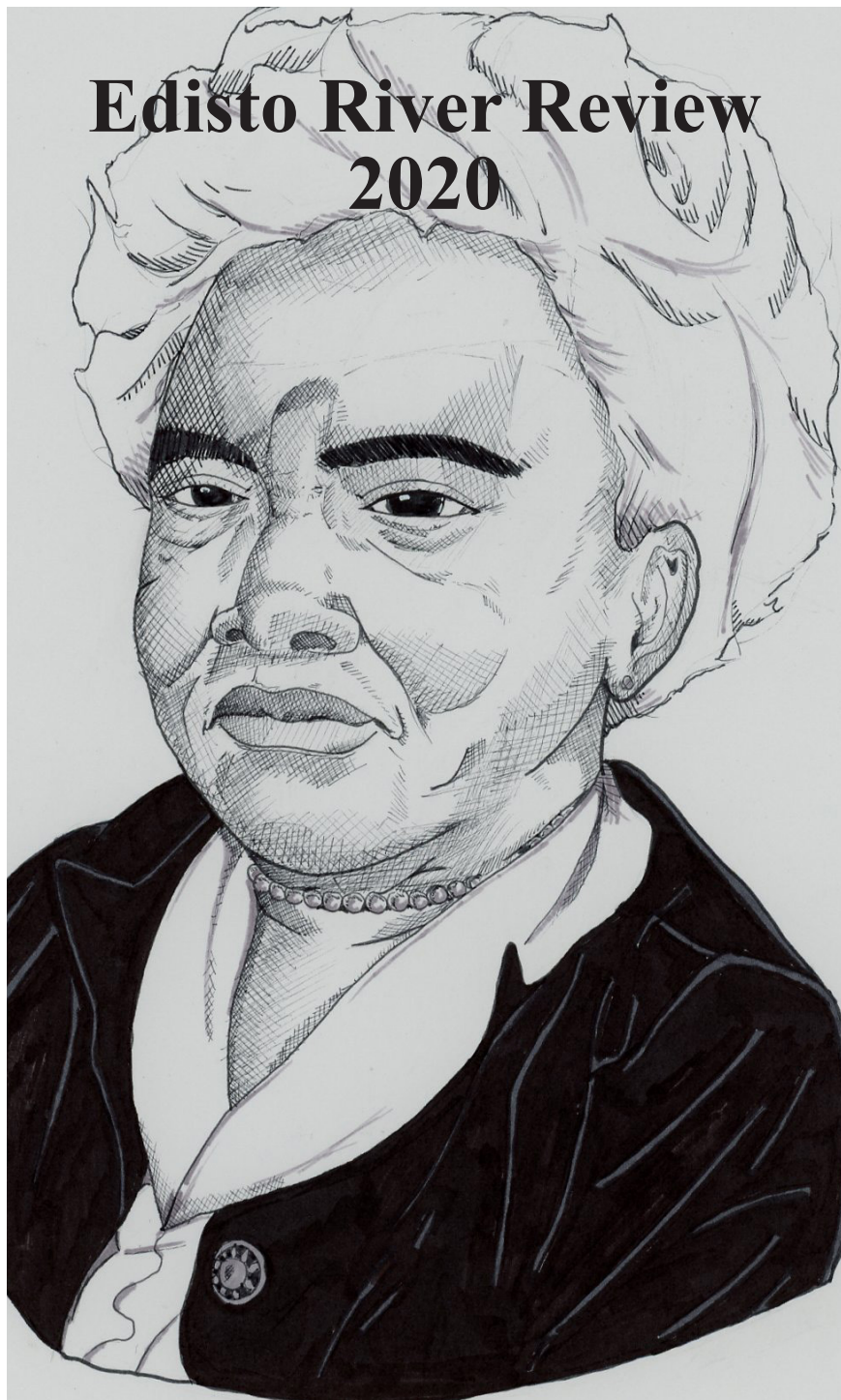


Edisto River Review 2020



EDISTO RIVER REVIEW

2020

Clafflin University
Orangeburg, South Carolina
Volume V

In memory of Mary McLeod Bethune

Matias Salvo

Lessons (A Poem for Mary McLeod Bethune)

Lesson one:

The world hasn't changed.

Not enough, not to thrive.

She supposed the first lesson was survive,

Help her mother, and rise.

Out of seventeen children the main lesson is

To play your part, to give and help: To Do

Lesson two:

Learn and learn well.

Make your efforts where you can.

If no one wants to sponsor you,

Then where you find yourself, excel.

School is for those who take what they will and help themselves.

Lesson three:

There's no such thing as mistakes,

Especially when you're learning.

There's relief and positives, even in the worst and the yearning.

Things never really end, they just leave you with what you need.

Lesson four:

Leave things better.

Not everything can be freed,
But we can learn how to treat people, and cut off the poison we
breed.
It's not enough to settle, you have to be
Impact,
Rant, screed,
Force the cruel or callous men to listen
Get the future to its feet.
One more Lesson for the road:
The world is never the same.
It can't be, not when you make it change,
Not when you take the toil and the umbra
Make bright lights on tragedy and winds you can't ignore.
She supposed the last lesson was learned,
We are the better place,
Not a constantly better fight, not a constantly better race.
A truth:
Out of billions of possible lives and futures and children
We are, we lose, we soar, we do.

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Associate Prose Editor: Dennis Bormann

Associate Poetry Editors: Sharon Gile and Charity A. Adama

Cover Design: Wayne C. White

Cover Illustration: Wayne C. White

Cover Photo: Wayne C. White

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Printed in the United States by
Williamson

FROM THE EDITOR

When we started working last year on the 2020 edition of Claflin University's student literary journal, the *Edisto River Review*, we had no idea that it would be published in the middle of a global pandemic. Or that our students who submitted their work and the faculty working to publish it would be among those most vulnerable to COVID-19. This dreadful coincidence has made this 2020 edition even more poignant and more important. This issue, the sixth and latest chapter of the journal, commemorates Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, the African American educator, stateswoman, philanthropist, humanitarian, and civil rights activist who founded Bethune-Cookman University and co-founded the United Negro College Fund.

As we have come to expect, the works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in this edition come from a diverse group of student writers, each with their own message and style. And certainly, this sixth edition highlights some of our favorite creative pieces, including first place submissions in fiction, nonfiction and poetry from Tiana S. Wilder, Jamaya L. Scott, and Trinity M. Ross-Mack, respectively. There is also tribute poetry by Matias Salvo.

With an eye to more closely aligning with our mission of one hundred percent student content, a goal we have met this year, we have added to this 2020 edition the first-place art contest winner—Wayne C. White's—drawings, which adorn the front and back covers. The second and third place art contest winners are honorable mentions and their work is included in this journal along with the accepted student art submissions. We hope you enjoy viewing and reading these unique and original works as much as we have.

I want to close with thanking Drs. Sharon Gile and Charity A. Adama for serving as associate poetry editors. I extend a sincere thanks to Dr. Dennis Bormann for his work as associate prose editor. It was a pleasure working with Bellica Z. Williams, student/Writing Center Consultant, who was responsible for copy editing, formatting, typesetting, and doing the final ERR document assembly work. Thank you Ms. Jennifer L. Clark Associate Administrative Assistant for your unflagging support and assistance. We are especially grateful to Dr. Mitali Wong for support from the Department of English. Additionally, we appreciate the support of

Dr. Isaiah McGee, Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Verlie Tisdale, Interim Vice Provost, Dr. Karl Wright, Provost, and Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack, President, and the Claflin University Board of Trustees.

Nick R. Robinson, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English

Editor, *Edisto River Review*

**2020 Department of English Creative Writing
Awards
Claflin University**

Poetry

First Place: Trinity M. Ross-Mack, *The Rabbit Hole*

Second Place: Matias Salvo, *Lessons*

Third Place: Shaniya Chapman, *Black Like America*

Fiction

First Place: Tiana Wilder, *The Strange Happenings of Clemence County*

Second Place: Shaniya Chapman, *Forgiveness for Father*

Third Place: Armani Ancrum, *The Story of a Freed Negro*

Third Place Tie: Jaliah Robinson, *Wireless*

Non-Fiction

First Place: Jamiya Scott, *The Smell of Home*

Second Place: Ronyeé Jones, *Not Good for You*

Third Place: Denisha Wade, *Nubian Queen*

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Unwanted

First Place Fiction Winner

Tiana Wilder

The Strange Happenings of Clemence County

It was about six in the morning when I first arrived into the sleepy county of Clemence. I had been driving for about three hours to a spot that couldn't even be found on Google Maps. I had to consult an outdated state map to find the directions. The sign that welcomed me was old, worn, and missing a few letters so that it said WLCOME T LEMECE ONT in big red letters. As I passed a few empty cotton fields, I noticed a man walking on the side of the road. He was dressed in a business suit with a hat on his head and a briefcase in hand. I slowed down a bit, thinking that this man was a worker, and something had happened to his car. I rolled down the window and shouted, "Sir! Do you need a ride?"

This would be my encounter with the strange in Clemence County. The man promptly turned to me and revealed that he had no face, just a smooth, flat surface on the front side of his head. He said nothing, though I believe it would have been impossible for him to say anything at all and tipped his hat to me. He then took a sharp turn and proceeded to run through one of the cotton fields, the dry stems rustling as he disappeared into the dark.

His appearance would later be explained to me in an old diner located in the town of Samuel. Clemence County is made of two towns, Samuel and Edgar, named after the respective brother, that founded each town. Both towns have populations under three hundred and could be considered a small hamlet if they ever merged together. The diner I stopped at was called Lem's Diner, just a mile or so down from the town hall. Lem, the owner, is a gruff man who does not talk; rather, he grunts his responses. He served me a cup of coffee and a greasy platter of breakfast food as the waitress explained to me what I had seen.

“The man you saw. He’s known as John,” said the waitress whose metal name tag read Shirlene. She wiped down the counter that I was sitting at in smooth, circular motions. “Don’t know where he came from.” She made a face. “Don’t really know where he’s walking to either.”

I took a bite out of my sausage link and asked, “Does he talk?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the P. That ruled out interviewing him, I thought to myself.

“Just walks around town. Don’t bother nobody. Likes to tip his hat at everyone who passes.” Shirlene threw the rag over her shoulder. “So, sweet pea, what brings you here?”

I told her I was sent to write about this county, given two days to explore Clarence County and write a story on it. I did not tell her that the task itself was busy work, that my boss was tired of me asking for a chance to do a story on my own and decided to send me to explore a town that I previously thought was desolate.

Shirlene tilted her head, brown curls falling over her shoulder. “Hm, where you from?”

“West Darnell.” I held up my badge. “I write for the Heritage News.”

“Oh, a reporter. We haven’t had one of those in years.” She focused her attention on her chipped acrylics. “The last reporter that passed through was taken into the woods.” She then quickly turned on her heel as if that was a completely fine sentence to end a conversation on.

I checked in at around nine at a motel that had seen better days. In my room, the walls were painted an ominous red color that sent panic running up and down my spine. The woman at the front desk instructed me to not look under my bed unless, and I quote, “the bed starts to crawl on its own.” I do not know if she

was joking or not, especially after seeing what I saw this morning. I put down my bags and looked into the mirror for a moment. I had pinned my hair up into a bun so that I looked more mature. I even bought a new outfit and notebook just for this occasion to seem more reporter like. Professional but not too stuffy; my simple blouse and skirt jazzed up with a pair of nice earrings and a matching necklace. A notebook that was leather-bound and had a belt around it to close it tight. I took a deep breath, the weight of the world— or rather, the weight of my own world —sitting on my shoulders, waiting.

I had to find a story. A story to prove to the higher-ups at Heritage News that I was worthy of being more than just another name on their roster.

My first stop was Samuel's Town Hall, a shoddy building with dilapidated sliding and a broken door chime. An assistant gave me access to the local archives after I explained the situation.

The room that held the documents was cramped and smelled of stale air. Several boxes were covered in dust and the carcasses of dead bugs. "Here it is," said the assistant as he passed me a pair of rubber gloves and a mask. "Please be careful while looking at the documents. A lot of these are old and worn, so they tear easily. If you need any help just let me know."

"Thanks," I told him, and he shut the door behind me. I looked around at the mountains of boxes, these pillars of file cabinets that seem to hold the water-stained ceiling up as if these documents, these papers filled with pieces of people's lives, were the only things preventing the drop ceiling from literally dropping.

I sat down in a squeaky, metal chair and got to work. For hours, I sifted through a variety of articles, records, and notes from various places throughout the county, but most of them pertained to Samuel. Most of what caught my eye seemed to be a daily occurrence here, such as the annual cult convention held in the high school auditorium and spring festival where fairies were openly invited to trade children with the citizens of Clemence. But what intrigued me most was an article on a woman who found a baby

inside the head of a cabbage. The photo in the article showed him as a baby; round face, curly hair, and leaves sticking out from his skin, dotted all over as if they were freckles. It all seemed fake, but then again, I had seen the faceless man with my own two eyes. I checked the date and realized the article was fairly recent compared to the others, only a decade or so old.

I stepped out into the hallway, article still in hand. “Excuse me? Do you have any more information on this person?”

The assistant’s information led me over into Edgar, which was just ten miles away from Samuel’s own town hall. I made a mental note that if this didn’t work out, I could always write an article on why the two towns never combined despite the town line being nothing more than an intersection with a stoplight.

The cottage that the assistant gave me directions to was located on an old dirt road. It was small and had obviously been renovated a few times before. A beat-up Honda sat in the yard next to a child’s bike. The mailbox was decorated with painted daisies. It seemed like someone was in the process of gardening but had stopped and let a pile of soil and a trowel near the front steps.

I knocked twice and waited. A moment later a man came to the door. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Hello!” I stuck out my hand for him to shake. “I’m Nina Grant. I work for the Heritage News in West Darnell.” I held up my badge for good measure.

“Uh, Blue.” I tried not to make a face when he said his name. He shook my hand but looked me up and down suspiciously. “Isn’t that upstate?” he asked.

I nodded. “It is, but I was sent to find a story here and I think your family might have one. If it’s alright with you, could I do an impromptu interview?”

He scratched his beard. “Now hold on. Lemme ask my

girl.” Blue went back in the house for a moment and then came back. “Come on in.”

As I centered, he instructed me to take off my shoes. I left my pumps by the door and my stocking covered feet sunk into the plush carpet. Blue led me into the kitchen and at the stove was the woman I assumed he called his “girl”.

She was shorter than him and had her hair pulled back into a frizzy ponytail. The pot she stirred sent a savory smell into the air, reminding me of home-cooked meals that my mother used to serve me. She turned, a scowl on her face, and said, “You here about Kohl?”

“I am,” I told her.

She nodded and told me to sit down. I dug my notebook and pen out of my purse, trying not to focus too much on the fact that I was majorly out of place in their home. I felt like one of those gaudy hand-me-down trinkets, a funky vase that never matched. She and Blue looked like plain people, with wrinkles in their faces and obvious tan lines on their arms. Hard-working, plain people. Hard-working, strange people, I reminded myself.

She sat across from me; arms crossed over her chest. “What do you want to know?” she asked.

“First, what’s your name?”

“Peach.”

“Last name.”

She hesitated for a moment, throwing a glance Blue’s way. “...Hyde,” she said, and a little smirk appeared on Blue’s face.

“Are you two married?”

Peach huffed. “It’s complicated.”

Blue leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “It’s technically common law.”

Peach frowned. “Blue, can we not do this in front of the girl?”

I tried not to take offence to her calling me “girl”. Though, her calling me girl was better than getting called “kid” around the office. I tried to steer the conversation back on track. “Is Kohl considered your son?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m raising him.”

“Do you remember what it was like when you found him?”

Peach rested her chin in her palm and sighed. “It’s still as fresh as ever. It was drizzling and I went out to pick a few peas. I walked over to my cabbage patch, not really paying attention, and then all of a sudden, my boot knocked into something. And when I looked down, I noticed this big ‘ol thing. Like...like a cabbage head but mutated. I swear it was the size of a tire, maybe bigger. But anyway, I saw it, freaked out, and then figured I needed to kill it.”

“So,” she continued, “I grabbed some pesticide and got ready to kill it when it just opened. And inside was Kohl. And of course, I was confused. And also, scared. I was only twenty-three at the time, I didn’t know what to do with no baby. But we’ve got a rule in Edgar that the local government doesn’t get involved in this type of stuff. And I don’t really blame ‘em, this supernatural shit is complicated. But I tried to put Kohl into the system, but they wouldn’t take him, so I kept him. And that’s about it.” She accented the end of her story with a shrug.

As I finished writing down her story, I asked, “Well, what about the leaves?”

“Oh, those fell off after his first birthday,” said Peach simply.

“And what about where he came from? Do you know what he is? Like is he an... alien?” I felt a bit silly saying that last part.

Blue chuckled. “I doubt that. But it’s honestly better to

leave the unexplained unexplained here. Strange things are always happening and if you stress yourself out trying to find answers to them, you'll go crazy." Peach nodded in agreement.

I blinked. It was my job to get answers, not to ignore them. "Well," I started as I finished writing down Peach's last answer, "I'm going to try my best to get something close to an answer."

Peach rolled her eyes, "Good luck, honey, cause that's all I can tell ya."

"How is he now?" I asked, refusing to cave so easily.

"What do you mean?"

"Is he normal?"

"He's as normal as he can be. He makes plants grow really well, but that's about it."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about him?" I asked.

Both of them thought for a moment. "...He likes the crusts cut off his sandwiches," said Blue.

I huffed. "Look, I understand I'm some reporter from the big city and you may not trust me but—."

"That's not it," explained Peach. "It's just...Kohl is normal. He's just like any other kid. He likes video games and hates school. He wants to be a firefighter when he grows up."

"Isn't the story of his birth enough for your little article?" asked Blue.

I sighed. It all felt so...anti-climactic. Though, I couldn't really explain exactly what I was expecting. Was the child supposed to be a monster? A creature unexplainable?

"Do you wanna meet him?" asked Peach, interrupting my thoughts. "He'll be dropped off around two-ish. You can stay 'til then."

I nodded. Peach resumed her cooking duties. Blue walked

over to her and placed a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll be out back," he told her before walking through the screen door and out into the yard.

"So, Miss Big Shot, what made you come here for a story?" asked Peach.

"To your house or to Clemence?"

"Both."

"Well, I didn't pick Clemence. My boss did. I was begging for something to do and I guess they got tired of me begging and decided, 'Hey, let's send her to a small county that can barely be found on a map'."

Peach chuckled. "Yeah, I'm surprised you even found us. We rarely get normal visitors."

"As for your house...I found an article from when your son was...I guess harvested, and I just wanted to know more." I scribbled a doodle on one of the empty pages of my notebook. "I thought there would be more."

Peach stayed silent for a moment and then, almost in a whisper, she said, "I... I think Kohl changed me. I did a lot of growing up after finding him. I don't usually tell people this, but I think Kohl saved my life."

"What do you mean?"

Peach sighed and turned the heat of the stove eye down. "Alright, buckle up 'cause this is a long-ass story." Peach sat back down at the table. She rested her hands on the table, laying them flat against the wooden surface. "When I found Kohl, I was smoking and drinking...a lot. I was going through a rough patch in my life. My aunt died, and she was like a mother to me. I had just broken up with Blue for like, the fifth time in my life and I honestly thought it was going to stick. My reputation in town was... less than admirable. And then Kohl came along and it made me realize that I needed to take care of myself in order to take care of

him, you know? And so, I stopped drinking. I'm still trying to quit smoking, but overall I got better. I just knew that I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, and you can't really do that if you're blackout drunk."

Peach's voice started to break a bit. "And I think part of me knew—and it still knows—that eventually, somebody will come and try to take him from me. He's a wonder, that's for sure. More people are driving through Clemence nowadays. More people are stopping, seeing what we see. It's just a waiting game."

At that moment, I could feel something heavy rest in my stomach. I shifted in my chair as the words of a mother replayed in my head. Peach stood and let out a weary sigh. "I just hope whenever you publish this, they take him to a good home."

After that, I waited in silence, listening to the sound of tools wiring out back and the occasional rolling boil of the pot. By the time Peach finished what she was cooking, the bus pulled up in front of the house. I could hear the sound of children laughing and chatting as the bus doors creaked open. Through the window I could see Kohl hopping down off the bus, his bookbag looking bigger than him. Blue around from the back of the house and greeted him, ruffling his curls with his hand.

When they both walked inside, I could hear Kohl's voice from the den. "—and I need some plastic dinosaurs to make it look realistic. The ones from the craft store."

"I don't think you need dinosaurs for a volcano diorama," said Blue.

"Yes, I do," protested Kohl.

They both entered the kitchen and Kohl stopped in his tracks. Peach looked at him and gave him a soft smile. "Hey, sweetie."

If you've ever seen a child tense up, then you know that their bodies sort of crumble together as if someone was making strange origami. His shoulders came together, and his mouth twist-

ed, his whole aura unsure, suspicious. “Don’t worry,” said Blue as he placed a comforting hand on Kohl’s shoulder. “She’s just here to do an interview.”

Kohl relaxed. “C’mere,” said Peach, “Sit next to me.”

He sat down and looked me in the eye. Even though he was growing, he still had his baby face. Fat cheeks, freckles, and blonde curls. “...Hi?”

“Hi,” I stuck out my hand for him to shake. “I’m Nina Grant from West Darnell.”

He gave my hand a limp shake. “That’s where the zoo is right?”

“Right.”

I asked him a few general, child-centric questions, such as his interests and what school was like, but never wrote them down. Every time my finger even inched toward the pen; I felt a rush of guilt go through me. After “interviewing” him, Peach invited me to stay for dinner, but I left, quickly, and headed back to my hotel. The night sky in Clemence is an old purple-ish, red color. Like God spilled mulberry juice all over the sky. The stars seemed to pulse with the beat of the music playing through the radio.

A red light slowed my car to a stop. I threw the notebook out the window.

Jevauni Malcolm

Merek and The Scales of Fate

“Imbue: Thunder Gloves,” I said as I coated my fists in pure, concentrated purple lightning.

I dashed at the first gnuboar, which was more plump and furry than normal, and with two swift jabs to its head, it fell unconscious before me. I then knelt to the ground, arms extended towards the earth, and leaped above the forest canopy to search for my other prey. The gnu-cow I was searching for had taken off with its children as the gnuboar was allowing them to escape. I was now at the apex of my jump so I aligned myself so that my falling trajectory would intersect with the gnu-cow’s escape route. I kept my focus on the big, pink ball of fur that was squealing as it was running and willed the electricity on my hand to take the shape of a spear.

“End of the line gnus,” I said with false concern. “Saijin’s Rod!”

Saijin’s Rod was a move that I dubbed so because the god of storms was called Saijin. Though it is nowhere near godly power, it still did the trick against mortals. The bolt of energy encroached upon the gnus in no time and mother and children alike were blasted by the lightning. The rod expanded upon contact and left the family of gnus all unconscious.

“Oi, Merek, I got me a prize here,” Tybalt boasted as he walked into the clearing. “I caught us a nice falipa from the stream a little further into the forest and- you caught way more than I did. Dwarf’s shat Merek! Why do you have to be so good at hunting!”

I chuckled softly and patted my friend on the back as I imbued my legs with electricity and sprinted back for the gnuboar that I left. Trees flashed by me in a blur of green and brown, light from my imbued body cast an ethereal purple over the area that I ran through, truly a picturesque scene. Soon I found myself back in the first clearing where the gnu den was. The clearing was still covered in leaves as before, but the gnuboar had disappeared. I

looked around in confusion at the entire area, stirring up piles of leaves to see if the falling leaves had covered it. I moved fallen branches, anything large enough to hide the gnuboar from my immediate sight. I threw down the only other log in the area before giving up and deciding that asking Ty for help was the best way to go. Gnuboars were sold for a lot of coin when captured alive, thus I didn't intend to have my hard work and expended Mana go down the drain. I threw a Saijin Rod into the sky, where it exploded in a grand flare and sent sparks of energy in waves over my immediate area. With my signal sent, I decided that I would take a closer look around. I examined the spot where I had knocked out the gnuboar and found something unusual, the imprint of the body that was left in the leaves was messed up. The part where the hind legs were supposed to be, seemed as if something had been dragged over it. My eyes widened and I shook my head in understanding. Someone or something had dragged my gnuboar away and they had found themselves in a deep morass of peril as I intended to punish whoever had stolen from me.

“Full Body Imbue: Lightning Aura!”

The purple coating on my legs and arms all flared up highly, then slowly crept from their respective locations to cover my entire body. When both coatings finally joined up, my entire body was rattled by electric shocks.

“Erg-ah!Grr-mm!” I growled as my body spasmed.

I clenched my hands tightly, steadying it to the point of control then I calmed my now rapid breaths until they slowed to normal levels. After I felt some degree of control, I forced my eyes open and realized that the transformation had neared completion as my sight had improved and the entire world seemed purple. I then stood straight up and steadied myself causing the transformation to be completed. I took a good look at the world around me and was relieved to see that everything had slowed down considerably.

“Ok, now to find this thief afore my transformation has ended,” I said with an undertone of urgency and anger.

As I moved through the now darkened forest, I illuminated my surroundings with blinks of light due to my aura and surveyed every possible hiding place where a thief could be. I hadn't been gone from the gnuboar for long so the thief had to be in proximity

of my location.

“Where has Merek found himself that he isn’t back here yet,” Tybalt pondered. “The clearing was not too far fro- that’s his distress signal!”

Tybalt was gazing at the sky when he saw the Saijin Rod explode across the sky in a scintillating display of purple arcs. He swiftly grabbed a twig from the forest floor and mused on what enchantment he would be able to use to protect the spoils. He then decided on creating a portal trap around the catch so that when it was triggered the gnus and falipa would be transported back to the village.

“Rift Magic: Rift Glyph!,” Tybalt incanted.

He walked around the catch in a circle, dragging the stick around them to create a mandala from which the magic would activate. When the circle was completed, Tybalt heaved a sigh as he cast a Rift above the animals.

“Yria smiles on me today, as there, fortunately, was a ley line right here,” Tybalt said thankfully. “Without it, I’d be unable to have the mandala sustain itself for longer than five minutes.”

Having completed the trap for safeguarding their catch, Tybalt set off to see what the issue was that had Merek sending out a distress signal. He took care to follow the path closest to what he had seen Merek take prior to leaving him. As he did not have knowledge of enhancement magic as Merek did, he was forced to cast short distance portals at various intervals to speed up his travel but use little Mana in the process.

Merek, pray be safe my friend. I know not why you sent that signal, but purple means that something had happened.

Seeing the clearing up ahead, Tybalt did one last portal afore landing in the center of the clearing. He opened 3 Mini Portals behind him and stood in a fighting stance to be ready for any attack. But upon seeing that the clearing was vacant, he relaxed and the portals faded into the air.

Where did you go, Merek?

“I hope by Yria’s grace Tybalt got my signal, for this situation certainly calls for the power of two,” I muttered as I glared at the enemies afore me.

Pseudo-daemons- the lowest rank of dark beast in the beast compendium by Farseer Ricardus, but one of the most deadly when in a pack such as this. They were beings of darkness usually formed from a crystallized essence of darkness that higher ranked Dark Beasts shed after metamorphosis. So, in a sense, Pseudo-daemons were the leftovers of an actual daemons evolution.

My crackling aura had slightly diminished over the hours that I had spent searching for my quarry, but I was confident that I could still at the very least defeat them all and sustain non-fatal injuries. I clenched my fists as I saw that the Pseudo-daemons were no longer patient enough to participate in the waiting game. As the first one leaped towards me, I slid my left foot back a bit then lifted my right foot off the ground. When it came into striking distance, I slammed my foot down while pushing my right palm out and towards the airborne beast. The force that my palm thrust generated, along with the energy from my aura, brought into being a lavender, electrical shockwave that disintegrated the beast before me. The ripples of the shockwave knocked some of the other Pseudo-daemons back, a sight which to those standing meant to attack.

Spheres of deep violet hurtled through the air, focused on eliminating one target, which I wasn’t surprised to find was myself. I tensed my muscles and in doing so, bolstered my sparking aura and speed. I swiftly dodged the barrage of blasts and retaliated with miniature versions of the Saijin Rod. Small-scale blasts reverberated throughout the visual spectrum in a phantasmal mix of lavender and dark purple. I believe that I would have found the sight more mesmerizing if it didn’t mean forfeiting my life. I floated around each of my adversaries as though a descendant of the god, Bailaba, god of dancing, and elegantly assassinated them. As I landed once again to take flight, I felt the first downside to my Aural Enhancer. The lightning aura had put so much stress on my muscles that as soon as I landed my body buckled to the forest floor.

Ugh, I didn’t think that I had put that much stress on my

body as yet. Well, my chances of nonfatal injuries just fell.

The Pseudo-daemons had now crowded, well there were only about 5 left of the 15 that I had initially encountered so crowded may be a stretch. I glared contemptuously at the menacing faces around me, picking up 5 pebbles while being careful to watch for any possible surprises. Picking up pebbles was not as easy a task as it should have been as my entire body was protesting in agony. My legs felt sore, my aura had dissipated, but regardless, I stood upright once more and faced the Beasts. They hissed and conjured small spheres of flame that hovered above the clearing.

“Imbue: Frost”

The composition of the pebbles in my hand rapidly changed and became icy, emanating near unbearable chills. The beasts noticed that I was doing something and sent the fireballs hurtling towards me. I threw all the Frost pebbles above me, where they exploded into a cloud of ice shards. The ice shards met with a majority of the fireballs and extinguished them, but some were still on a crash course for me. I tried to rush away but my calves were too exhausted and I fell to my knees.

Tyalt, if you don't jump in here and save me right now I'm gonna-

“Rift of Reflection,” an all too familiar voice shouted behind me.

A swirling mass of blue came into existence above my location and swallowed up all of the incoming fireballs. When the last fireball was swallowed, the rift aimed itself at the enemies and blasted them with a barrage of flames. The Pseudo-daemons howled in agony afore exploding with a puff of black.

“Phew, that was a close one there, Merek,” Tyalt said as he fell to his knees.

“.....” I glared at Tyalt in silence.

“Sorry for being late ok, but we still won,” he said while rubbing the back of his head.

“Sigh, fine. Thanks for the assistance,” I said after rolling my eyes. “I guess that rift took a lot of your Mana.”

“Yeah, but not to worry, I found a ley line intersection back at the clearing where we met up.”

I nodded solemnly and stood up shakily with Tybalt’s help. I hadn’t found the gnuboar in all the time that I had been fighting, so I decided to count it as a loss. My reason for this was that the Pseudo-daemons had most likely eaten it as they weren’t the smart type to drag food home.

“Godsdamned Paemons just had to ruin it all,” Tybalt swore after I explained how it all unfolded. “That gnuboar would have fetched quite the hefty price.”

“Ha, I see that you still shorten the names of things that you find to hard to say, Ty,” I quipped.

He only pouted at my remark which made my quip seem all the funnier. It was good to have some joy at Tybalt’s expense, especially after a day like this one had been.

Jevauni Malcolm

About Me, Solemn Version

My body was tender, yet to fully bloom.
But still I find myself put out there, into the world.
For I was naught but a tool to earn him some adoration.
Delicate scribbles had my feelings inflate,
Though most of the times they are saddening curls,
That just make me want to shred myself.
Though I say this my emotions are forcibly contained.
So I show no feelings, not of my own will,
For I have no control of myself when I'm in his grasp.
Day in, Day out, I'm used, abused and exploited,
For when his feelings of sadness overtake him,
I am his one true confidant.
Whilst lavender flowers stagnate the air with their angelic aroma,
And the scintillating light of the sun starts to dim,
My being lends itself to him, my lord, my creator,
As no good servant could bear to see a troubled master.
But then he begins and the oh so dolorous era has for me begun,
As he puts his hand a stanza lower, casting a net of pain onto me.
Lines upon lines he then writes for me,
Filling pages upon pages with his sorrow.
Then he looks at me and smiles, as that last tear rolls down his
ruddy cheek,

And onto my crisp parchment, sadness now replaced by glee.
I am now filled with joy as another sad day has ended,
And I now have a new title and role to play out.
For while my master may use me to express his feelings,
I am happy that in me, he places his trust.

Jevauni Malcolm

Wings

The sky is the ultimate goal.

The limits of which man will despair on his inability to obtain.

In contrast to this,

The birds of the air twitter in bliss,

Reaching ever higher heights with their minuscule wings.

We, however, are earthbound

Forbidden to touch upon the boundless sky

Forever made to tread this barren earth.

The sky is a promise of more, more adventures, possibilities

The land is a promise of repetition, a never-ending cycle of joy
turning to despair

Then when it is too unbearable, it transforms into the hope to fly.

You use this hope, transform it into power,

Power enough to fuel your motivation, innovation and helps you to
rise above your station.

You are a special one, that much is true.

Whilst many are limited by their frustrations and fears,

You soar as a dove above the trials of the world, refusing to have
them weigh you down,

Refusing to be like the rest.

There is never a period in your schedule for complacency, though
it never shows.

For your fights happen below the surface, their subterranean repercussions
never to be seen by those whom you care for.

Wings are more than just a metaphor, they are a symbol.

A symbol of your ever rising confidence, happiness, and care,
That you selflessly impart to those around you.

Wings signify determination, the mindset of quitting quitting, of
never settling for the average.

Wings signify beauty, in that of the soul.

Always trying to help a stubborn fool even though he always refuses.

Now I realize that a correction needs to be made.

For it is not “we” who are forever cursed to repeat the cycle of
boredom, never reaching the sky.

It is instead I and all who fall into the category in which I lie,
Who will have to watch solemnly as you soar through the sky.

Jevauni Malcolm

Downing My Sorrow in Hot Chocolate

Barman pass me another cup of the good stuff,

Because once again Fate has shown me up.

Put it on my tab please if it's not by now way into my checkbook,

And worry not about the balance for if I can sell the amount of
tears that have streamed down this face, I shall surely be rich.

Another mug is sent sliding my way and my hand deftly catches it,

This you see bartender, is proof of how many times I have done the
same thing.

How many times has it been Gerald, since I have been beaten and
bruised like this?

How many strokes will it take to silence my foolish heart?

I see that look Gerald, and I'll have you know that pity I don't
seek,

Too much have I accumulated over these years, enough to make
even a demon somber.

Jillian pitied me, as she hung onto the arms of my traitorous best
friend, Harold the bast-,

Spouting how much she was sorry that I couldn't satisfy her.

Hmph, I hope she choked on some ice from the champagne I last
saw her sipping,

Just so that I could see her in the hospital and apologize again.

What do you mean forget about Jillian?

She was the love of my life.

Gerald, come on sympathize with me, do your job, and stop pressuring me with that look.

Fastrack from Jillian and we see Loretta, at the time the best thing since shooting stars.

She forced the light in me to shine once more and I fell to her charms.

Then once she saw the fruit was ripe for the picking, she ripped the light from my soul and left me there on the ground to stare at the sky in agony.

Then here I arrived again, drunk on tears, on chocolate and heartache,

And yet you stood there wiping your glass, never changing your stolid stare.

My heart was in the grave and a zombie was I,

I lost all semblance of humanity and coldness became my lover.

In her frosty arms I stood in an embrace,

Deflecting all attempts from love's annoying tentacles to pierce my ignorant yet aching heart.

Then along comes Susanna, the finest fruit in the Garden of Eden,

I was ignorant of its truth but still I sought after it.

Finally fruit in hand, I stood triumphantly,

As now I believed that I would finally find peace.

Alas, the fruit was too good to even be tasted,

And in sorrow there I left it to stand.

Aye, Gerald this was a good lot of pain letting go,

But hot metal only burns the more you hold it.

Now I'm back here drunk on chocolate,

Dark brown walkways trickling down my chin.

Gimme another Gerry, old boy, for though my tab be filled and me pockets empty,

I have a heart to heal and a soul to find.

For right now the discourse tormenting my mind is as agonizing as five drunk demons beating down a cornered angel.

So let me down me sorrows Gerry, lemme have one more drink.

Lemme just keep downing my sorrow in hot chocolate.

Antonio Rutledge

Three



Brooke S. Jacobs

With Love from Aphrodite



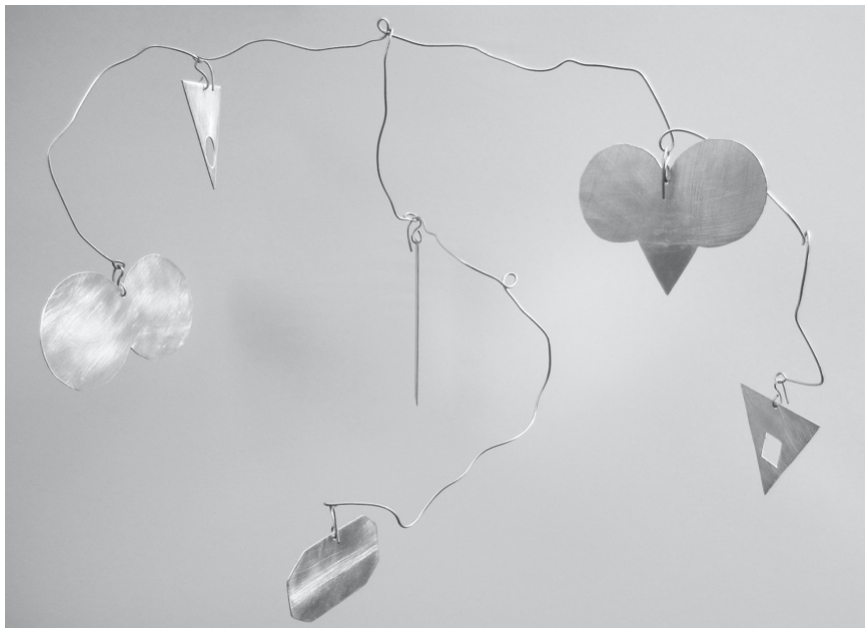
Ethan O. Drake

Defeating Fear Depression



Wesley V. Hickson

The Machine



Ronyéé Jones

Not Good for You

My mom is like my own personal alarm clock. She always gets me and my brothers, Shaunie, and Kharon, up on time for school. We're hardly ever late or miss school. Daysha is in high school and her bus leaves before ours, but if I took a guess, I think Mom probably wakes her up too. From waking me up out of my sleep, to picking out my clothes, to slicking my really thick hair into one huge puff ball and doing it all again the next day... Honestly, there's nothing she can't do.

My mom has beautiful, smooth skin, like a Hershey's milk chocolate bar. She doesn't have your typical model's shape, but I always thought she could be one. Everyone always says how much I look like her and I don't see it, but I want to. I want to look and be like her. I look like my dad, though. I have his sparse eyebrows and lighter skin. The constellation of bumps on my forehead proves I didn't inherit her flawless skin, among other things.

Her sliver of a gap between her two front teeth, full cheeks and pronounced cabbage patch doll dimples is my very first sight in the morning. Either that or the deepest scold she can manage, if I place the pillow over my head and rolled over to get a little more sleep, one too many times. She attempted to wake me first, by turning the lights on, leaving my eyes to adjust to the unwanted light forcing itself in. Laying there, staring at the 4 brown painted walls around me, I decide 5 more minutes of sleep wouldn't hurt anybody.

A few years ago, we were living in Pennsylvania, where Daysha, Shaunie, Kharon and I could walk 5 minutes down the street and be at school. I so missed those late mornings and short walks. Here, in South Carolina, where every other road is a dead end or dirt road, nothing is in walking distance, not even a corner store. Here, the school day starts at 6:30am followed by an hour

bus ride.

“Go in there and see what she’s doing,” I heard my mom say from the living room. Rolling my short legs off the side of the bed and jumping into the clothes left at the head of my bed, I was fully dressed right before my door swung open revealing a bright-eyed bushy tailed Kharon. “Mommy said hurry up so she can do your hair,” he said, closing the door behind him.

If there’s one thing I know my mother does every single day, it’s drinking coffee. Her own morning routine included piping hot coffee with a generous amount of flavored cream and sugar. She’d always buy the instant kind that boiled on the stove, sending the rich smell of the caffeinated drink throughout our small trailer. If her yelling about the time didn’t wake me, the smell of the coffee sure would. The smell wafting from her cup always lead me to ask the same question. “Can I taste it, mommy?,” I’d beg. “I just want a little taste,” I’d say, pressing on, which always rendered the same response. “This is not for kids, Ronyee’. It’s not good for you and it’s too strong,” my mother replied.

I can only recall one morning when her hands weren’t wrapped tightly around a coffee mug, like it held her day together. The night before, I fell asleep on the couch. I wasn’t carried to my bed or waken up in the middle of the night to groggily walk there through sleepy eyes, like usual.

I awoke that morning around 10. The sun shining bright through the burgundy curtains in the living room let me know I’d missed the bus. I hated staying home. I would spend the whole day watching the clock, imagining what subject my classmates were on or what they were having for lunch.

At that point in time, my mother had a boyfriend, who was initially introduced as a distant cousin once, twice, or three times removed. My father had only been dead for a few years. Somehow, she thought keeping the fact that she had a new love interest from us would protect our feelings. It didn’t. She doesn’t love my dad anymore, I thought. Maybe she didn’t necessarily intend to be secretive, but my siblings and I never knew the nights that there was

an extra body underneath our roof. He came and went in silence. He was always there, but hidden away, secretly spending nights at the house or my Mom and him having hour long conversations, parked in our back yard. I wondered, what was there to hide?

On the way to check my siblings' rooms to see if I'd been the only one to oversleep, I ran into my mother in the hallway. Her head hung low on her shoulders, but the damage was already done... to her face and my mentality. Her lip was fat and her eye noticeably beginning to swell shut, was rimmed with a purplish color that would turn blackish blue over the following days.

The loud gasp that escaped from my mouth filled the space between us. "MOM!?", I exclaimed, horribly. "What happened to your face?!" She just shook her head, her face displayed an emotion that I'd never seen her show before. Embarrassment. She said nothing. She pushed past me, leaving out the back door to finish her phone conversation embarrassed and pushed past me to sit on the back porch. She left the door cracked. I got the feeling that she didn't want to be bothered. Still concerned and shocked at her bruised-up face, I followed and listened. On the other end of the phone was my cousin, Vern.

"You should press charges", he said. I don't know what it means, but I held hope in my heart that it was beating out of my chest that it would mean time in jail or some type of punishment. I don't remember exactly what she said, but ultimately, her response was filled with reluctance and reasons why she wouldn't.

I blamed myself momentarily. I imagined the assault happened right in our front yard, just feet from where I slept. I thought about what I could have done to save her. I could have woken up and heard the struggle or her screams. I could have grabbed the sturdiest pot in our cabinet and bashed his head in. I could have woken my brothers and we could have all fought him off. I was only 9 or so. Neither one of my brothers had even gone through puberty. Truthfully, we probably couldn't have done much. That was the first time in my life I ever wanted to inflict pain on someone else. It was the first time I hated someone.

“Your dad wasn’t perfect, either.” Or “He hit me before, too,” Mom would say later when I found the confidence to actually ask her about it. But I didn’t have to save you from him, I thought. I hated her for being weak. I hated the fact that she stayed and endured the pain, through the struggle our life already was. I no longer viewed her as my hero, my dependent. She couldn’t save herself and neither could I. I didn’t wish to confide in her about the boys I crushed on in school. Maybe the advice she gave would lead me to be in that same position, years down the road. Perhaps I wasn’t meant to ask or know. Maybe boys and love were like the drink she sipped faithfully every single morning: too strong, not good for you.

Ronyeé Jones

Good Hair

I grew up watching my mom and my older sister beautify themselves in the bathroom mirror for hours. Every other month, they'd be sure to mix up this thick white concoction, leaving it on their roots "until it burned" and scrubbed for what seemed like an eternity trying to get the pink out. "Let me know when it's not pink anymore," my mom would yell over the sound of the running water in which her head was submerged. I became her shadow whenever she was doing her hair. After that followed the blow drying, the stove top hot comb that sent the reeking smell of burnt hair through the house, flat ironing, and achieving the perfect wrap that wouldn't fall at night.

My mom's hair bounced on her shoulders. I thought everything about it was perfect, down to the perfectly cut layers and the V-shape it fell into at the back. It was always dyed black to keep the greys at bay, and held a shine that I couldn't keep my eyes off of. I wanted my hair to be just like that. It was perfect. It was good hair.

I was 8 years old when I was absolutely certain that I wanted my hair to be straight too. I

wanted the silkiness of a blowout, the stretched length and seemingly perfect locks that blew in the wind. The ponytails and puffballs my mom put in my hair faithfully every morning became boring and childlike. "Mom can you pleaaaaase straighten my hair," I'd plead. "I don't like my hair like this," I'd complain while she parted zig zags all over my head. The ponytails didn't satisfy me anymore. I wanted that sleek look. "Once it's straight, it's straight. You won't be able to get your texture back, Ronyee'. Most people would love to have your hair." Yeah, most people, I thought. But

not me.

“You have good hair and I don’t want to mess it up with a perm,” she’d said one day, while gliding the flat iron through her freshly permed hair. My chubby face wrinkled in frustration. I wanted to be able to run my fingers through my hair without them getting stuck. There’s no way I had good hair, if I couldn’t even manage it. I examined the mess atop my head when my mom finally left the mirror. I thought about how my mom and my sister’s hair looked. Their hair was always so shiny and bouncy. It looked healthy to me. I thought, maybe I couldn’t get my hair straightened because I was too young. “I don’t know why you want your hair straight so bad. It’s not gonna stay that way,” my sister, Daysha said, even furthering my frustrations.

My childhood summers always called for trips to my aunt’s house in Raleigh, North Carolina. My two brothers and I would stay for weeks, soaking up sun and playing with our first cousins whose ages coincided perfectly with ours. After a day at the pool, washing my hair was somewhat of a frenzy to my aunt who didn’t know how to do “good hair.” “What does Lich usually wash your hair with?” my aunt, Kanesha asked, while working her hands through my thick mane. “Shampoo and conditioner,” I replied, oblivious to the fact that she meant specific product names. Then followed a 15-minute phone conversation with my mom on exactly how to

maneuver each strand and how to style it to perfection. I looked in the mirror struggling to find the specialness in my hair. It sat on my head in mounds of curls and coils. What’s so special about that? Isn’t everyone’s hair curly?

I seemed to always be known for the texture of my hair. It was somewhat of a staple. I never saw anything special about my hair, until it became a defining trait for me. In high school, I was “the girl with the puffball” or “Ronyeé... the one with the good hair.” I even snagged best hair for my Senior class’s superlatives.

Attending an HBCU exposed me to the world of comfortable naturals. At my high school, no one ever wore their afros out or tried styles like twist outs, bantu knots, or braid outs. Silky long 20-inch weaves and permed straight hair was all I ever seen growing up. It was the vision of beauty I thought I should achieve too.

I decided that it would be best to cut my hair in the first semester of my freshman year in college. I stood in my suite's bathroom mirror for what felt like hours, holding a pair of school scissors in one hand. A traditional sew-in left the portion of my hair I left for leave out extremely heat damaged, limp, and curl-less. My constant need to have perfectly straight hair had completely damaged my hair texture. I revisited my mom's words, wishing I would have listened when she would always tell me to appreciate my hair texture.

Snipping like crazy, I watched all my hair fall into the sink. Taking a first glance at myself in the mirror, my chest felt like it was about to cave in. I'd recently big chopped my best friend's hair a few months before. She loved it instantly. Unfortunately, I didn't feel the same

way about my new haircut. I cried for at least 30 consecutive minutes, hating the reflection that stared back at me. I was bald. My hair was not long or flowing or straight or any of the things that I considered beautiful. My face was exposed, unable to be hidden behind my once luxurious locks. My cheekbones seemed more defined since I could see them more clearly. It's like all my facial features became more enhanced. My hair was what made me feel beautiful. If my hair was done, then I felt like I looked good and if it wasn't then I just felt drab. With no hair at all, I didn't know how to feel.

Calling my mom proved to make me feel even worse. Her opinion was the number one opinion I counted on to confirm or deny anything in my life. She obviously didn't like that it was cut. She only made a comment about how I was trying to be like someone else (my best friend) in cutting my hair, when in reality, it was

for the health of my hair. “All that good hair, gone,” I remember her saying, disapprovingly.

I’m obviously no professional and I cut my hair with some dull school scissors instead of shears. It was uneven everywhere. Some pieces in the back were shorter than in the front and the middle was longer than anywhere. After a week or so I went back in with the scissors and evened it out. I still wasn’t feeling the haircut, but I would have rather had it even.

Around campus, I received a lot of compliments on my haircut, which made me feel a lot better. Trying to manipulate and manage a short haircut taught me a lot about the meaning of good hair. Good hair doesn’t have to be a specific length. It isn’t a certain texture. It doesn’t have to be kinky or have coils or be bone straight. Good hair is hair that makes you feel good about yourself and hair that makes you feel comfortable with yourself. My senior year of college has broadened my opinion on hair even more. My mom’s opinion doesn’t sway me like it used to. My hair hasn’t been straight since a year before I decided to cut it, which was more than 3 years ago.

The Fall of Paradonia

The bare tree branches swayed lightly in the morning winter breeze. Leaves crunched loudly under the weight of Celeste's snow boots as she trampled downhill to the teleportation grounds, where she'd exit the beautiful land of Paradonia to embark on her last year of secondary school in the mortal land.

Teleporting was still new to Celeste, as was nearly every element and rule of Paradonia. No matter how many times Nonna told her to exercise or rest her powers, Celeste wasn't quite sure how to. However, Celeste was privy to one of the most serious rules of being an asset and true member of Paradonia: "Never use your powers in the mortal world, unless it is for the greater good of the entire nation".

Celeste's powers appeared a few months ago at the annual Spring Dance. After stepping away from the dance floor for merely 5 minutes to use the bathroom, she'd come back to find her then boyfriend, Sam, swapping a copious amount of spit with Akuji Monroe. She assumed the heat she felt in her hands and rising up her neck was normal. Perhaps that was the feeling that came with extreme embarrassment and anger. She stood at the edge of the dance floor, watching the two of them closely, with tightly clenched fists. The dim lighting in the small gym flickered on and off, causing a murmur amongst the student body. When the lights came back for good, the bodies of two students lay still in the middle of the floor. Shrieks filled the small space as everyone became aware of what was going on.

Glancing down at her shaking hands, Celeste noticed an all too familiar blue-like glow radiating from them. With everyone gathering around Sam and Akuji, who seemed to be coming back into consciousness, Celeste slid out the back door. With shaking hands, she retrieved her phone from her crossbody bag, scrolling

through her contacts, until she stopped at “Nonna”. The phone rang twice before she answered. “My sweet Celeste. How is Nonna’s favorite girl?” she

said. “I’m in trouble” Celeste replied, trying to control her rapid breathing. “Head to the grounds” her Nonna replied “I’ll be there”. The phone clicked signaling the end of the call.

There was no need for a confirmation of power meeting with the board of elders in Paradonia. Nonna and Celeste’s late mother had already suspected that Celeste’s powers would show up sooner or later. It was in her blood.

“You can never allow your feelings to overtake your entire being. EVER” Nonna said. “You stunned two mortals. And now you are officially a Paradonian, so I never expect that to happen again. Do you hear me?” she said sternly. Her light brown eyes bore into Celeste’s.

Ronyéé Jones

A Letter to my Dad

I have been rewriting this letter for an eternity.

I just can't seem to find the right words
to fill this empty sheet.

The ground seemed to have
Shaken beneath my feet
When cancer so suddenly
Snatched your soul away from me.

At 6 years old,
Death became my worst fear.

Truth be told,
I have been lost for 12 years
Trying to put together pieces of this puzzle
And I can't seem to figure out
Why you had to leave.

Condolences are nice gestures,
But they'll never silence this grief.

I need to know
What will ease the pain?
This is the kind of heartbreak
I couldn't possibly feign.

I just can't ignore this
Gaping hole in my chest,
Reminding me of that empty
spot in my life that can
Never be filled.
Day by day,
This agony seems to become more real.
Death is the guest who
Decided to crash my party of life
Too sudden and unexpectedly.
It hurts so much
To not know exactly where you are.
You left and literally took
A chunk of my heart.
I live to make you proud
And I'll never stop cherishing your memory.
So wherever you may be,
I hope you're at rest and at peace.

Ronyeé Jones

Love, A Brutal War

In the early morning hours, she stumbled through the front door and past the living room couch, where I lay, stretched out and exhausted from play. The hours before nightfall were filled with sheer joy and all that could be expected in a typical 8-year old girl's day.

Soon to be purple blue bruises were already rushing to surface on her face.

I always tried to imagine what could have provoked fists to fly after midnight, right there in our front yard.

I woke sometime after ten, hours after my school bus had gone it's route down the long, winding country road. In those days of pig-tails and twists, she was consistent in waking me and wiping the sleep from my eyes, but that morning was different.

I didn't wake from a shake, but to the soft, yet profound sounds of my mother's cries.

I recall seeing her face for the first time. It seems like I never let that sharp intake of breath out.

Love never handled my mother gently...

Never cradled her softly in its arms nor caressed her cheeks, but struck her down, made her fearful whenever it was around.

Love is a brutal war,

Often times not worth fighting for.

Ronyeé Jones

Beyond

Let's go high,
Past the treetops and hills,
Above the atmosphere
Where it feels
Like no one can reach us here.
Just disconnect.
You have to tell no one
of your fears or doubts of tomorrow.
Compose your tears and sorrows.
Just ...
Try not to let them out.

Denisha Wade

Nubian Queen

She had the skin tone of a freshly unwrapped Hershey bar. Her hair was long and locked like a true Nubian queen. They were the most beautiful locks I've ever laid eyes on. Her mother who often did her hair was talented because you could see passion in every lock. Tara was at least 6'1 the height of a model but the attitude of an NBA basketball player. Her wardrobe was filled with clothes, I would never wear. I often joked about buying her a dress and she playfully would hit me every time.

"Denisha stop fucking playing with me."

"Why Tara, I want you to look pretty.

"You do not want to see me in a dress. I swear you would laugh."

"Okay, Tara stick to those basketball shorts.

Her voice didn't match her appearance, it was very high pitched like Alvin the chipmunk with a little more bass. Tara was the type of person that would make you laugh when you didn't want to. A true comedian who, of course, made me laugh for free. However, her anger was her downfall. She had major anger issues which pushed away family, friends, enemies but never me.

I understood Tara when everyone else didn't, and she understood me. I most definitely categorized her as my best friend. Despite her differences I never judged her once. I often reminisced on how we met. It was at her cousin's sleepover. She stuck out me the most she was so funny. I remember when we both walked off together when they were eating crabs at the party.

"Denisha you don't know how to eat crabs either."

"Nope, I sure don't. I'm not about to mess up their crabs"

“I know right I guess we’ll just wait for them to come back to the room.”

“Sounds like a plan Tara.”

I knew from that moment on we were going to be friends. I shared many other moments some that will make you laugh and some that would make you cry. I think 3 years of moments would require me to write a book.

So many moments to share but this moment still shocks me when I think on it sometimes. Tara never is quiet. She’s always speaking, but something was wrong with her that day. She was so mute that I thought she lost it and killed someone. Me being nosey but worried and uncertain of what my ears may encounter.

“Tara what’s wrong, is everything okay?”

“I have something to tell you but I’d rather text you.”

“Are you sure? Is it about me?”

“Yes, I can’t tell you in person. Text me when you get home.”

I remember the drive home from her cousin’s house like it was yesterday. I was confused and I wasn’t sure what was going to be said. My mother was driving like an elderly person. I remember wanting to put my foot over her leg and place my foot on the gas. I just wanted to break Tara’s rules and text her on my way home. Instead I respected her request and waited until I arrived home.

I remember getting home and quickly greeting my dad as I entered my room and closing the door behind me.

The phone attached to my hand like Thor’s hammer attached to his hand. I quickly gathered thoughts of what I should text her.

“What’s wrong with you Tara?”

It took at least an hour for her to reply and all I can remember is wishing that it took longer. “Denisha we’ve been friends for

a long time and I just want to know if you want to be more than friends?”

It may have taken me longer than hour to respond. I didn't know how to feel about that text. It really threw me for a hell of a loop. I liked her a lot, but to be with a female would have been new for me. It wasn't something I woke up dreaming about either. My parents were major Christians so the thought of this would kill them. I questioned myself many times before I responded to the text. The thoughts of losing my friend weighed on me more than ever. I just couldn't imagine telling her no to anything. Telling her no would also be embarrassing and I would have hated for her to feel embarrassed.

I felt like I was the judge of this very uncomfortable case and proceeded with the verdict. I finally replied to Tara after talking to myself for hours. I just knew my message would make her happy. I didn't care about my feelings at that moment.

“Yes, I'll give it a try.” I replied.

“I can't believe you said yes, I thought you were going to say no.”

I couldn't believe I said yes either. She called me and after seconds of hesitation, I answered her phone call. I felt better hearing her voice and felt relieved when the conversation felt like our regular talks on the phone. Some questions that she asked me made me cringe and some of them made me laugh. The more we talked on the phone the more the unexpected relationship became to feel normal.

The only issue that I had was with my parents. I knew that I had to hide the relationship from them. It would hurt them, and I didn't want them to judge me. I was very close to my mom, but this would probably make her hate me. I don't believe any 17-year-old would want their parents to hate them.

I had to be honest with Tara and I told her that my parents would have a problem with our relationship. I had to ensure that she never showed up at my house for anything. Because no mat-

ter how hard I tried to convince my mother she was not having it. She attempted to come over, but my mother kept turning her away. Thankfully, after a couple tries, I did manage to convince my mother to let me spend the night at her house a couple of weekends. I grew even closer with my mom when she made the decision to compromise with me, it showed she cared.

Unfortunately, the relationship lasted for a year and eventually like any other kind of typical teenage love story, we grew apart. I respect her and thank her for teaching me something about myself. She taught me how to be myself and to not let anyone judge me. I also remind Tara about this story and now that were older, we laugh about it. And, yes of course I still joke about buying her a dress. Until this day, I still look forward to her response and her playfully hitting me.

First Place Poetry Winner

Trinity M. Ross-Mack

The Rabbit Hole

Just as Alice, she fell into the alluring hole

Just as Alice, she fell

But didn't really fall

Just as Alice, things flew past her

But not Alice things

No these things were evil, mean

These pictures, these playing cards, these painted roses, these
clocks

These monsters of mind were her foes not friends

They taunt and tease

and bruise

and scream

Unlike her when Alice came back no time had passed

But with her

years went by

Each mirror showed age

Each clock painted years

Each passing day she grew

She grew crazy,

Scary,

Mad

But thank God,

We're all

Mad here

Trinity M. Ross-Mack

His Story

What he had was depression
He was always sad and felt alone
But he expressed it as aggression
His family called it an obsession
The way he controls, His evil tone
What he had was depression
His constant acts of transgression
Forced his wife to leave him on his own
But he expressed it as aggression
His mood took a downward progression
As he sat on his dark and broken throne
What he had was called depression
He cut off every connection
Sadness and anger, his natural cologne
What he had was depression
The man walked into a busy intersection
All that's left of him is a tombstone
What he had was depression
But he expressed it as aggression

Leighanna Mahoney

What is Love?

It is something that we all want and need.

We fight for it until we bleed.

It is more than a feeling, but an action.

More than just a passion.

It is more than a touch and a kiss,

But something we often miss.

Here I am, waiting to be found.

Yet, it seems like no one is around.

I can't wait to be held close by the one who knows me the most.

The day will come when I meet my king,

It will be worth even more than the ring.

Until that day, I will be patient and kind.

No longer feeling left behind.

I will walk with my head held high

And know that I am the prize.

Wes Guyton

We'll Be Back Soon

I sat on the couch with my favorite blue shoes tied to my feet. I was eager for my brother to run out of the kitchen and into the living room. That's when I knew it was time to play outside. He was finishing up his homework as I was finishing mine. I look out at the screen door to see the sun's rays piercing through the room. I looked back to see Westley standing at the back door with the basketball in his hands. The bright orange basketball was now old and brown with the surface of the ball peeling off. I could smell the grass coming from that ball, and it meant nothing but fun. I raced him out of the garage into our "court." The cracks on the cement floor were our lines for free throws and three-pointers. We had the whole front yard to ourselves. We were young at the time but we felt like legends.

"Close the door behind you!" shouted my mom, "don't let the bugs get in." Westley beat me to the court first, so I pulled the door shut.

"We'll be back soon, Mom!" We ran outside dribbling the ball and shooting it into the hoop. The net was old and torn, but still made that 'swish' when you release that perfect shot. I would sometimes shoot it too far off and throw it past the goal. The ball would roll down a hill, and I would have to race to get it back.

"From the Miami Heat, number 3, Westley Guyton!" He would dribble past me and jump to the goal as if he was going for the slam dunk. But he would only fall or run into the metal chain fences that were placed behind the goal. The sound of the crickets and the birds were our crowd and we were giving them a show.

I lay back on the edge of my bed. The door was locked and music was playing in my room. Suddenly, my ringtone went off. I was eager for my friends to call me. That's when I knew it was

time to head out and hang with them at the mall. I already had my license. If my brother wasn't using the car, it was my turn. I looked at the mirror and gave myself a self-analysis. I didn't look too over the top that they wouldn't roast me, but I was clean enough so that the girls could maybe notice me. (I don't think they did.) I walked out of my room, past the living room, where my younger brother Micah was watching TV.

"Can we play soccer outside?" begged Micah, "From FC Barcelona, number 2, Micah-"

"Go ask Westley," I interrupted, "I'm going out with my friends tonight." I pulled the keys out of my pocket and switched it with my phone, sliding it in my back pocket. "We'll be back soon, and I'll play with you later." My parents already approved me to go out, and it was the weekend. He can wait for tomorrow, right?

I went out the garage door and went into the car. It was parked right underneath the basketball goal. The basketball net was replaced with a new one, so new that we didn't dirty it up yet. With Micah playing soccer and us going out every other day, the basketball goal felt like a trophy that stands there collecting pollen and dust. Even the cracks on the cement floor became trenches for ants and nesting grounds for ever growing weeds. It wasn't my problem yet because it was Westley's turn to handle chores cleaning the front yard. I closed the garage door and started the car. The car freshener was clipped onto the vents, and the smell itself meant nothing but fun. I knew of a couple of spots like the mall, fast food joints, the barbershop, or my friends' house, but it didn't matter. I was young at the time but I felt like the man.

I sat at the desk in my fourth and final course for the day. I was eager to go to my dorm room where it's quiet and comfortable. When my phone hit 6:00, that's when I knew it was time for a break. After weeks of planning, quizzes, and assignments, I had that a few hours to prepare a meal and relax before I head to the computer lab to finish a paper. I would always have one of two choices. I would lie on my bed and make up hours of sleep due to the late nights. I could either call my parents back home and

check on them. I chose the latter and prepared to call my parents. I arrived at my room and pulled up my rocking chair. I would heat up leftover pizza in the microwave and grab a water bottle from my fridge. I would call my dad's number, then my mom, then the house number until I received an answer. After a couple of tries, they finally picked up the phone. We would have the regular start of the conversation.

"How you doing, How's the classes going, we miss you," they would always say.

"I'm doing fine, I'm doing alright in my courses, I miss you too," I would respond. I and my Westley still reside on our college campuses. When we meet up, we either go to church or out to eat.

My parents would pass the phone to Micah, and he would tell him about his day. He would only speak briefly; he would be so engaged to the video games.

"We'll be back soon," I would say, "then we can go outside and play."

There would be a long pause at the other end of the line. It was probably because Micah is playing the game. But he would later respond OK. I could imagine smelling the cut grass when we would arrive back home. The birds would be chirping or the 'swish' sound would be echoed in the distance. But a sudden 'ding' brought me back to reality as the pizza was ready. I said my good-byes and sat there facing the white wall. I wasn't young anymore, I said to myself,

"From Claflin University, number 1, Wes Guyton."

Wes Guyton

I We

I rep that orange and maroon like ivy park,
We creatin' the change of this world like that, Tony Stark.
Carrying the baton and I – run – man!
For the next generation, I trust you fam.
Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott, the Auntie of Wakanda, Tina Turner,
All I'm saying is... let Angie get the Oscar!
It's true... we might just be takin' over one city at a time,
Miss America, USA, Teen, and Universe; Killin' the game like it
was a crime.
I'm just keepin' it real, don't shoot the messenger cause that's just
facts!
Call me Issa Rae cuz' I'm rooting for everyone that is black.
I know my rights; I have the right to speak up!
Anything we say can and will be used for our children, sorry
Trump.
We have to fight prejudice and combat injustice,
So when we make it out, we succeed, just Us.
Call me whatever you want, doesn't matter how I'm treated.
The only N-word that they see us as is needed.

Antonio Rutledge

Four



Brianna R. Bradley

Human Nature



Ethan O. Drake

Straight Outta Venus



Wesley V. Hickson

Do you see me?



First Place Non-fiction Winner

Jamiya Scott

The Smell of Home

The smell of Creed cologne and Spearmint filled my nostrils as I heard someone whispering in my ear,

“Good morning baby girl, time to wake up!”

I rolled over and embraced my dad, Kodi. I loved his smell, I loved his voice, I really loved my dad. It was something about having him being home that made me feel whole. When I realized what time it was I hopped out of bed, got ready for school, and ran down the hall to get my five-year-old twin sisters, Raegan and Rylen, ready for school.

“Miya, Daddy got us up a long time ago,” Rylen laughed.

“I wanted to give you a chance to sleep in this morning, and we even made you breakfast,” Dad said, rubbing my shoulders and pushing me towards the kitchen.

As I sat and sipping my orange juice, I fully embraced this moment. The twins were playing, and my parents were cooking and laughing. It seemed like everything in my universe was in complete balance. My dad came home from a tour in Iraq six months ago, but it still felt like he just came home. You could tell he was so happy to be home too, he wanted to do everything. My thoughts were interrupted by my mother rushing us out the house so she could get to work on time.

“Ladies let’s go let’s go! We gotta get a move on!” she yelled from the door.

“But Mommy we want Daddy to take us today”, Raegan cried.

My father tried to give the twins a short pep talk to get the twins to comply with my mother's orders.

"Kodi please! I can't be late again." My mother began to whine.

My father finally got us all packed in the car and waved us goodbye as we drove away. This day was already off to a good start; nothing was going to ruin this feeling!

My dad picked me up from the afterschool program around 6pm that night.

"Hey kiddo! Did you have a good day?" he said with a slight smile.

I'm not sure what it was, but something was wrong. My dad only calls me kiddo when something was wrong. My mom was just getting home from the twins' gymnastic practice as we were pulling up.

"I bought Fatz for dinner, I'm too tired to cook" she said exhaustedly.

At dinner, the atmosphere wasn't as jolly as it was this morning. I couldn't be the only one that felt it.

"So, how was your day dear?" my father said trying to lighten the mood.

My mother saw right through him. She pushed her plate from in front of her and sat just staring at my father. "Girls, go to your room." she said emptily. The twins started for their room, and I began to clear off the table.

"Jamiya, can you have a seat please?" My father whispered without taking his eyes off my mother.

My parents and I sat in silence a little longer. The anticipation got the best of me, so I went on and broke the silence. "What's going on, Dad?" I asked anxiously.

"Kodi, please tell me . . ."

Before my mother could finish my dad blurted out, "I'm going back! I am going back to do another tour in Iraq" he shouted all in one breath. With tears in my eyes I just got up and went to my room. I was so hurt; he had just come back. We were so happy; now he was leaving again. Now we had to go back to how it used to be. Back to when the twins would cry every night for Daddy to come home. Back to my mother having sleepless night worrying about us and my father. Back to taking on the responsibilities of my dad. I had to go back to being a grown up instead of getting to enjoy being a kid.

As I lay in the dark lost in my own tears and thoughts, the smell of my dad's Creed cologne mixed with spearmint hit my nose before he spoke. "Baby girl, I know you don't wanna talk to your old man, but as your dad I had to make some hard decisions. I don't want to leave you guys, but I took an oath to serve and protect this country," he said in the saddest voice. I could tell it was hurting him to leave us just as much as it affected me.

It was raining and gloomy the morning we had to drop my father off at JFK airport. The weather was appropriate for the occasion. My mom tried to hide her hurt, but I caught her wiping her tears once or twice. I was surprised how well Raegan and Rylen was taking all of this. That sat at the table drawing while we waited for my dad to get ready. I had just gotten my period for the first time the day before, so I wasn't feeling too well.

"I going to lay down for a bit. Just come get me when Dad is ready," I said kind of annoyed.

I laid in bed trying not to think about the fact that my uterus was falling out or that my dad is about to go fight at the frontline of war. I was so overwhelmed at this point. I hear a knock on my door, it was my dad.

"Hey sweetie, I just wanted to talk to you before we go. I just want you to know I am so proud of you for being so strong through all this chaos these past couple weeks. You are so brave, and no matter what happens I'll always be thinking of you my brave girl because home is where the heart is. Always remember

that,” he said, and kissed my nose. I had barely talked to my father since he told my mother and I that he was going back to Iraq for another tour.

“Dad I’m proud of you too. You’re my hero” I said as he left my room. He threw me a quick smile and that was the last time I saw my father.

Today, March 30, 2008 was the day that my father was supposed to come home, but instead we were laying him to rest in Rosehill Memorial Park. I never seen the twins so broken, at six-years-old their pure and joyful spirit seemed to leave them that day. My mother, who was eight months pregnant, was inconsolable. My mother found out she was pregnant a month after my father left for his deployment. She never told my father because she wanted to surprise him with the son he had so desperately wanted. My baby brother would never get to meet my father and know him for the wonderful man he was.

A month had passed since my father’s death, and I was so busy being strong for everyone else that I didn’t even get a chance to cry myself. My mom had her hands full trying to cook, help the twins with homework, and tend to my baby brother, Kodi J, I guess she didn’t hear the doorbell ring. When I answered the door a man in neat military uniform stood before me.

“Hi, you must be Jamiya. I’m Sam, I was a friend of your dad’s. I hate to meet under these circumstances, but I have something for you. He told me to give this to you if god forbid, he didn’t make it home,” he said, pulling a yellow envelope from behind his back.

I invited him inside and made the introductions between him and my mother. He was eager to give her a hand with the chaos going on in our kitchen. I took the envelope and retreated to my room. The first thing I smelled when I opened the envelope was my father’s Creed cologne and spearmint. The first thing I pulled from the envelope was his shirt that lingered with his scent, and I broke

into tears. The contents consisted of not only his shirt, but also a locket with his favorite picture of him and me with a note attached.

“To my brave girl: Stay strong for your mom. Always remember home is where the heart is. I love you so much!”, the note said.

At that moment all I could think was how much I loved his smell, and how much I really loved my dad. It finally hit me that these items were all I had left of him, but my heart was whole.

Bre'annah Holcombe

The Smell of Home: All Bouncers to the Floor

Today was finally the big day! I jumped out of bed with excitement rushing to my mother's room, "Momma! Get up, today's the day." The night before we were up until 12 a.m. getting my hair together. "Good morning, Happy Birthday, did you check under the tree yet?"

December 6th was my national holiday of birth. It was far but not too far from the 25th which was Christmas Day. Fortunately, I was able to receive both birthday and Christmas gifts separately, but birthdays only resulted in no more than two gifts.

"No ma'am, I didn't look yet," I responded.

"Your gift is wrapped in blue," she said. I smiled and hopped off the bed and ran to the living room. She yelled, "And brush those chops girl," she laughed, "Your breath might've knocked me back to sleep. And tell Brian to get up please," he's my oldest brother.

Grabbing the box with the blue wrapping, with a note: "Bre'annah, Happy 10th Birthday, I love you baby girl. I hope you enjoy your party at the skating rink later!" I ripped up the wrap to find my very own pair of skates. I had been asking for these for some time now, and my mom finally got them. Opening the box, I gazed at the black leather boot, the fresh smell of the skates reminded me of a new car smell, and the wheels were hot pink.

Sitting at the table at Carolina Grille, on a Friday evening with my homegirls, my phone rings, I answered, "Hello?" it was my younger cousin Ari, "Hey Bre. Are you busy? Can you drop me off at the rink later? My mom won't be off in time. It starts at 6 tonight."

“Hey Tink,” that was her nickname. I responded, “I’m with some friends right now about to eat. We just ordered our food. I’ll pick you up around 6:40. See you later!”

Finishing up my food I noticed how eager I was to go pick up my cousin to take her to the skating rink. It was about 6:30 p.m. I said my goodbyes to my friends. After school the bus dropped Ari and her little sister off at our grandmother’s house. Their mother, my older cousin, would have to work over, and they were only 11 and 6 years old; too young to be home alone.

I arrived at my grandmothers. “Alright Mama,” Tink kisses and hugs our grandmother, “I just got Niya out the tub. She’s laying down in your bed,” she said.

“Okay, thank you, y’all be safe driving,” she responded.

Walking out the door I noticed my cousin’s excitement to get to the car with her all black leather skates. It was a familiar energy that I once experienced too. The skating rink was nothing more and nothing less than a good time. It was a safe zone for kids of all ages; after a long week of school everyone was looking forward to going skating. Every weekend with my friends we would all get dropped off at the rink and had loads of fun. At that time, it didn’t start until 7 p.m. and ended at 11 that night, but now things start and end an hour early.

I laughed, “You know, I should’ve asked my friends if they wanted to go skating tonight.”

Tink side eyed me and shook her head looking down at her phone.

“What? Why you do that?” I asked.

“Bre, you’re too old to go skating,” she responded.

I could only laugh. “Girl, I’m only 21,” I said, “And you know what? I have my own skates too! And, I can still fit them. I can still skate.”

I sat in my Thursday 2 o'clock class in Laymen Hall. An email from Claflin pops up on my phone, "COLLEGE SKATE NIGHT! This Saturday at the Orangeburg, Jammer's Skate-N-Fun Center—"I instantly got happy. I began to text and reply in the group chat with a few friends of mine to verify that we all wanted to go to the skate night event.

It was now Saturday, and we all loaded up on one of the buses that Claflin was escorting the students into the skating rink. As we arrived and got out of the bus you could hear the loud music echoing from inside.

One of my friends starts dancing and says, "Ayy, they got the music jumping already!"

We walk in, pay, and go to the skate booth with our tickets to pick up our rental skates. You could smell the popcorn and hot nachos coming from the canteen. My friends and I finally laced up our skates, and as I stood up, I felt wobbly. I laughed to myself. It had been like nine or ten years since I had last put on a pair. We all get to the skate floor holding hands because no one was yet steady on their own two feet. I eventually got comfortable and the skill of skating naturally came back. The music and the adrenaline filled my heart and brought back so many great memories. The building was filled with all college students who laughed and joked around like we were kids again. The lights were dim and blue and the disco ball on the ceiling reflected vibrant colors on the skating floor.

"All bouncers to the floor; calling all bouncers to the floor," the DJ spoke in the mic.

I had loosened up a little, took on the challenge and remained on the floor to bounce skate. The DJ played a throwback by Zapp & Roger, More Bounce to the Ounce. The night was coming to an end and we all had to return our skates and head back to the bus. On the way back to campus I texted my mom: "Let me tell you about tonight." I was overjoyed.

Faith Stallings

Who Am I?

I am black

I am born of delicate melanin skin

It shines like honey against the sun

Blessed by my ancestors, my beauty has always been within

I am a black woman

I rise above the hate of my own color

The world has tried to keep me silent

I am only a nurturer

I am a strong black woman

The devil has not won my battles

Oppressed in shackles, for hundreds of years I remain to rise,
despite the fears that I will not be accepted, that I am but a small
crack in cement

But what our world doesn't understand is that together, with the
right aspirations and limited temptations, we, will be crowned at
the top

A glorious vine that blooms to the heavens will submerge out of
that once disregarded crack and they will notice our power. That
comes from deep within.

We are not alone, despite our independence.

We are not mean, or dirty.

My hair nor my music taste defines my self-care

We are rising to lead in a war against humanity itself, we create,
we destroy, we conquer, we educate

I am a strong beautiful black woman.

Faith Stallings

You are Just Too Black for Me

I apologize for the coarse texture of my hair
How it gets stuck at the roots of my pick
I apologize for the dark color of my eyes
How it mirrors a deep pool of liquid chocolate
I am ashamed at the way my brothers sag their clothes
How it displays an arse we'd want the world to presumably kiss
I am discouraged by the mixed curvy girl down the street
She has more followers than me
I cry myself to sleep knowing my parents struggle to float above
the line of poverty
How has my tears not moved you?
I laugh at the jokes about drug usage and sexualized personalities
about my complexion
How awful of a soul I must have
If I relax my hair and bleach my skin will that make you happy?
If I change my voice will it soothe your fears?
I am dangerous, a menace, and statistic to your perfect world
Is my existence that threatening?
I am appropriated and forgotten
Should I stamp copyright to my forehead?
It is okay that I am not a monotoned race

Their toxic habits linger in the dark

I am too black for you, and you are just too bland for me

Christoph McFadden

Look Up

Organize. Study. Prepare. Execute. Repeat. These are a few of the many attributes of an ambitious team member, student, or leader. Society continues to be driven by those who utilize their ambitions to increase productivity and influence. Ambition is the driving force that begets success and as such, wherever one places their ambition determines where their success is found. What is often overlooked, however, is the calamity of misemployed ambition. History will show that ambition has also been the driving force behind revenge, disaster, loss, and grief. So, while ambition might sound attractive, ambition in and of itself does not equate to a series of best-case scenarios.

Take for example, the ambitious college student. One can imagine that the ambitious student would not only complete the required course load, but also would be driven to take on other edifying opportunities. Such tasks might include serving as a student government leader, freshman orientation leader or tutor, joining social clubs, fraternities and sororities, music ensembles, or performing community service. These all contribute to personal and communal impact. Aside from this, the ambitious student may be a part of organizations, internships, and/or fellowships that assist in academic and career competitiveness. In this type of environment, the student's ambitions may easily develop into a "tunnel-vision" mentality. Students encounter many demands both directly and indirectly. The direct demands are found in the course work and degree requirements. The indirect demands are found in the aforementioned lists of co- and extra-curricular activities. While not required, they constitute a demand nonetheless because of the common educational mission to create globally competitive students. The ambitious student is able to manage these demands, but often starts to see university studies as a series of tasks, ultimately leading to discontent. Having experienced this myself, I must ask: What happens when the sun goes down and the only thing accomplished was your to-do list? What happens when the grade is made, degree received, but there are latent relationships that never flour-

ished? Even beyond college, the systems of life can cause us to only see the road in front of us, never slowing down to appreciate the scenic view of our journey. We live as though it is good enough to be on the right path, but too often we do not realize that a part of that path is the environment and life that exists around it. This is the calamity of misemployed ambition.

I was sitting in an airport and across from me, I could see a moving walkway. I noticed a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, standing on the walkway. As he stood, moving along, he had his head down, focused on his phone. Then came an older gentleman walking behind and eventually passing the younger gentleman. When the young man noticed he had been passed; he looked up from his phone and began walking. Although the young man had the advantage in getting to his destination sooner, he stood still, allowing his path to do all the work. His ambitions were focused on his phone while the older gentleman had his head up and his focus on moving through his surroundings. He had enough ambition that he did not settle for the propelling force of the walkway alone, but instead combined that with his own ability to walk which increased his overall speed. In society, it is often assumed that younger generations are more active, more aware, and have more access. This illustration demonstrates how that is not always true by inserting another quality into the equation – ambition. With the right ambition, the older gentleman was more active, more aware, and obtained greater access to his goal. Figuratively, yes, the young man was on the right path; yes, he was moving forward on that path. But with his head down, he missed so much of his journey. If your weeks are starting to feel like days and if you are productive, but often feel absent from life; if you are active, but unfulfilled, perhaps you should consider re-channeling your ambitions. I present a simple solution: Look up.

There is nothing wrong with moving towards your goals, but as you progress, remember to look up. Remember to notice where you are and where you are going. Considering the environment around you gives you greater appreciation for your journey. In this way, you can reflect on where you have been compared to where you are. You may even notice something that might influence how you continue on that journey. As a student, this may look like scheduling free time for lunch with new students and learning their stories. Or you may take time to watch video interviews of

successful people in your field of vocation to find out how, why, and what positioned them in the current state of their career. This can give you new perspective. Even if you are not a student, still, remember to look up. Remember to take moments to reflect and journal. Your first step in looking up is intentionality. Plan your free-time or self-care time. Commit yourself to meeting new people on a consistent basis. Do. Again, the goal here is to give you more perspective and that perspective will affect how you experience your own journey.

Finding ways to “look up” will also help you determine if you are still on the right path at all. If you are constantly running the race looking down, you will not know where you are headed until you get there. What if you got on the wrong path along the way? What if your path is not leading you towards the destination you thought? Look up.

I do not suggest that looking up requires you to stop moving forward. On the contrary, as with the older man in the airport, you can keep moving forward while you are looking around. Instead of thinking of reflection as a standstill and waste of time, consider this discipline as a moment of “journey assessment.” You are still being productive, working hard, and gaining success; the difference is that now you are channeling your ambitions also to consider the larger questions that surround your individual journey. Where you place your ambition determines where your success is found. You may be placing your ambitions in your work, so you are successful in your work; but are you placing your ambitions in your mind? Are you as successful in advancing your state of your mind as you are with career benchmarks? I suggest that we all look up, consider where we are, consider our “why,” confront unexplored dreams, unanswered questions, help others along the way, and let the beauty of our environments contribute to our journey and the stories that we will tell.

Shaniya Chapman

Forgiveness for Father

“What am I doing here?” I said to myself. Placing my car in park, I straightened up and sat back in my seat. I let out a breath and rubbed my clammy palms on the denim fabric of my jeans. I need to keep calm, because if I keep freaking out, I’ll have another panic attack for sure. Closing my eyes, I placed my head on the head-rest and allowed my breathing to even out.

Buzz Buzz... My phone vibrating in the cupholder interrupted my focus. I looked at the clock on the dashboard which read 10:15 a.m. My phone buzzed again so I grabbed it. I saw that I got a text message from, *Solomon*. The message read: *I’m here*. At the bench near the waterfront.

After reading the message, I locked my phone and exited my car. The cool late November winds caused brown and orange leaves to skid across the asphalt as I neared the park’s entrance. I stopped in front of the sign that read, *Riverfront Park*. I couldn’t help to think about how even though I had good and bad memories of this place, the good out weighed the bad. I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my parka and walked onto the trail that led to my destination.

I took in my surroundings of the park and noticed how much things haven’t changed. The water sprinklers that would normally be on were turned off due to the cold weather. The naval memorial still had that same statue of the woman kissing the navy man returning home from war, and the wooden boardwalk still felt as durable as ever. A cargo boat on the river blowing its horn grasped my attention next.

“Sade!... Sade over here!” I snapped my head in the direction of where I heard my name being called and saw him, Solomon. There he was standing in front of the bench holding two Starbucks cups in his hands while looking at me looking back at him. I didn’t smile, I didn’t wave, I simply walked until I met him at the bench.

“I got you your favorite...pumpkin spice latte with extra

foam,” he extended the cup that was in his left hand. I hesitated for a second before gladly excepting the warm drink.

“Thank you for this. For agreeing to meet me here this morning. Knowing you, you probably didn’t want to come meet me here.” He flashed his devilish smirk that I grew to resent. I didn’t respond, I took a seat on the bench next to us and looked out at the water. He took a seat next to me, putting a comfortable distance between us.

Just like the park, I noticed how much he hadn’t changed. He still wore the same Polo Ralph Lauren cologne, and sported the same wavy low-cut fade. The only difference was the few strands of grey hair that were sprouting from his head. His dark milk chocolate skin was as vibrant as ever, but his dark brown almond shaped eyes bared a sadness that I couldn’t decipher.

“You don’t know me. You never knew me.” I finally said something. I didn’t bother looking over at his face for his reaction. Silence fell over us. The only thing that could be heard was the sounds of the water splashing against the large rocks, birds chirping, and the rustling of leaves.

He was right about me not wanting to come meet him though. It just didn’t make sense to me. That after no form of communication between us for almost ten years, what made him have a change of heart? I took a sip of my latte before speaking.

“Why did you want me to meet you... here of all places?” I looked over at him this time. This is my happy place, and I didn’t want him to ruin it for me. He cleared his throat then looked down at his dark denim jeans. He took a sip from his coffee, then waited a moment before speaking.

“Your father is dying,” He sipped from his cup then looked me in my eyes. I looked away then scoffed.

“So, this is what this is gonna be? You called me down here to tell me that you’re dying? You really know how to brighten the mood Solomon,” My tone was a little too loud. I shook my head as I crossed one leg over the other. I didn’t know how to feel about what he just told me. Here I am sitting on a park bench with my estranged father, who just told me he’s dying. How am I supposed to feel?

“Is this your way of you wanting to make amends with me?” My tone was lower this time around. I looked over at him taking in his appearance. He looked healthy. How could he be dying?

“Yes, if that’s not too much to ask,”

“Look Solomon I don’t know what you want me to say but,” he interrupted me.

“Could you stop with all the god damned Solomon’s. I’m your father and you should address me as such!” I snorted at him. He was getting frustrated, but so was I. I couldn’t see how he expects me to address him as something he’s never been to me, a father.

“You lost your privileges of hearing me call you my father years ago. You should know that by now Solomon.” I narrowed my eyes at him awaiting his response.

“I know I haven’t been the best father...”

“You can say that again.”

“I don’t want you to feel pressured by me wanting to be around you more. Hell, I don’t want you or any of your brothers or sisters to feel that way. But I do want yall to know that I am trying to make up for what I wasn’t when yall needed me. I wanna start right here, right now with you, but only if you’re willing to hear me out” He looked up at me with pleading eyes, and I had to look away. I couldn’t let him make empty promises to me. I’m not ten years old anymore.

“Why only meet with me? You have nine other children. What, the other ones didn’t answer your phone call,” What made me the one he wanted to patch things up with first? I’m not the oldest or the youngest.

“Believe it or not, but I wanted to meet with you first. I did try calling Shon though, couldn’t get an answer,” I watched as he sipped from his cup as I shook my head. Knowing how my sister Shondell could get when it came to our father, it was a good thing that he didn’t get through to her.

“So, what’s wrong with you?” I was trying to tell myself

not to get concerned, but I couldn't help it.

He inhaled a sharp breath, then exhaled deeply before speaking.

"I have stage three hepatic cancer. Doctors say I have a lil less the six months left." I looked at him as he hung his head low, then turned and faced the river.

He did it. My happy place, he ruined it.

Thinking back to a conversation that I had with my sister when I was around twelve years old, a stale taste entered my mouth. It was as if my words from that conversation were echoing in my head; *when daddy dies I'm not even gonna cry*. I honestly feel like kicking myself right now.

Here I am sitting next to my father, who is dying from the same cancer that took my grandmother away from me. I remember how this disease ate way at my grandmother, and I honestly felt bad for him. I know first-hand how he's going to look, how weak he's going to become, and how much help he is going to need.

I looked over at my father and I could see the look of despair written all over his face. He honestly looked lost. I noticed something fall onto his jeans, then looked at his face to see a single tear streak on his left cheek. In all my twenty years of living, not once had I seen my father shed a single tear. He's the type of man that is completely guarded and shows little emotion when it comes to pain or fear. I hesitated before grabbing his left hand in mine and giving a gentle squeeze.

"I used to hate you, ya know," I waited for him to say something but all I got in return were sniffles, so I kept talking.

"I used to think that you didn't want me. Back when Shon and I were still going to James Simmons Elementary, I thought you loved her more than me. At least your actions made me feel that way," Still silence. Finally, he was listening to me.

"Remember that time when you and your ex-wife took her two daughters, the four kids you have with her plus Shon with yall to Disney world? Do you remember not taking me" this time I got a response?

“Yeah, I remember. It was for SJ’s Make-a-Wish trip,” he turned his body so that he was now facing me. My emotions were at a high, and my eyes became teary.

“I was so excited thinking that my daddy was gonna come pick up from school for the first time, and how he was gonna take me and my brothers and sisters to Disney World. Boy was I so naïve,” I allowed a single hot tear to fall. I quickly wiped it away with my shoulder.

“You weren’t naïve, you were a little girl who put trust into her father and was let down. I let you down.” This time my father squeezed my hand.

“That was the first time you let me down with your empty promises. I was seven years old. You never even apologized for leaving me behind. Because of that day, when you left me. You made me feel unwanted and undeserving of love from a man. You hurt me to my core. Did you even love me... do you love me?” I allowed the tears to flow a little more freely. Solomon pulled a Starbucks napkin from pocket and dried my face.

“Of course, I love you. I loved you then just as much as I do now. I just had a funny way of showing it. I just- I just thought that since you and Shon were girls, it wasn’t my place to do things with yall. I felt that it was your mother’s job.” I couldn’t believe how dumb he sounded.

“We’re you children of course you’re supposed to spend time with us. How could you even think that you basically abandoning us would be beneficial to us in anyway? You left my mother to struggle by herself with two of your children.” I’m starting to get upset. I could tell because my leg is bouncing, fast.

I started thinking of my mother and father’s relationship and how non-existent it is. They do consider each other as friends now, but it hasn’t always been that way. I remember how my mama would tell me how she never paid my father much attention when they first met. And then, she would tell me how when they did finally get together, all the constant cheating he did.

“As a man I thought that it was only right for a man to spend time with his sons, while mothers spent time with their daughters. Now that I hear myself saying it out loud, it sounds so

stupid” He’s right it does sound stupid.

“My mama never put you on child support, even when I wished she had, she never did. You still never made it an effort to come around. There were so many things that you missed out on that I can’t even count. My birth, first steps, first words, first day of school, heart breaks, band recitals, prom, high school graduations, you just weren’t there but my mama was.” I stopped bouncing my leg and let go of his hand. I placed both hands around my cup and took a few sips of my drink.

“I know, I missed out on a lot with you and Shon while yall were growing up. If I could go back in time and be there I would, believe me I would. But I want to try and be there for yall now. I can’t go back and fix what’s already broken, but I can try my best to repair it. I just need yall to give me a chance.” I hear everything that he said, it’s just hard to trust someone who has shown you time and time again that they shouldn’t be trusted.

“I hear what you’re saying, but how do I know that I can trust you? How do I know you aren’t just trying to get right with God before you die, instead of you making amends wit your children?”

“Well you don’t know you could trust me, but if I have to spend everyday of the last six months I have left here on Earth trying to gain you and your siblings trust back, then so be it I will. This go around I promise you that I’m genuine with my intentions. I know I haven’t shown it before, but I love you and I need you, Sade.” With every word he spoke he was looking into my eyes. It was as if he was allowing me to see how honest he was being when he said that he loves and needs me. The both of I couldn’t stop the tears that fell from our eyes. I closed the gap in between us on the bench

“I trust you dad.” He let out breath then engulfed me in a bear hug. I stiffened for a second, then hugged him back. I placed my head on his shoulder and sobbed as is I were a little girl again. I repeated those four words over and over: I trust you dad... I trust you dad. I needed to forgive my father for all his imperfections and shortcomings, he’s human just Like I am. I didn’t want to dwell on the past anymore, because I didn’t know how long he has left here. I know that this one conversation didn’t fix everything between us,

but it was a start.

Beep beep beep...beep beep beep... I groaned I reached out to silence my alarm clock on the nightstand beside my bed. I slowly rolled onto my side then sat up. I threw my legs over the side of the bed. I slid my feet into my house shoes then proceeded to the bathroom to complete my morning routine.

As I was finishing up in the bathroom my stomach reminded me that it's time for breakfast. Walking back into my bedroom, I grabbed my phone from the charger then made my way downstairs to the kitchen. I pulled out everything needed for my veggie omelet then started on making coffee.

I filled my tea kettle with water and placed it on the stove to boil. As I waited for my water to boil, I took a seat at the island in the middle of the kitchen. I couldn't help this feeling that I needed to return the call that I missed last night.

I unlocked my phone and went straight to my call log. I stared at the unknown number for a moment contemplating if I should make the call or not. I released a breath that I didn't know I was holding in and dialed the unfamiliar number.

To say I was nervous was an understatement. I could feel the blood rushing in my ears and I could feel my heart rapidly beating in my chest. I listened intently as the phone rang once... twice...three times before he answered.

"Good morning dad." It's been ten years since I spoke to my father.

Shaniya Chapman

Black Like America

Black like the berry
As sweet as the juice
Running like Harriet, so
We can hang around like Nat
By the same noose

Dreaming Just like Martin, of
Lincoln's promises that were as empty as
A poor man's pockets
But,
Got fed up like Fanny Lou who gave birth to men
As radical as Malcom, and
As political as Newton
Take heed to our list of demands,
The same as the Ten-Point-Plan

Hussle like Nipsey to break curses of generations
In our community
Black bleeds like Kansas
By faces as pale as the white of Trayvon's eyes

With necks as red as the blood of young Tamir Rice
Only want to Make America Great Again
But,
When was America ever great for Blackness,
Like it was for the white man?

Kristopher Dunbar

Catharsis Vice Grip

My head was full of stars. Almost as if Vincent Van Gogh took his paintbrush and started painting an array color in my blurry vision. I could only see so much as my eyes would allow me to, with the rush of tears streaming down my cheek as I clenched my fist. Mumbling inaudible words that I could only understand “What would he say about me? What would he say about me this very moment, if he were to see me?” I stumbled between the street-lights and parked cars as I caught myself dry heaving holding my stomach with my knees on the ground. “What would he say?” My mind began to lapse back to our last conversation as my peripheral started to blacken.

“I shouldn’t have to find you like this. I shouldn’t have to see you coming down from some high! You talk about changing, yet you relapse into another worse state of yourself, Francine!” His words echoed through his hollow apartment as I tried to pick myself off the floor. “So, you’re going to lecture me again Elliot?! I’m not like those normal people who can live an easy white picket fence life okay. I tried going to support groups, but their only end goal was to make me feel that my problem was relatable. Well, my problem isn’t relatable.” I said with slurred speech, even I was surprised that I was holding a conversation with the room shifting around me.

Elliot sighed with frustration turning around as if he was trying to bite his tongue. Clearing his throat, he uttered “I’m never blunt with you. Yes, that what it is. You’re nothing but a shell of sex, drugs, and good posture. Your vanity seems to always go away when they have you bend over like the whore you are! A Norma Jean that drinks till she’s dry heaving on someone’s backseat. Constantly exhaling your past to relieve, to falsely believe in yourself Francine!” The room went to silence as I felt my porcelain heart

shatter onto the apartment floor. I placed my hand over my mouth as I felt my emotions bubbling from the seams of my skin. My tear ducts began to break like a levee leading to a vessel of water. But I held it all in and shouted these piercing words “You don’t know shit about me! You think you have seen behind the curtain?! I only allow you to see only so much of me! You’re just another guy in line waiting who’s trying to fuck me!”

Never have I ever seen Elliot so angry before. His eyes seem to darken as his whole demeanor shifted. But he caught himself to only reply with “I’m done...I’m done Francine. If you can no longer help yourself, then I won’t watch you die from this. I can’t. Not like last time when I found your unconscious body slumped over on the restaurant’s bathroom floor. I just couldn’t allow you to die that night, of course, the only thing you remember was waking up in a hospital bed with an IV in your arm.”

I snapped back into my reality after accidentally setting off a car alarm with my hand pressed against a four-door car. Realizing that I was in potential trouble, I got up from my stupor and stumbled away down a nearby street. Staggering in the moonlight with the cool wind pressing against my chest, it reminded of all the hands that touched my body. Some hands were welcomed, while most were unwelcomed due to my vulnerability.

I remember when my ex-boyfriend Miles had me on his kitchen tile floor on my back. Steadily kicking my side, yelling obscenities, and then lying to his parents as if nothing ever happened that night. Miles was later arrested and charged for domestic abuse. After Elliot saw the mugshot of Miles, he was furious and wanted to get his hands around Miles’s throat. The image still haunts me as I watched love or the idea of the love I once had destroyed in front of my eyes. Yet I know the image still haunts Elliot since he could have lost me that night. I’ll never forget his shaky voice over the phone the night after the incident. “Just come home and I’ll take care of you. I know that I don’t have much, but it’ll be more than enough for you...” It made me realize that nothing is good enough for me.

Even my father could testify to that. To believe that the only two things we would have in common are having a strong liver and being Fleetwood Mac fans. Sobriety was never easy for him. My father would only find sobriety in the grave. It was a frightening sight to watch him tremor in his hospital bed as he begged for a sip of Yeager. He knew he was dying, constantly breaking out in cold sweats, trembling to where he needed to be restrained, and starving himself thin. Mortality became a constant fear of his as his liver was corroded. Doctors only gave him a few months to live. During that time, the only visitor my father would get was me. Lucky for him my face favored my mother, so it was a two for one deal. Every moment spent with him was bittersweet. Bitter since he was never around to watch me grow up. Sweet to know our livers can handle what our hearts couldn't. Our conversations consisted of how much he regretted leaving my mother and me, to who broke up The Beatles. He was a sorrowful man till his death.

The streetlights started to go off one by one as their timer demanded. I found myself in front of a familiar place. A place that I used to run away from. A place that my demons hated because they knew they would be cleansed and no longer will be a part of my vessel. St. Mary's Rehabilitation Center. Before going in I phoned Elliot hoping he would pick up and he did. "Hello? Francine is everything okay?" Elliot said with worry in his voice. A smile pierced my lips as I replied: "Elliot...I'm ready."

A small laugh of relief broke out on Elliot's end as he said: "Took you long enough."

The conversation was brief as Elliot encouraged me to enter the building. To enter and receive the help that I desperately needed. Walking in I could feel my demons wanting to flee as fear and the death of them was inevitable. With their last antics, they hovered my thoughts trying to make them race as my feet were racing from their salvation. They could no longer salivate for their mouths were about to run dry. Walking to the front desk with a shake in my step I opened my mouth "Hello...I would like to get a bed here, please. I know that I've been here before and it didn't quite work out so to speak" "Name please" the desk assistant asked clicking her pen

readily to mark her papers “Francine Smith” I said with a small hesitant hitch in my voice. “ Ah...yes Francine Dover Smith. Your name is still in our system and your last stay here with us was on April 17th, 2017. You were removed for fighting staff and violating the rules here. Today is August 28th, 2017, so you’ve been gone for about four months. What have you’ve been doing these past four months?” I cleared my throat as my eyes widen to the question. For these past four months, I would only say that I have just been surviving. Yet survival was so far from the truth to where it was fiction. I opened my mouth with hesitation “...I’ve spent the past four months using, stealing, and living on a drug binge. I’ve been a complete mess of myself and over-all a catalyst for my habit. This time...this time I want to be clean...I want to be...” Before I could finish my sentence, I was interrupted. “Are you talking? Or are these the drugs talking in your place? You see here at St. Mary’s Rehabilitation Center; we want to aid those in need and promote a healthy space for those who desire to get cleaned. You’ve been here three times in the past and shown in your actions that you don’t appreciate our services here. Hell, you even racked up \$500 in damages here. What makes this time any different?”

“This time is different. I can’t end up like my father”.

A sigh left her mouth as she met my gaze. “Rome wasn’t built in a day. There’s a room in the back, so I’m putting your name down for it. If you damage anything or break one violation, then you’ll be put out of here permanently without a thought.” I began to smile as tears raced down my cheek. “ Thank you...I hope to make this one count” I said.

Chasing the Dragon

The euphoric sensation was a flood underneath my skin, racing delightful bliss of transcendence. Shooting heroin through my poorly parched mouth as I angled the syringe using a bathroom mirror to guide me. I couldn’t find any decent veins on my arms since they were snake-bitten, and I was dehydrated. The needle pierced through my gum striking a vein, where blood began to seep out. Forcing myself to ignore the pain as I injected the syringe.

Dreaming while being conscious was such a beautiful flow state. Flowing in and out of a garden of Eden. Roaming the garden as a curious Eve only to partake of one fruit that would send rivers through my veins. The flood would build up in my chest, then rush its way into my head as my eyes dilated with this numbing sensation behind them. Then my lungs would deflate as I was comfortably high. The restroom door creeped open as I was planted on the floor with my head against the tile wall. "You haven't used it all yet? Is there any still left?" Mumbling towards the blurry figure "I don't...think so...I think there's still...a small dose.... left." As the figure drew closer, I realized it was Brooke. A short woman with blonde hair and brown eyes. A fellow co-worker of mine whom waited tables with me and whom would shoot up with me after work. She was an older woman whose been around the block longer than me. A woman who looked like hell, yet who could easily mask it if seen in the right eyes. In my eyes that wasn't the case.

The taste of blood lingered in my mouth as it intermixed with saliva. Swallowing was ever so hard as breathing. Brooke would sit by me resting herself on me as she rose to her high. "You know they'll never understand people like us. They'll never share our experiences They'll always look down on us like rats sick with a plague." Her words filled the air as I stared down at my veins drawing in shallow breathes. It was apparent that I was hanging in between a twilight zone of life and overdosing.

Brooke's words became muffled as the bathroom started to become ever so still. Too still for my comfort, as life started to escape my dilated pinpoint eyes. The rivers in my veins were becoming cold and still as my veins were completely flooded. Yet another river was building up in the back of my throat. The coating of saliva intermixed with blood building up in my respiratory tract as I have begun to involuntary inhale. The light began to fade as the only thought that crossed my mind was "So this where the light comes to die." At that very moment I died.

I've heard of multiple stories of people overdosing, seen it in the news, word of word mouth, even heard about a local supplier dying from his own supply. -Poor bastard. Just never thought

it would happen to me. It was usually you get good smack, inject, rinse and repeat. Even though sometimes that good smack may be a potent batch or bad batch that had the chance of killing you. That was a chance I was always willing to take. A chance that I've been taking since seventeen, now here I am lying dead on a restroom floor at twenty-three. Time sure does flies when your scraping by with your blessing insurance. Its laughable at that moment, where I could pinpoint on how this all started. It was a late-night during spring break, during my junior year of high school. The music was blaring, bodies were making chemistry, the combustion of laughter filled the halls, to where the walls were shaking. Then there was me who was there acting as an accomplice for a friend. Stealing prescription pills from medicine cabinets to later sell them for fast cash. "Hmm okay let's see, we have cough syrup, cough drops, allergy meds, and some vitamins supplements. Looks like this party is a bust after all." Melody said as she looked and peeked through the containers of medicines. "Usually we end up finding something. Maybe weren't not looking hard enough." I responded back with my voice lowered "How much harder do we need to look? We've searched everywhere to be honest. I say we should go back out into the party before we become suspicious." Melody glared at me flaring her nostrils at the disgust of the word suspicious. "You see the word suspicious is just another word for suspect. Therefore, if people view me as suspicious then I've always been a suspect." Melody twisted her head away from me as it was easy for her to catch an attitude. Ever since her brother went to prison for a drive-by gone wrong, that's all she has had. Melody's brother Daniel was always in and out jail to where the judge always wanted to throw the book at him. Time after time the judge was always trying to get him on a straight and narrow path. Yet, Daniel would never take it and keep his heads in the streets. Those streets would lead to firing shots into an innocent young girl on Holiday Avenue. To see her brother branded as a thug across the news broke Melody's spirits. As for the little girl's mother, she never regained her power.

Melody sighed and face me with a smile "How about we go do something fun?" Before, I could answer Melody took my arm and lead me outside from the party. We venture around the house

and made our way to the edge the property. From hearing loud blaring music, my ears began to pick up faint traces of laughter. I began to smell a burning sensation of tinfoil. It was an odd thought at first. Usually you'll expect to smell the burning of cigarettes and weed. Yet, people are burning tinfoil for what? My mind began to ponder, as Melody and I came across three people grouped together laughing in their own dissonance. "What is this?" I laughed nervously as I look towards Melody. She replied back with a quirky smile "This is where's the actually fun is at. Why waste your time on a short-term high, when you can have a long-term one instead?" From the way Melody phrased it she sounded like an infomercial. "What is this exact high?" I glared at her.

A mischievous smile broke across Melody's face as she whispered in a childish manner "It's heroin." I immediately grabbed Melody arm pulling her towards me as I was visibly shaken on how causally she was about it. "Have you've lost your goddamn mind?!" Melody broke away from my grip and smirked in a causal manner. "You know Francine...you always know when danger is coming, and it shows. Those little kiddies can play with their kiddie pool, while for me I want to swim." It wasn't unlike Melody to try new things or do something that was in over her head. Hell, her life has always been like that, but at this moment she was in something too deep that she would not be able to escape from. Melody stuck her tongue out at me in her own defiance. She moved towards the group of three as she joined them in their activity. As they burned the tinfoil, she would inhale. "This is called Chasing the Dragon Francine. You should try it sometimes, when you're ready to get out of the kiddie pool." I was angry at Melody's snark remark as she snickered and laughed. Then in a moment notice Melody laughter began to slow down as she entered a dazed state of consciousness.

I certainly wasn't impressed by her, yet I followed her up anyway. Inhaling the burning heroin off the tinfoil, would open a new gateway for me. A gateway of a euphoric self-destruction with the god and devil raging inside me.

A cough erupted from my chest as I felt a force coming up

from my stomach to my throat waking me from my unconscious state. The floods in my veins ran dry like a car permanently on empty, yet someone keeps trying to turn the engine to get things to start. That someone was a paramedic “Okay ma’am we’ve just administered you a can of Narcan. You’ve overdosed, we’re currently en route to the hospital. My eyes darted around the ambulance in an erratic panic. For I only remembered laying on the restroom floor and the rest was blank. I could only ask how I got here and why I’m not in the city morgue yet. With a slight impaired speech “How...did you...find me?” “We received a call from your friend, he’s behind in tow.” My mind jumped at the thought with my heart beating out of my chest. Elliot was supposed to pick me up tonight, yet he ended up saving me. While for Brooke, I don’t know what happened to her.

When we arrived at the General Hospital, I was immediately taken to ICU, where I spent the remainder of the night. Elliot never left my side, yet I could feel him running out of patience for me. The silence of disappointment spoke for the two of us. I glared at the IV in my arm placing my fingertips over it, watching the fluid enter my body. “Don’t pull at it!” Elliot voiced at me from his chair with his arms crossed. He sounded like a father scolding his disobedient child. “Look, I’m sorry...” I said with a shallowness in my voice. “Shut up Francine! You’re obviously not. Honestly you should be dead right now and be having the coroner sign your death certificate. Yet, you’re still here and I’m still here sitting with you. So, stop picking at the goddamn IV, stop eyeing me, and close your eyes! I’ve had it up to here with you...I help you get a job and give you a place to stay. Yet you spit in my face.”

I did as demand, even though I could feel Elliot glaze burning into my skin. I whispered to myself, before falling to sleep “I’m sorry...”

A Death in The Ocean Would Be So Beautiful

The perspiration building up on my skin was constant. My thoughts raced as my eyes darted in-between my eyelids. Violently shaking in bed with my only accompaniment, a dripping water

faucet. I felt sicker than death, yet this was all a part of the process of rehabilitation. I've managed three days so far in here. So that's seventy-two hours under my belt so far. I could hear the water collecting at the base of the sink. Drip...drip...drip. It started to feel like a competition of who ever could build up the most water. Even though I wasn't building up water. I was steadily losing majority of it.

"Water." I whispered to myself. The ocean came to mind. My dried lips open to answer back at my thoughts. "Beautiful." The smell of sea-salt and the sound of the seagulls. To the clashing of the violent waves against the shoreline. A memory from my childhood emerged from my collective thoughts. I remembered my black curls blinding my sight, for I was only seven sitting in my mother's lap. She would sip away at her wine glass, while the sun rays touched our darken-brown skin.

A sickly smile came upon my face with these words leaving my mouth "A death in the ocean would be so beautiful."

Hold Back the River, Before It Floods

They say that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day from his creations. Well, this vessel that was created in his image had no idea of rest. I've been sober for three weeks now and it's a miracle that I haven't damaged anything. I started going to meetings, listening to other's stories, and realizing my problems are relatable. I burned so many bridges that I made my life into an ashtray. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, my fingers traced my arms where I used to inject. I could still feel the urges of wanting a fix, yet I couldn't give into those urges this time around. I put on weight and began to be removed from my scarecrow frame. To think I used to be so beautiful with my black curls, darken taken cared of skin, and lush lips. I was far from that former appearance of myself. An abrupt knock on my door caught my attention. I motion to the door opening it and there she stood. My splitting reflection. My mother.

The First Step Is Always the Hardest

It was a quite some time since I saw my mother. To sit with her and listen to her voice was a blessing. She held my hand and addressed me by nickname Fran. “Elliot told me you were here. That you were trying to give rehab another shot again. And I know we haven’t spoken since...since our little incident. The incident my mother was referring to was when I stole from her and got into a physical altercation with her at her home. Even though I was arrested, she chose not to press charges against me. A knot began to twist in my stomach as for what I did was disgusting to her. No daughter should harm their mother. I opened my mouth “I’ve been doing well so far, and I know we haven’t spoken since then. But I’m sorry for what I did.” There was a moment of silence for those words carried so much weight. Apologizing carried so much weight, to where it was folded in my stomach. Then I found myself in my mother’s loving arms. We cried together as anger, sadness, and other negative emotions began to change. I inflicted so much pain in other people lives. I’ve suffered and shared my cancer with them. And now I get to remove that cancer. I felt a hand brush against my cheek removing my tears. In a calm voice my mother asked, “Are you ready to come home?” I answered with a happy nod. I felt like a child again. I felt ready.

Kristian Greene

Black Legacy Immortal

From the basement of Hell, to the ceiling of Heaven

A sinner, descendant of Cain, I am the son of the pain I dwell in

I've seen death ten times, but I rise eleven

I meditate deeply, through the darkest parts of my mind I crept in

Time bandits with blue eyes try to make my soul weak

The ground is like the Lake of Fire, they're burning me like Black
Wall Street

Still I rise like the moon and the sun, I don't lose sleep

From pain comes beauty, like conception, the reward is sweet

My skin is like stolen oil or the night sky

My Zulu roots shine, a value, not a soul can quantify

I've seen genocide and brutality, been a casualty of my block they
gentrify

I just spread my wings and fly; I don't die, I multiply

My tears bathe generations in inspiration and my soul breeds hope
when I cry.

Kristian Greene

A.A.D

There is no possibility in the realm of imagination or reality, where
love and hate are the same.

Our eyes lock, and my heart melts

I like the warmth, my problems evaporate, replaced by you

Your face is my antidote, maybe tomorrow is worth it

I see you, and my heart shatters

The pieces pierce my body, my soul

Like my feelings, I am broken

Your face haunts me, a million joyful days pale to the hurt of now

I love your words, they feel like home

For an eternity, I could dance to your voice

You make me feel special

You make me feel wanted

Your words are horrid, they feel like death

My ears bleed and my skeleton rattles to your voice

You make me feel sorrowful

You make me feel wrathful

Perhaps hate and love are the same after all.

Kristian Greene

Vexation

“The Fool who Forgot to Live”

I was cursed to a thousand years of sadness

Until I woke up and was granted a single day of happiness by God

I couldn't believe happiness had found me

An euphoria, if only temporary, made me joyous

I cried thinking of the unrelenting bleakness that preceded this moment

Then I was skeptical, why was a cursed soul like me given such a kindness?

Then I was scientific, how would I spend such a day, where would I go?

Then I was irked, how much could one really do with a single day?

Then I was incensed, why was I only granted one day? Why not two?

I looked outside and the moon was laughing at me

I took my life, for another thousand years of sadness was unbearable.

Shania Sherman

Don't Leave Me

Daddy was making breakfast, Mama was on the couch working as always, and my little sister, Lele, like any other 16-year-old girl was cooped in her room. I walked downstairs, took in the smell of cinnamon toast and my daddy's "famous" made-from-scratch oatmeal and joined my mama on the couch. I was trying to find something to watch on tv when my phone rang. It was an unidentified number, so of course my first instinct was to not answer. The little voice in my head told me to just hit that green button so I did.

I spoke with a lady and she explained a couple of fees I had to pay and let me know I needed to go see a few people and sign some paperwork when once I got there. Orientation was only a few days away and I was basically crunching for time but I was interested and determined to get it done.

"Ma, Claflin done accepted yah girl!" I screamed as I got up and danced a little. She was working so she was a bit caught off guard by my outburst.

Daddy came around the corner from the kitchen confused "Child, what's wrong with you?"

It was early January, I applied to Claflin during the late registration period, not knowing if I really wanted to go back to school or not. I was leaning towards just staying home, but a staff member from the admissions office called me and informed me that they would send my acceptance letter via email considering that it was so late in the registration period. Seeing that they took the time out to even accept me so late in the game gave me the sense that it was meant for me to go back to school. I instantly made a list of things that I wanted to just go ahead and purchase for my room. I looked through my art bins to see what I wanted to buy new and what I

wanted to just take with me. I called my job and let them know I would be putting a two weeks in, typed it up and took it to them that same day. I was ready, or at least I thought I was.

It was my first time driving this far from home. My mama was in the passenger seat and the backseat was full of posters, turquoise containers and school supplies. “Girl if you don’t drive the way you drive when I’m not in the car!” my mom screamed as she grew tired of me pretending I was a law-abiding citizen. We had a two hour drive and I was honestly feeling a little overwhelmed that I had to be so far from home. I was ready, but I wasn’t.

I was extremely nervous. “You gonna stay down here with me?”

Mama gave me the side eye, “You’re coming back Friday Nia, and I have to get back up the road so I can go to work. Two days won’t hurt you.”

I purposely kept my speed constant as we continued to drive down long road of I-26. Nothing but trees and road. I did not want to be apart from my mama and the boring drive to Orangeburg didn’t make it any less nerve wracking. I was excited and nervous all at once. More so excited because I finally got back in school after taking a year and a half off. I was the only one in my immediate family that had attended a university. I was determined to take on any obstacles that came my way during this journey to make my parents and grandparents proud. I had a 16-year-old looking up to me, and I wanted her to be successful in whatever she put her mind to. I needed to show her that big sis had her for whatever she needed and more.

After giving everything a good cleaning, I stood in the middle of my dorm room trying to decide what I wanted to unpack first. A few more minutes went by and I started with my con-

tainers filled with clothes. I opened the lid and all I smelled was my parent's house, its true when they say you can't really smell your house until you're somewhere else, and then came the water works.

I called my mama, "How far have you made it?" I asked.

"I'm almost in Newberry, what you done forgot?" she replied.

All she heard were my sniffles and she knew. A little while had passed and she came a knocking.

We spent the day unpacking my clothes, decorating my room and making a list of things I needed to get from Walmart. We finished my room and went to grab something to eat, by the time my mama was getting ready to leave, it was late evening and I know she was sick of me. I had basically held her hostage for the day. She called my dad to let him know she was on her way, looked through the door and gave me the most reassuring smile I had gotten in a while. She basically let me know that they were going to be right there with me the entire time. I was still sad she was leaving me in Orangeburg.

"We'll see you Friday girl, we're proud of you," Mama said.

After seeing my mama off, I felt a little bit better. I was more ready than I had been in the beginning of my journey and there was no turning back now. I had the support of my parents, my grandparents, and my little sister looking up to me to help me through it.

Daila Holloway

Beauty

When I thought about beauty
What could be more fluent
While I pondered, blissfully
Sad thoughts rose peacefully
Somewhat louder than intended
My thoughts left me bawling
I crave pleasing
But felt obligated to listen
They were installing, and hauling
Left me bawling
The reserve brought sorrow
Only this and beauty
Back into my memories standing
I had dreamed of rounds demanding

Daila Holloway

Sleep

Yes I need sleep
Actually sleep needs me
Only this and a bed
But my thoughts keep me up instead
Wishing I was asleep
But I'm here instead
Working late nights
Running up a check
Will it pay off?
I hope instead
Mind over money
I can't get that through my head

Daila Holloway

Everything D'Luxe

My passion is my favorite
My drive, drives me crazy
Always thinking of ways to make my life better
Getting caught up in the matrix
In a kingdom full of snakes
I am the click bait
I crave the world finest
Not talking chocolates
Everything D'Luxe is my brand
Countless nights up
Mastering my plan
You can look it up
On my page
I have a vision
Set in place
2020 it's up
Follow me on Instagram @everythingdluxe

Jaliah Robinson

Wireless

The daily agenda crept on the wall as the blinds flew open, welcoming the sun. Recurring words, *one chance... one chance... one. Escape.* Coffee started to brew. The steam, shaping objects that aren't there. Neglected. The instruments lay vacant calling for attention. Loneliness. The room grows cold. Fingerprints and footsteps still visible in the studio. The sound board lights up, getting ready for the day, putting buttons into position. *Time to start the process.* Heat and high frequency danced through the building as it met a soft melody. *I've got no strings...to hold me down.* Then it woke.

A whistle call met with dead silence. "*Sound check. 1...2...3. I've got no strings, so I have fun... I'm not tied up to anyone.*" Tense air choking the life out of any living thing... if anything was living. *The day is September 13th.* The door opens and the microphone turns on. Hard breathing fills the room. The booth, the place where freedom is gained. The voices. Harmony. With every octave it began to ignite. Slowly gaining strength empowered by music. *I've got no strings.* A low growl sounds as pieces began to be put together. One chance. A guitar starts to play setting, the mood of determination. The metal mouse is the keeper watching the growth of something new. Words spoken. *Before you live you must die.* Dead, such a dark memory. The spark starts to burn out. Losing power. Losing strength. Wires binding together. Suffocation. *Time for break be back in five.* Dying.... slowly dying. So close but too far. The sound booth, the place where freedom is found. Blackout. Frustration. *I've got no strings to hold me down... To make me fret or make me frown.* Time... a trustworthy ally or a worst enemy. *3...2....1...GO.* Sparks.... Life. *One chance.* Tension builds in the air, the wall starts to sweat. The booth. The place of freedom. *Escape.* The patterned breathing enters the room the microphone goes crazy. Feedback. Electro. *Responding well...*

very well. The tempo from the drum quickens like a pulse. Ringing sounds in the booth as the microphone begins to shake.

Electricity flows through the walls like blood in veins. The blink of the blinds every two seconds, synchronizes with the beat of the heart. Metal heart.

Volume rising and falling trying to find the perfect tone for the unknown element. *Use your voice.* The metal mouse waits in silence, patiently observing the creation affront. *Got no strings to hold me down.* Breathing... one breath at a time. The rise and fall of a chest. The heartbeat. Sparks of energy. The intensity in the air. The becoming of a new thing. High frequency once again fills the air. Base in the speakers. An instrumental melody is beginning to be created. The start of a life. Life after death. Failure is not an option. *I had strings that held me down.* Agony... Trauma... In every great making there is pain. The booth. The place of freedom. The air holds its breath and the booth grows silent. *One chance... one chance... one...* Almost there. The process continues growing stronger and stronger. Humming... Threatening to make its appearance in the show. A few more steps and the process is done. *I had strings but now I'm free... there are no strings on me.* The path to freedom, a recording studio of tomorrow.

Angel Hague

My Black

Growing up as a little girl I was always asked,
“What are you mixed with?”
People assume just because I am fair it cannot be true
I cannot be just black.
I respond confidently and tell them I am black,
The only thing that I am mixed with is my momma and daddy.
People say you have beautiful eyes,
But what about my skin?
They say you have beautiful hair,
Well I have my ancestors to thank for that.
My unique texture is one of a kind and cannot be replicated.
Which is perfectly fine.

Angel Hague

The Screen

Fractured and ripped open

I am pulled and forced in whichever direction I am forced

Through the crack of the window, I slip through just for a second
for relief

No longer being controlled, I am free

The force that moves me is strong and unforgiving at times

It is smooth and causes me to wither

I am thrown back and forth

Flipped up and down and side to side

The light drifts in and out, it could possibly be nearby

Resemblance of a fingerprint makes up the hole that was ripped out
of me

In the distance nothing remains but a brick separator

Armani Ancrum

The Story of a Freed Negro

They say before you die you make amends with God. Ever since I have been living on this land, I've wondered which God is hearing my prayers. The God the white man preached to us about or the one my elders talked about from back home in Barbados. As I tell my story to my children to record this thought has crossed my mind more than once. My name is Mae, and I guess you could say I'm one of the lucky ones. Born a slave died a free negro. My story starts on the Magnolia Plantation. I was born on this plantation to a negro woman named Mabel. Our Master Tom Drayton rules over the entire house. His wife Ann was kind to my ma because her and my granny were some of the first slaves on this plantation. We live in a place called Charlestown. Miss Ann taught my mother here and there because before they built this plantation in 1676, they lived near Edisto, before that Barbados where they got granny from and allowed Ma to come with her. Ma use to say that granny Ros had long beautiful black hair. She used to tell stories of how she brushed miss Ann's hair and how miss Ann beloved granny Ros. She died way before I was born and miss Ann always said she mourned her loss greatly. Now I know you're probably thinking what happened to your pa? I never knew him and I don't want to. See I'm a mulatto negro. Not fully negro so my pa was some pale skinned man. I assume he raped my ma because she nor misses Ann never talked about em.

The Magnolia plantation has the most beautiful gardens in the town. It contained a flower maze of azaleas and roses. Sometimes I feel conflicted about loving that plantation, a place where I was enslaved now that I understand. But how can you hate the only place you know? People are always stopping by to see it. Stretching across many acres it sits on rice land surrounded by forests and trees. Sitting on top of Cypress lake as miss Ann calls it. Sometimes she let the negro children play in it when all the work

is done in the rice fields. The fields stretching from the front of the big house to the back. The house was so big I never really knew how many rooms there were. It was about 50 of us negros on the plantation each month it grew in size. The houses the negros lived in were cabins down the dirt road behind the house. Before the hurricane struck, the cabins were little shacks. Afterwards master Tom wanted to have it built better so the negros on the plantation wouldn't die if another hurricane happened. It was good he did because another hurricane struck in later years. Another sight on the plantation was the church hall. Ma told me that back in Barbados they went to church all the time. The "pale skinned people always made us go to church and listen to the words of their God." We even use to have a minister come by and preach to us negros on being good people to miss Ann and master Tom. We had a cabin but when miss Ann and master Tom held their big gatherings or balls as they said in the big house me and ma were allowed to stay in one of the rooms. Ma and the other negros that could cook would fix these big meals with big turkey, swine, loafed bread stretching for miles, corn, and many vegetables on the big table. Miss Ann's and master Tom's friends would always say how much they loved ma's cooking. The town is a way away so it took about an hour to get to the market downtown. I remember always getting to go into the market with my ma (she was the cook on the plantation).

Charles town is beautiful at dawn. The market stretching for miles and miles on the river had so many sights to see. Sometimes I would even see Indians down there. The harbor filled with ships coming and going with flags from all over the world. Pale skinned people from all over speaking all different languages. The worst part about it though was the slave auctions. When I was allowed to go with ma and miss Ann to the market on Wednesdays the auctions would be going on. We had to dress a certain way for the auctions. Large puff dresses, hair tied up, and we had to go in the fancy carriage cause master Tom said we had to look presentable to get good negros at the auction. Any other day we were in light garments for field work, since my ma worked in the big house, she got to sew our clothes with cloth from miss Ann. Any People who look like me in chains being sold like cattle. I was

too young to understand it at the time, that I was a slave too just a slave higher on the negro chain.

I never thought I was enslaved when I was younger, I certainly never felt enslaved. I was allowed freedom most negroes on the plantation had but I always thought it was because of miss Ann's liking to ma. One day everything changed what I had thought for the rest of my life. I had been out in the field with the other children and a pale skinned man whom I had never seen before came unto the plantation with master Tom. When he saw me working in the rice field, he said to master Tom "Why you got that mulatto out here working with these negroes?". From that moment on I was told I was going to be in the big house cooking with ma. I didn't understand it then I was about ten or eleven when it happened. As I got older, I realized mulattos and people like me were held above pure blooded negro, especially ones from Angola. On the plantation we negroes had our own dialect. Miss Ann told us we sounded like we spoke broken English. At times she would read to me in one of the rooms, she said she use to do the same with ma and that "A young mulatto like you should know how to read and write". Ma and the other elders could still speak their home languages so they taught us mixed in with what the white folks spoke. Certain times we would get whooping's for speaking our language among master Tom's friends. He didn't like it because he couldn't understand it half the time, especially from the Angolans because they were rowdy. When he died the Angolans rejoiced and celebrated his death quietly in the cabins after that his son took over and became the new master.

I was about eighteen when the war started in Charlestown. It was also the year Ma had died, so I had taken her place in the big house. I prepared and cooked all the food now from everything she taught me. We mourned ma for a week and after she died miss Ann went right behind her. In a matter of months everything on the plantation shifted. In the city the white folks started fleeing because of the attacks from the French as they told us. The white folks who spoke of the Spain dialect with skin kind of like mine were the ones being attacked so our new master felt like we shouldn't

leave because we weren't in danger. His wife would tell me of the new things that happened every day during the war. She once told us of the olive-skinned people capturing the French ships in the port at the market. She also told us that they were fighting in a war because of Queen Anne the queen who ruled over the countries across the water. I didn't know nothing about no Anne or what they were fighting for but I know that the slave auctions stopped when the war started. The market was shut down and things were hard to buy in the city because of the fighting. After the second hurricane came another fight ensued, this time between the Indians and white folks. I tried to listen to what the new master said they were fighting about but he didn't want me in the house as often as his father did only to prepare meals. He had taken a liken to me but I always turned down his advances because I knew it wasn't right. I just know the fighting lasted for two years.

Around my fortieth birthday, I saw more violence on the planation from the new master then master Tom ever put on the negros. He worked us from sun up till sun down in the rice fields, and wanted his food cooked a certain way. I say new master because he didn't live here when I was coming up. Master Tom use to say his kids are off at school when I was younger so that's why we never got to see them. He said he was used to slaves in the ocean working like this, so we had to. I said "Well if you is so use to them slaves why don't you go back there?" I got a whooping after that. Ma use to always say "Mae your smart mouth is gone get you in trouble!" I loved working on the plantation but not the master I hated him at times. Some slaves tried escaping but because the Indians and the white folks got along now, they brought them back. They got beaten so bad by the new master that boils would come up on the skin. When I was younger ma use to tell me that there were certain Indians you could trust and some you couldn't because they loved helping the white folks. In this case those were the ones you couldn't. About four years in with my new masters, the master's wife asked me how long I had been on this plantation, I said "I reckons just about as long as her husband had been alive". She asked me if I had ever thought about getting my freedom and leaving. I didn't think about it until she asked me and I wanted

to know how I could do it and why she had asked. She said she thought I deserved it and wanted to help me. Told me her and her husband had decided to let me go and get a younger cook and that I had served my time. I had never thought about what I would do if I was free. Most of my life had been here and I had never thought about leaving Charles Town. Weeks later she brought me my papers saying that “Mae Ann Drayton was a freedwoman.” I sat there for hours staring at that paper not knowing what to do. Can you believe it was that easy? Negros were running away for freedom and I got mines just like that. To be frank, I think they let me have my freedom because the new master had taken a liking to a new mulatto cook who was younger and wanted her closer to him. I never brought it up though. I knew that because he couldn’t have me in his bed, he wanted someone like me. After a while I showed the other negros as they jumped for joy for me, I sat still not knowing what to do.

I lived a great life on the planation and when I left. I travelled to the ocean nations and saw the people of my ma’s and granny Ros’s land. Went to the north where I met a lot of other freed negros. Got married and had kids. As the time passed, I watched many more slaves be brought to this land. As much as the boats could hold. I met the leaders of rebellions and runaways. I eventually came back to Charles Town and to Magnolia to die where I had been born. Master Toms grandson had taken over by this time and had about five hundred slaves on the plantation. He had heard stories of me and fixed up the cabin me and ma use to live in. I stayed there till I got sick from the small pox that affected the Indians. Now lying on my death bed, I felt it was only right to tell my story. My children always asked “Ma why would you wanna go back to that place where they hurt you and enslaved you?” I guess that’s where my conflict came back. I loved this place and grew in it. I know it sounds stupid, but this is my peace. Isn’t that funny a freed slave saying her old plantation was her peace? Of the horrors and the beauty, I had seen on this planation this was my home. And I need feel not ashamed of it either. Born a slave, dying a freedwoman I did what I could in this lifetime to help my people and I hope this story helps even more.

Kymberlei Benford

Did I do something wrong?

I had a part of me
Removed from my life
Did I do something wrong?
I tried to cure the ache
I tried to cure the pain
I was so mad that day
He took you away from me
Did I do something wrong?
I wasn't ready for you to go
But God took you away
I blamed him for this
I blamed myself also
Did I do something wrong?
Grieving is not fun
But I'm trying to move on
Your sons and daughter
Hurting along with me
Did I do something wrong?
Your family on the edge
Maybe even broken up

Stress comes every day
I hate waking up now
Did I do something wrong?
I feel like God is mad
I feel like he is punishing me
Still, I gotta go on
It's what you want right?
Did I do something wrong?
Hurting but still driving
I'm proud of what you made me
Even though I miss you
My success, I must succeed
I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG
It was just your time to go
And now I have accepted it

Unwanted

Chapter 1: The Doors

It was dark and quiet. I was running in pitch-black darkness. I couldn't stop. Tears ran down my face. SLAM! I ran into what felt like a wall or door. As I rubbed the newly put knot on my forehead, I felt around for a doorknob. I couldn't find one. It was a wall. "Man" my voice echoed. "Where am I?" I added.

Suddenly, I heard a deafening sound. The bass of the sound vibrated in my chest. I felt around the wall, looked to the right and then to the left. A light turned on near the left showing a brown door. I walked towards the door and when I reached it, there was a white sign with the word "confidence" written in red. The light turned off and another door with the word "Happiness" written again in red. That light turned off and then multiple lights turned on in both directions, showing a circle of doors surrounding me.

I counted all the doors and there were 15 doors with 15 different words on them. One of the doors was white and still had the red word on it. This door had the word 'Insecurity' on it. "Love, Fear, Grief," I said to myself.

They were all words of something I had encountered within my life. The door that caught my eye first was the door that read 'Depression' on it. I took a look at all the doors, trying to figure out where I was, how I got there and why I was there. I tried to go through a door and it wouldn't budge. It turned out that all the doors were locked. I started to panic, feeling like I was trapped in a terrifying dream. It didn't make sense to me and I had no memory of what I happened that put me here. My skin started to tighten up and chills ran back and forth all over my body. I sat down against one of the doors and started to cry. I was afraid that I'd die here. Suddenly, I heard multiple clicks going off as if there was a bomb

getting ready to go off right above me. I anxiously looked up with my face soaked in tears and saw what looked like a timer. It was counting down.

“23 hours, 59 minutes and 49 seconds...?” I read aloud.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Welcome, Crystal Evercoss,” a mysterious voice said above me.

“H-hhh-hello?”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!” I shouted.

“No need to be afraid, my dear. I am here to help you”

“Help me? Who are you exactly?”

“Oh, pardon me if you would. I am Silas Garcia, your conscience. I am that little voice you hear when you make decisions,”

“My conscience??”

“Why would I be talking to my conscience?”

I was so confused and scared. I couldn’t figure out what was going on and still, I couldn’t remember how I got here. Now, what was I supposed to do? I’m stuck here talking to my conscience and he’s telling me I’m stuck inside my own head. I began to hyperventilate like I was getting ready to faint.

“Relax, I am here to help,” he said.

“Help? Help with what?”

Chapter 2: Stuck

So here I am, stuck inside my head, talking to my conscience named Silas? Am I crazy? Did I knock my head on something or die and this is where you end up? “Stuck in

my head,” I repeated to myself. I just couldn’t believe it. I mean why am I here? How did I get here? I couldn’t really remember the events that happened before I woke up in this strange place.

“Unbelievable,” I said slapping myself on the forehead.

“Are you okay? You got a little quiet there for a moment.”

“I just can’t seem to get this wrapped around my head, Silas. Why am I here?” I asked. “You’ve been through many things in your life, Crystal. Even at this present moment, you are in hospital stuck in a coma.”

“WHAT?!? A coma??” I asked.

“Dddddd-DDD--- yooooooooo aaarree”

Silas’s voice started to skip like a broken record.

“Silas? Ummm, Silas?” I said as I started to panic. It suddenly got very cold. Colder than standing inside of a freezer. Something behind me moved. I turned around. “Sss-Silas? This isn’t funny. You’re my conscience hehe, you know what I’m afraid of” I said shakily.

“Ssssssilass issssssn’t heeerreeeee,” a very spooky voice said in front of me. “Ww-wh-who are you?” I asked.

“Hahahahaah heheheh.” it laughed maliciously.

Suddenly, the lights turned off and it was dark. To me it seem darker than before. I screamed and ran, but again ran into the wall. I was stuck in the circle of doors this time.

“Thhheerrrrreee issssss nooo essssccappee” the voice stuttered again.

I was definitely scared out of my own skin now. It was dark and all I heard was.....immorality...immorality....immorality. It just kept whispering in my ear---this word--immorality. What did it mean?

“That is who I am.” the voice said as if it read my mind.
“Do you not know what immorality is?” the voice asked.

“Wickedness, evil, dishonesty...that is the meaning,” it added.

“But I’m not evil OR wicked, why would you be here?” I asked.

“Milady, you don’t HAVE to be evil to have me around, I am born with you whether you like it or not, I AM ALWAYS HERE hehehehehe.”

Why me? Why was I going through this? I took one more good look at the doors and then asked immorality a question.

“Well if Silas helps me make decisions, what do you do?”

“I do the exact same my darling, but there’s a catch haha, I’m evil. I am temptation, the reason you make bad decisions, the REASON you are here now.”

“You?”

I finally got it. Immorality. HA! They were opposites. All I needed to do was ignore immorality, listen to my conscience and get out of here. “That’s easy.” I thought to myself. One thing I couldn’t understand is why I was here. I’m not perfect but I’m also not a bad person. I get along with my family well. My life is going great, so why would I be here?

“I am going to let Silas go now, but I promise you I WILL BE BACK. I won’t let you escape from here.”

“And I promise you that we will see if you’re correct. Now let Silas go!”

I heard weird noises as if my brain was being hacked by him. It got dark again. My heart started to speed up. I don’t like the dark at all. I felt sweat dripping down back and face. Ten minutes went by, one by one the red doors started showing up again. The

relief I felt almost knocked me over like a gust of wind. Chills were sent down my back and my heart slowed down. I could still feel the coldness behind me. Immorality was still here. Like I was supposed to do, I ignored him and walked towards the middle of the circle.

I was waiting to hear Silas's voice for my next instructions. I just wanted to get out of here. I looked at all the doors, trying to pick which one I was going to go in first but then--

"Hello Crystal. It is Silas again."

"Oh my God, you don't know how happy I am to hear from you"

"Yes, I know. Immorality hacked in my database and temporarily shut me down"

"Well, forget that. I found out what I'm supposed to do. Listen to you, ignore him and I'm out of here." I said happily.

"Uhm, It actually won't be that easy, my dear. Immorality is powerful. Just how he hacked into me, he can do the same with YOUR thinking and make you do horrible things. For every door, you have 3 tries. Every time you fail to correct that situation, you start over.

"Silas" I said while starting to cry.

"What am I supposed to do when he comes around?"

"You can only get away from him with this"

A blue bag with red stripes floated towards me.

"This is serenity sand. The blue stands for serenity and the red stripes are for strength. When you feel immorality's presence, rub the sand in three places. Your wrist, behind your ear, and in the middle of your forehead. Once it touches your skin, it will turn into a liquid and soak into your skin. You will immediately feel serene and he won't be able to bother you, that is why your heart speeds

up when he is around.” he explained.

“Is there a catch to this sand?” I asked.

“Just one. It only lasts for 10 minutes, so whatever situation you are fixing, DO IT FAST!”

I got my instructions. I looked around one more time at the doors. I was so terrified. Only three mistakes? What if I don’t make it? What if I don’t use the serenity sand the right way? I couldn’t stop worrying but I had to get out of here.

“Will you stop worrying and get this over with? You can do it, just remember my instructions” he said reading my mind once more.

Here I go. First door. Fear.

CONTRIBUTORS

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