me. Only three people knew about our plan: my mother, Maria, and Kevin. It couldn't have been my mother. It wasn't Maria. Could it have been Kevin? No. I couldn't believe that.

But I had to know.

Three days later, I followed Kevin to the dock where he'd be leaving for an assignment in America. I watched him closely, waiting for some sign that he'd betrayed me. But nothing came. When he was alone, I confronted him. I slammed him to the pavement, pinning him down with my foot on his neck. "What the hell are you doing?!" he shouted, his eyes wide with panic. "Let me go!" I accused him of selling me out, of betraying me to the bosses. But as he lay there, tears filling his eyes, he swore he hadn't. He swore he was going to help me. And I believed him. I let him go. But that left only one possibility.

Maria.

Could she have been the one to betray me? No, it didn't make sense. Why would she have been killed if she'd been the informant? I needed to confront her, but I didn't know how. Two days passed. I watched her, searching for anything that felt out of place. But she was the same Maria I'd always known until I finally gathered the courage to ask her. "Did you tell anyone about our plan?" I asked, my voice trembling. She denied it, but there was something in her eyes. The conversation quickly escalated into an argument. The tension between us grew until she finally let it slip. She had been sent by the boss. Her

love was a lie. She was a tool—a spy meant to keep me in line. My heart shattered. How could she?

The rage took over. I don't even remember the moment it happened. I stood over her lifeless body, the bed stained with her blood, and I remembered. This had all happened before. The questions. The doubts. The murder. Tears began to fill my eyes as the realization came upon me. I was stuck in a loop. Doomed to relive it, again and again. I then turned, bracing myself for what I knew was coming next. I hope next time I can understand her, maybe save our future, or at least save myself.

And then...**Ring, ring, ring.**

“Babe, wake up! You're almost late for work,” Maria's voice called out, sweet as ever.

I opened my eyes. Dazed. Confused. The clock blinked back at me.

A week.

A week before it all happens again.

Attalia Peccoo

With Pain Comes Strength

Nonfiction

On the morning of my twentieth birthday, I woke up to the warmth of the Jamaican sun streaming through the curtains of our hotel room. The ocean breeze carried with it the scent of salt and palm trees, a gentle reminder that we were in paradise. It was supposed to be a birthday to remember just me and my best friend, Alex, exploring the island, celebrating our youth, and making memories.

“Good morning princess,” he said smiling as he remembered the excitement he had planned for this trip while fluffing my hair.

“Stop nagging stupid,” I said playfully.

We both chuckled as we got ready for today's events, Alex had saved up for months, surprising me with plane tickets as a gift. We had been best friends since childhood, always sharing our milestones. Jamaica was meant to be our escape—away from school, work, and the pressures of life—a week of adventure, relaxation, and laughter. But in just hours, that paradise turned into my pain. That day started like any other on the trip. We spent the afternoon snorkelling off the coast of Negril, then found a quiet spot to watch the sunset. Alex had always been obsessed with sunsets, saying they were a reminder of how fleeting moments can be. I never thought sunset would mark the last day I would ever see him alive.

The next morning, I woke up early to the sound of waves crashing outside our window.

“Good morning sleepy head” I called out to Alex, but he did not respond. At first, I thought he was just exhausted, maybe sleeping off

the night before. But when I walked over to his bed, something felt wrong. He was completely still, his face pale and cold to the touch.

Panic surged through me as I shook him, calling his name over and over. Nothing- it felt like the world was caving in around me as I screamed for help. The hotel staff arrived within minutes, but it felt like an eternity. The paramedics came next, their faces showed no expression as they worked on him, but I could already tell it was too late. The rest of the day was a blur. Police questioned me, doctors came and went, and all the while, no one could explain what had happened. They called it “unknown causes,” something that entails them having to investigate further. But in that moment, none of the details mattered. My best friend was gone, and there was nothing I could do to bring him back.

The aftermath of Alex’s death shattered me in ways I still cannot fully explain. The days following were a fog of grief and confusion, the beautiful island around me now feeling foreign and cruel. I couldn’t leave Jamaica immediately. I had to deal with police reports, his family’s arrival, and the logistics of sending his body home. Each moment felt surreal, like I was living someone else’s life. When I finally returned home, nothing was the same. Alex had been my rock, the one person I could always count on, and now he was gone. I felt lost, drifting through life without any sense of direction. My twentieth birthday, which was supposed to mark the beginning of adulthood, became a dark milestone—a constant reminder of everything I had lost.

Friends tried to console me, but no one really understood. How could they? The grief was suffocating. I could not even celebrate small things anymore without feeling guilty. I dropped out of school for a while, unable to focus on anything. It was as if Alex’s death had ripped away not just him, but a part of myself too. In time, the shock wore off, but the pain remained. I sought therapy, trying to make sense of what

happened, but the fact that the cause of his death was still a mystery haunted me. Every day, I replayed that night in my mind, wondering if there was something I missed—something I could have done differently. The unknown gnawed at me, a constant source of anxiety and regret.

It took years before I could even begin to heal. And even now, there are days when the grief hits me like a wave, pulling me under. I have learned to live with the loss, but there is always an emptiness, a space that Alex once filled. My 20th birthday will never be just a memory of a milestone—it will always be the day I lost my best friend most inexplicably. The hardest part is not having answers. I have had to make peace with the fact that I may never know what truly happened. Life moves forward, but that loss, that day in Jamaica, will always be a part of me, woven into the fabric of my life.

Taniyha Sampson

From Darkness to Connection

Nonfiction

“This is how it always is,” I think to myself uncertainly. They have a huge fight, damage gets done to our home, they forgive each other, and everyone is happy again. I couldn’t help but feel like this time things would end differently. I heard the heavy footsteps of my mother pacing back and forth, as if stuck in an endless loop. This is how it always is. Her voice was filled with desperation as she cried out about how he had been her one true love, and now he has gone. It was a scene I had witnessed far too many times, a recurring drama that played out in the confines of our home. For as long as I could remember, I had been the therapist for my mother. Her emotional struggles, her heartaches, her losses, they were all poured out on me, as if I were the only vessel capable of holding the knowledge of her pain without being affected by it. I understood that my mother was hurting, that her pain was real and valid, but I also knew I couldn’t continue to be her sole source of solace. This is how it always is.

As I was trying to calm my mother down, she continued her pacing and ranting. She went to her room and came back to the dimly lit living room with items of great sentimental value to her: a hat that one of my grandmother’s boyfriends gave her from long ago, a Bible, and two other items I can’t seem to remember. Her breathing was heavy, as if she had just run a marathon and she was sweating profusely. I began to worry; this has never happened before. “Mom please just talk to me; What happened? What were you guys fighting about this time?” I said in a shaky voice. She looked at me, her eyes filled with a mixture of tears, sorrow, and longing. She said, “This is not all about him Dee, I want you to know that. I have wanted to leave this earth since I was twelve. I have been in pain since I was twelve. This is years’ worth of

pain and anger.” This is how it always is. She tells me the traumatic stories of her childhood I’ve heard all my life, she cries, I attempt to console her, and she will be fine come morning time. After a few minutes I decided to finally muster up the courage to enter her room. She was lying on the bed with her feet dangling off the side. “How are you feeling now?” I asked. I noticed an empty bottle of pills on her bed dresser and another in her hand. “I’m just going to sleep,” she said, slurring her words. She had peed the bed. I took the bottle of pills from her, but by then it was already too late.

I remember the first few weeks after the incident. The wounds, both physical and emotional, were deep, and the healing process was slow and often painful to witness. We took it one day at a time. I knew she was in pain, it’s all she ever talked about when we did speak, but I never imagined the possibility that it could overtake her. She is the strongest person I know, and our bond, though strained by the trauma, began to strengthen as we faced the aftermath together. We learned to communicate in ways we never had before, and I would help her unlearn toxic patterns whenever they would resurface. My mother started turning to a different source for support as well, God. It was as if a newfound spiritual awakening had washed over her, providing a sense of comfort and purpose. I was uncertain of how long this would last, but as the weeks kept going by, I continued to see a positive change within her. She laughed more with me, we spent more time together, and we talked about our plans for our future. This was a side of my mother I’ve longed to experience all my life and I’m happy that we found connection through the darkness.

Jalevina King

dear black woman

Poetry

dear black woman

you are the greatest reflection of who i am and who the next generation
is yet to become

you are the wildest dream just to be alive and free

you are the inspiration to all the young black girls that look up to you

you are the blueprint to society

and you are also the mother to society so don't let society turn you into
child

i know the world wants us to be meek and mild

but we must not please the world bc the world was not made to please
us

if anything the world is owed to appease us

but thats neither here nor there

when you're talking don't be afraid to hold your stare

walk into every space like you belong there.

dear black woman

do not forget the ones that came before you

remember that the same power that lies within them also lies within you

don't be afraid to speak and shine bright

remember that the world should not dim your light

when you're feeling weird think of these women

and the lessons you can learn by the life they were living

think of Assata Shakur when dating

"a revolutionary woman cannot date a reactionary man"

so please do not be out there settling for what you can

but that is not the only thing that can be taken from her words

she also said "we have nothing to lose but our chains"
so make sure when you're walking through this world you find
something to gain
when it comes to taking up space think of Shirley Chisolm
"if nobody gives you a seat at the table bring a folding chair"
so please don't sit in this world walking around in constant despair
if we want spaces for black girls we have to create them here
not in a white-centered space because we don't belong there.



Courtesy of—**Diamond Pearl Jones**, *My Body, My ‘
Choice*—

A'miya VanBuren
My Life My Choice
Nonfiction

Yesterday, I went to the store and picked an outfit I liked. This outfit, in particular, is color-coordinated with the rest of my team. I made the decision by myself to join the modeling team at my college. On Monday, I will be attending a class called Military Science 101. I chose to take this class and be a part of ROTC. I also made the decision to go to a party tonight. Last month, I decided to allow my biological dad's side of the family back in. Shockingly, I feel no shame or regret. These are the decisions that I made on my own. They may not mean much to you, but they do to me.

I grew up with two overprotective helicopter parents. They didn't trust me. This led to me growing up not even trusting myself. My parents always thought I wasn't mature enough to do the basic things in life. All decisions were made for me, from what I wore to where I went. I didn't have the luxury of picking out what I wanted to wear; they handled that for me. My dad used to tell me that my opinion didn't matter. What I wanted was not important. After hearing those words long enough, you start to believe them. I became dependent upon my parents for every single thing. To be honest, that's exactly what they wanted. As long as I was crippled in that area of life, I would always depend on them.

My parents didn't realize that they were simultaneously pushing me to make one life-altering decision. My dad likes to be in control. That's just always been him. Let's be honest. He is one big scary guy, and if he says something needs to be one way, you will do it precisely how he says it. He knows that. He also knows I am just as stubborn, if not more determined than he is.

One day, my dad got upset with me and said he wouldn't support me going to college in any way, shape, form, or fashion. At first, I thought he was just saying stupid stuff because he was upset. Then, a month later, he repeated it. Next, my dad said that if I wanted to go to college, I would have to get out of his house and never return. I'm not sure why he felt this way. As the months passed, he started commenting more about me leaving the house. I was scared. I didn't want to get kicked out. What was I going to do? I had nowhere to go. I watched every step I made. I worked like crazy trying to stay on my p's and q's. I was constantly suffering from migraines and abdominal issues due to my stress. Then, the summer came. He said, "When you turn 19, you leave my house and go do whatever you want."

It was the week to register for classes at Charleston Southern University. I was so hyped to go. I asked my dad to take me, but he didn't want any part of my college journey. My mom was going to be working that day. So, I called my uncle and asked him to take me. Simple enough? When my dad found out, he blew up in flames. He was so angry his eyes were no longer normal. I can't describe what I saw in his eyes that day. But one thing you will not do is get in the way of my future. I took a gap year just like my parents made me. I can't stay cooped up in the house for another year. Going to college has been vital to me since elementary school. You can't deny me an education. You **WON'T DENY ME AN EDUCATION!**

That Thursday, my uncle came to drop some stuff off at the house. This was it. This was my opportunity. This was my chance to get out before he kicked me out. No. I can't; I can't just leave. Yes, I must. No, what is wrong with me? I can't just go up and leave home. What if something terrible happens. Yes, it's time to move on. My future is at stake; I must stop thinking about the what ifs.

While everyone was downstairs talking, I went upstairs and packed my stuff. Once my uncle and my mom went outside, I brought my bags out. I told my mom I was leaving. I did it. I had the guts to say to her I was going. Of course, she protested against it, but this was MY decision, and I would stick with it. My uncle advised that I wait and think it over more. My mom and I knew that once my dad found out I tried to leave, he would put me outside on the porch in the rain. Oh, did I mention my dad wasn't home? He was somewhere fishing. So they wanted me to wait for my dad to discuss it with him before I left.

I didn't see my dad that night.

After about an hour of ineffective persuasion from my mother, I left. That night, I got in the car with my uncle and moved in with my Nana.

This was the first actual decision I ever made on my own. I stuck to it. I saw the plan through.

Now, I make my own decisions. I admit I still have trouble sometimes. I still must remind myself that my opinion really does matter. What I want is important. As time has progressed, I have become more and more independent. This is a considerable progress.

Treveon Wright

The Overcoming of a Life-Changing Asthma Attack

Nonfiction

It is important to be reminded of the dangerous nature of life sometimes. When I was young, about five through seven, I had a severe asthma attack that almost killed me.

The day was sunny and bright, and I had all the childlike enthusiasm for life that surrounded me. An invisible threat lurked in the pollen-filled air outside, and I had no idea it was coming. My lungs started giving out on me as I ran and laughed in my backyard. My allergies to pollen quickly developed into a severe asthma attack. My inhaler was inside the house and I did not even know it.

My carefree spirit suddenly felt like it was being suffocated. Gasping for air, I stumbled and eventually collapsed to the floor. My mom realized the seriousness of the situation, and her eyes widened in panic as she rushed to be by my side. Knowing time was ending, her maternal instincts kicked in and she quickly called for an ambulance.

My mother's heartbreaking situation became visible as the ambulance arrived. On the way to the emergency room, she was not allowed to join me. She watched in terror as the paramedics rushed me away, and all she could do was follow me in her car. However, the ambulance sped ahead of her due to the seriousness of the situation, and for a second, she could not see where we were going.

Meanwhile, the fate of my life was uncertain. As doctors and nurses fought to restore my health, the ER became my haven. After being admitted to the intensive care unit, I was in an unfamiliar and frightening setting. I was surrounded by tubes and machines that were giving me treatments that could save my life, for example, the

defibrillators (devices that apply an electric charge or current to the heart to restore a normal heartbeat.) (My anxiety was made worse by the clinical setting and the vague nature of the situation I was in.

The panic I felt during my first asthma attack as a young child has stayed with me forever. On the other hand, it served as a starting point for development, determination, and appreciation. Preparedness, life's precariousness, and the value of family in obstacles are all lessons I took away from the experience.

I recovered from my asthma attack thanks to the hard work and skill of the medical staff who attended to me. I was able to overcome my challenges and emerge with greater strength and stamina than before. This experience has given me an increased awareness of the weakness of life and a determination to make the most of every moment.

When I think back on that terrible day, the one thing that keeps me going is the unconditional love and support of my mom. Her determined character helped us through tough times, and her company was comforting as I got better. This suffering has reinforced the value of loved ones, determination, and perseverance in facing challenges.

In conclusion, the asthma attack I experienced was a traumatic event that severely tested my mental and physical strength. It is an essential reminder of the shortness of life, the value of being well-prepared, and the power of family and friends. For all these reasons, I am thankful today.

Malikai String

Torment

Poetry

Day in, Day out.

I endure **Torment**.

When I open my eyes in the morning, greeted by **Torment**.

On my way to class, **Torment**.

On my way back **Torment**.

When I get back to my dorm, **Torment**.

However, this Torment isn't physical.

This **Torment** is Mental and Emotional.

This **Torment** plaques my memories.

This **Torment** contaminates everything.

There is no running or escape.

Wherever I look or turn, it'll be there.

The **Torment** follows like my shadow.

Day in, Day out

It only gets worse

I really don't know how much more **Torment** I can take.

Before I give up.

Day in, Day out.

Thug it out.

Torment.

Malikai String

#MensMentalHealth

torment

/tor.ment / noun

severe physical or

mental suffering.

Jayla Odom

Little Olive What? I Can't Hear You

Nonfiction

Imagine a doctor saying to your mother, "She can hear, but she's maybe hearing only parts of words and not hardly any words with low pitches, and she may struggle with how she processes the words called auditory processing." Then, that doctor doesn't give any real solutions to help your child or any real explanation about how it may have developed besides too many ear infections, but like an olive tree, she will grow and strengthen.

One day, when I was nearly three-years-old, Mom would take me to a pre-k school called the Little Olive Tree. Olive trees symbolize peace resilience and strength. The teacher I had at the time would put me in a corner because in my teacher's words, "I wasn't understanding, so she would "just let me play." It felt like every single day. I had friends and went to birthday parties, but it wasn't enough.

Once Mom heard her say, "I just let her play during the lesson," she was furious. After my mom saw me crying in the corner, she immediately removed me from that school and took me to an audiologist. She told Grandma, "All they do is talk about how pretty my baby is and she is so quiet. I want her to learn and if she doesn't talk enough have the conversation with me. Don't just take my money and not care."

Grandma would tell Mom, "Remember Ms. Pepper, your first-grade teacher who put all the black kids outside the classroom wall isolated because they wouldn't pass their grade." Mom told Grandma she wouldn't help the black kids." So, Grandma became room mother and Mom had speech. Now Mom has two master's degrees and was a

graduate with honors. No way she was going to just let me suffer in silence at the Little Olive Tree.

Twenty-five years later, my mom experienced the same situation with me. I was the only little black girl in the class at the time. The first audiologist couldn't tell Mom, or me what was going on because I was so young. I had hearing problems, but they were having trouble understanding the type.

I, however, would try my best to understand the people around me. I would have to constantly ask them, "Can you repeat it? I can't understand what you're saying."

Soon after, I would meet a friend in second grade and when the teacher would cover something in class, she would tell me in my ear what she said. By the time I was around the age of 9-10, my hearing was being tested in many ways. Mom always bought us so many books and weekly trips to the library and reading programs to benefit not only me but my little sister.

Sound discrimination and high-pitched noises would make it hard for me to understand. For example, if I heard "Go wash the dishes and bring me some water." I will hear instead "Go wash the fishes and fling me some water." Some of the words out of that sentence will be missing for me.

We would go to church some days and if the singing was off, I was first to know. With my hearing disability, I can tell who was off-key and who was out of pitch. We, my Mom, and I cried and laughed while sitting on a church bench. She would wipe my tears and fit my ears with sound mufflers. Her eyes would redden and tear up, but she would lean over and say "That sister singing will have us all crying if she gets any worse." She would hug my sister and me close until service was over.

By fourth grade, I would take piano and Mom said, “Jay you sound like a smooth jazz player. I can sit and listen all day. You’re playing is so relaxing.” Neither she nor I knew I had a loss of hearing in one and a gain of hearing in another way. But music helped me, and I did better in school. ay. But music helped me, and I did better in school.

Moreover, we met other doctors, therapists, and tutors looking for help. It wasn't until we met Dr. Laura Barber who was my grandfather's audiologist that Mom and I learned I heard high pitches above everyone else's ears. It is unofficially called "super hearing" and the actual name is hyperacusis. Another diagnosis I would receive was that I had an auditory processing disorder and mild hearing loss of low frequency. I would do programs to train the ear and therapy, but the best therapy came from listening to music called Listening Therapy with a speech therapist.

After this, I revived custom hearing aids for music and high-pitched noises. I would give the band director a tug on the ear and he knew it was time to find who was off pitch. I would smile and give a little wink. I played the flute from sixth grade to early ninth grade.

Finally, I decided to give up band and try something else I loved to do, which was Art in high school. I enjoyed Art and took Art Honors. Later in upper grades, I would become a photographer for the yearbook and even a photo editor. I wrote short stories I called mini books that my ninth-grade teacher would love to read. I would let my Mom, family, and friends read them. I was truly becoming a resilient "little olive tree." This experience taught me to work hard and seek help if I needed it. And to stand up for myself for when I was being treated unfairly.



Courtesy of—**Amanda Roberts**, *Peaceful Day at Flatrock*—

Jada Ellison
Faith Over Fear
Nonfiction

“Y’all want anything out of the gas station?” my dad asked my little brother and me as he got out of the car.

“Nah we’re good,” we both said.

My dad always makes sure that his family members get what they need, even though the role of being a big brother of eight siblings can get overwhelming at times. We stopped to get gas before going to the gym. When my dad came back, I saw that he had a can of Celsius in his hand.

“The kids at my school used to drink those, but I’ve only seen bad things about it on the internet so I never tried it.”

“Oh, really?” he said intrigued. It didn’t change his mind about drinking it though. The gym was not that far, being that Columbia is packed with different places. The household always goes to the gym when my parents are free because they work very, very, very often.

“I’m going on the stair master. Y’all good?” Erika asked us.

“Yes,” we all said and departed. The mood was set, and I was so excited to be spending time with my family.

“Do you want to go on the treadmill?” I turned to my dad and asked enthusiastically.

He didn’t respond, just simply followed me. We walked for about fifteen minutes and, eventually, we went our separate ways.

After I finished my first set of squats, my little brother, Jr. came over.

“Hey, you like my abs?” I asked him.

While nit-picking and laughing he said, “I don’t see anything.”

I gave him the sibling nuggie. Erika came over to us and made us do some work out that she saw on Facebook.

“Have you seen dad?” I asked Jr. “Nah.”

I then saw him lying down on one of the machines. I thought to myself, “why is he working out so slowly?” I thought he was tired; I laughed and took a picture.

“You okay dad?” He just stared at the ceiling and nodded his head yes.

Being that my father is a laid-back guy, this was a normal way of acting for him, so I didn’t think anything was wrong.

*

Later that day, I turned off the shower and grabbed my robe. I flew down the stairs, skipping at least three at a time.

“Can you see his chest rising?” I heard the paramedic say while on the phone with my stepmom who was an emotional wreck.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” I kept repeating out loud.

There was no doubt in my mind that my dad’s life would be lost. I was completely calm. My brother was losing his mind and screaming.

“Jr, calm down. That’s not going to help anything.”

It was probably insensitive of me to say, but his angry screaming was upsetting me. The paramedic explained to Erika how to do CPR, so I held the phone for her. She was so emotional that her counts were offbeat, and she wasn’t going deep enough.

“Hold this,” I said as I passed her the phone and started the compressions myself. I absolutely forgot that I recently became CPR certified before graduating high school. I never would have thought I would have to use my skills in real life, especially on my own father. I did them until the paramedics arrived, then I let them take over.

*

The sounds of the ambulance truck squeaking and paramedics hooking me up to machines to check my vitals brought me into consciousness.

Faintly speaking, “Yooo, where am I?” Dad said.

“Your tongue may hurt a little bit. You passed out at the kitchen table eating dinner with your family and had a seizure. Your blood pressure is extremely high. Do you remember what day it is? What month is it? What is your name sir?”

*

“Does anyone have a testimony that they want to share?” My pastor asked the church.

My stomach twisted and gained butterflies. I wanted to speak, but something was holding me back. I put my uncomfortable feelings to the side and reached for the microphone. As I told my story, my voice started to shake, and my eyes became watery.

“I feel that God used me to be a gap girl. I had to stand in the gap and go to war for my dad in the spirit. The doctors say that my CPR saved his life, but I believe that God did.”

Everyday my dad reminds me that I saved his life, but I disagree.

“God allowed this to happen. He had to sit you down to remind you that you can not be a burden bearer and provider for everyone. That is His job. The weight is too heavy for any of us. This was an opportunity to endure and allow your faith to grow. If you don’t praise God even in the bad, do you really trust in him?” So many wise words came out of my mouth like never before.

“I remember writing in my journal while you were in the hospital: Lord, if you allow my dad to live then I will make sure that this entire household will worship you,” I told him.

Instantly tears dropped from his eyes. Without these trials and tribulations, my mind would have never been shaped into what it is today. I’ve learned the power of prayer and faith of a mustard seed. After receiving these revelations, my mind was at ease. Many times, we wonder why God allows bad things to happen, but I was finally at peace with what He allowed after understanding that it was meant for our good. When you request in prayer, be patient when waiting for His answer. Patience is not only about waiting, but it is about how we act while waiting. Rely on Him, seek Him, and peace will be with you.

Samiya Webb

Closed

Poetry

That door is closed
That door is shut
You are shut out
Shut up with all that second chance talk
Because I've shut down
Mentally
Emotionally
And physically
That door is closed
I put in all that work
All that time
And *all* that effort
And all for the door to be closed
Don't open that door
because just like those dingy old hinges,
I'm done
In and out
In and out
You've run that knob but as raggedy as you've run me
Running in and out of my life
That door is closed just like the way you closed me out when all I
wanted
Was to be let in
your embrace.

Jakori Judson

Expect the Unexpected

Nonfiction

Life has a way of throwing curveballs when you least expect them, whether you deserve them or not. One moment, everything seems predictable, and the next, your world is turned upside down. For me, high school was a breeze. I had just come off the senior cruise, just graduated, and just completed a summer program at Claflin University. I know people always used to say things like “college will be what you make of it” and “college comes with a lot of distractions,” but I felt like I was ready to take it on all by myself... or so I thought.

I was so ecstatic once the first semester began. Finally, I was out of the house and in my own space, had my own freedom and was on my own time, and discovered a whole realm of untapped potential regarding the females on campus. My long, brown dreadlocks were freshly done and presentable. My outfit was crazy, clean, fly like it always is when the time is right, and I was ready to go on and tackle my first day of classes. After progressing through the next couple of weeks, getting great grades on my first assignments, I thought to myself “man this is about to be a cakewalk.” Not too long after, parties started stacking up, homecoming was here, and I felt like I had to be there for everything. I felt like I couldn’t let my first semester disappoint. The experience turned out to be everything I had hoped for. Once the dust settled it was time to move out for Thanksgiving/ Christmas break just like that. As soon as I got home, I was already anxious to get right back on campus. I was still reminiscing on the moments and new friendships from my first semester.

One morning I woke up and my phone was buzzing rapidly. It was the group chat, and my friends were talking about the grades that had just dropped from fall semester. It had totally slipped my mind, but still, I went to go look. Suddenly, my heart dropped. I had failed three out of my four classes. I was in a state of panic, was shocked and didn't know what to do. Then I started thinking back and realized, I started becoming lazy and began to put things to the side. I was out late whilst having assignments to complete. I didn't have my Outlook notifications on so if I didn't go check myself, I had no knowledge of emails that were sent to me. I didn't follow up with a tutor for calculus thinking I could handle it myself, knowing that I couldn't understand a thing my teacher was saying because he was foreign. To sum it up I was just lying in bed mentally breaking down. Just thinking of being a failure, one of my biggest fears. A few days went by and of course I had to tell my mom. She was at work when she texted me saying she wanted to see my grades because all my friends' parents were posting my friends' grades. Once she saw that my response was "I'm a failure," she instantly called me.

"What do you mean you're a failure?" Mom said.

With a long sigh I said, "I didn't do good at all honestly."

Mom then asked for my login information. Once I gave it to her, she went to go see for herself. Then, a look of concern and sadness came over her as she asked me "what happened?" This was a question I just didn't have an answer to at the moment. I knew she was disappointed, and I was just as disappointed in myself for disappointing her. It was just an unfortunate situation, and I had to figure out the next steps of my life.

As time went by, the days began to look a little brighter. I had gotten my situation together and was able to continue my college journey, recovering from the major hit it took. However, I wouldn't be able to live on campus for the spring semester. I found out I would have to take some classes during the summer (which I expected), and the cost of those conflicted with the cost of other things such as housing. It was a new year and I felt like I needed a change. One night I was standing in my bathroom looking in the mirror and with the snap of a finger those long, brown dreadlocks went from my head to the floor. After owning up to my mistakes, I felt that those dreadlocks were holding on to old memories and old experiences. Therefore, I just had to let them go. To wrap it up, I went from being ashamed of my failure to wearing it like a battle scar. Without it, I wouldn't be the person I've become today, and I vow to come back better than ever.



LMK