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WINNERS.....

2023 Poet Laureate Contest

First Place // Amiliana Ford, "As a Dark-Skinned Girl"

Second Place // Cody Gibbs, "Black Educators"

Third Place // Jeremiah Box, "Pagoda"

8th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Place >> Cody Gibbs, "Her Favorite Holiday"

Second Place >> Kaliyah Greene, "Grieving What Was Once Mine"

Third Place >> Chinyere Offor, "Mirage"

2nd Annual Writing and Reading Center Essay Contest

First Place ## Aalaythia Hepburn, "Analysis of Claude McKay's 'If We Must Die'"

Second Place ## Jordyn Sanders, "How Will We Address the Disproportionate Death Rate of African American Mothers and Infants?"

Third Place ## Ezenwa C. Onu, "*Phineas and Ferb* and Positive Masculinity"

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BLACK EDUCATORS

As the sun is essential for warmth and light
As rain is essential for the growth of plants
As the moon is essential for the pull of the tides
As soil is essential for nourishment and cultivation

As milk is vital for strong bones
As salt is vital for preservation and curation
As nectar is vital for the pollination of flowers
As water is vital for hydration and regulation

As a father provides enforcement and tenderness
As a mother provides nurturing and gentleness
As a grandparent provides wisdom and perspective
As a grandchild provides joy and fulfillment

As the library is required for the advancement of our intellect
As a school is required for critical thinking and learning
As a hospital is required for care and treatment
As a church is required for community and fellowship

As bad days cannot exist without good days
As the beginning cannot exist without the end
As the past cannot exist without the future
As darkness cannot exist without light

As prayer is necessary for reconciliation
As service is necessary for good character
As humility is necessary for forgiveness
As God is necessary for love

So are black educators necessary for the
Excellence, advancement, and wellness
of our youth.

A PART OF ME

Take a deep breath before the world hears less.
Spirit leaving.
Guess the cheap shit need a new crest,
And I been feeling that nobody ever knew best.
We were guessing,
Till cheating was the new next,
A casting call of life's do's and duets.
It ain't a perfect role.
Sometimes I hit a two-step
Out my life,
See the shit that plays round,
Tensions telling me things:
Who is to be found,
When a stop turns to a drop.
Thumbtacks appear,
My gut medium-rare
As I walk on my fears.
Don't feel too passive if I'm just keeping my peace.
May feel foreign to y'all, but maybe it's me.

AM I ENOUGH?

Losing visibility of myself,
Not recognizing who I am.
Do you see me?
Am I enough?

Not wanting the feedback:
They broke me once before.
Looking through myself,
I can see that I'm enough.

"I believe I am enough,"
I tell myself and not the people.
I control myself—
No one else can.

I am who I say I am,
With so much joy in my soul,
Letting everyone know:
I am enough.

THE ANT THAT I AM

This jewelry box, so old and small—yet deep. I shoved so many pieces of jewelry in it, believing it was really steep. It didn't matter if it was small, shiny, old, rusty, new, expensive, or cheap; all I knew was to keep stuffing it into the jewelry box. This jewelry box belonged to my grandmother, but, in a way, I always felt like it would be mine. I'm not sure why I did this when I was younger, but it does remind me of myself now, the "ant that I am."

My jewelry box represents my feelings. It refers to every happy, sad, and inexplicable memory that I have ever experienced. I believe that everyone has a jewelry box, even if they deny it. Maybe your jewelry box is not filled with different childhood memories, like watching yourself grow up, making new friends, losing your favorite aunt, or even attempting suicide, but mine is. Apart from storing my feelings, my jewelry box has taught me that no matter what path you walk, you'll always stumble across a new piece of jewelry. It's how you pick it up and live with it that matters.

Hardships, obstacles, and acceptance are what make you strong. Society's perception of strength is not what you need to follow to be strong. I have faced a big obstacle in my life and it is attempting suicide. It didn't define who I was or who I will be, but it did help me form a path so I can walk freely and become mentally, emotionally, and physically strong. Facing that, I did struggle academically, and it didn't turn out pretty, but I persevered and filled the negativity and darkness with so much positivity and light. I'm not happy with my past but I'm happy at the outcome because of it. I'm also happy to witness the strong, brave, and independent woman that I am becoming.

I am the ant. So strong and intelligent, the one who witnessed hardship and made it her best friend. The one who carried her life on her back not knowing she had the strength. The one who walked her journey, making sure she gave it her all. The one who got back up after falling. The one who didn't believe in herself when things got rough. She is the ant who remained strong, who *claimed* her strength. She is the one who made it to her hole and finally released her load.

Despite every challenge that I've faced in life so far and every challenge that I will face later on, I'm glad to say that no matter what I go through, I have found my strength. I can't wait to grow even more, explore the world, and just be happy. Gladly, I don't consider my past as a burden but as a triumph. The author Daphne Rose Kingma once said, "Holding on is believing that there's only a past; letting go is knowing that there's a future." As far as my jewelry box, it's now polished with sparkles and so is my jewelry. I have now found peace with my feelings, and I've learned their true value. No more shoving endless pieces of jewelry into my jewelry box. From now on, I'll only be placing my treasure.

ANXIETY & PTSD

Have you ever heard the saying:

“Monsters don’t sleep under your bed,
They sleep inside your head”?

Well, I have. And honestly, I disagree.

These monsters don’t sleep in your head, at least not in mine.

Instead, they are always awake.

They slip into your mind when you have self-doubt,

When you have fear and worry.

They feed off your insecure emotions and torment you.

They form a home inside your mind,

And the more you feed into their tricks,

The bigger their home gets and the harder it is

To tear down that house of illusion.

Each brick slab is a small division of all the fears a person has.

They live in complete luxury and rent-free inside your head,

Just to keep your mind distracted.

They use your past and memories as a gateway

To control your actions and behavior.

It’s like a computer that never shuts off,

And you are constantly bothered by annoying ads

That won’t go away no matter how much you click them.

It’s like being trapped in a cage of fear

While your eyes are deceived by the illusions

That plague your subconscious mind.

I call them mind-walkers; they latch onto you after a traumatic experience,

They walk through a maze of your memories,

Some of your deepest confessions,

Moments and secrets, to gain strength from the negative emotions

You have trapped inside your mind.

They plague your dreams and confidence,

Make you weaker with each and every thought.

It is like a game of dodgeball and every ball represents anxious thoughts.

To be constantly taken over and suffocated by your own thoughts—

It is draining.

SO, WHO AM I?

Who am I?

Am I the ocean because my feelings and emotions control me?

Or am I the land because the roots of my history run deep?

Am I a ball of gas because I burst with innumerable energies?

Or am I a speck of dust because I am minuscule and barely seen?

Is it possible to define me with a mere few words or a paragraph?

Can the definition of me explain who I am?

Will it be comprehensible to the people that surround me?

And will my definition of myself change the way others perceive me?"

I am antisocial because I don't feel

The need to be friendly with every person I meet.

I am reserved because I enjoy the majority of my time alone.

I am melodious because I have a spiritual connection with music.

I am the ocean because my emotions are a symbol of the sea,

Its intensity, its profundity.

I am the land because I shift into levels of maturity like tectonics.

I am a volcano because my rage is fierce and fiery.

I am independent because I step up from the ground unbroken.

I am imaginative because my mind is outspoken.

I am strong because not even the deepest cut can break me:

"I am titanium."

I am a star because I bring light and hold an ecstasy of energy.

My figure may be small but my mind is tremendous,

My strength is stupendous, and my heart...

My heart is ASTRONOMICAL.

I am the ball of energy that produces the light of the star.

I am the empty space that holds the universe as a whole.

I am the production of the growing seed

That fills with life from the water droplets

After a light sweep of rain.

My mind, my heart, and my soul
Hold a unique treasure that slowly unfolds
To shape me into my true self.
I am elysian, and my beauty is incomparable and celestial.

So, who am I?
Can I say I know for sure?
When will I know exactly who I am?
Will I continually learn new things about myself as I grow old?
Or will I have it all figured out as a young adult?
I don't know.
I guess I'll wait and see.

FAKE FRIENDS

Thought you were a good friend.
Should've known from past experiences.
There's no way that everything is just my fault.
Your petty ways are pulling us apart.
Tried to do everything to make our mark,
But everything is always my fault.
Take out the time to be there for others:
I gotta realize that I ain't these "friends" mothers.
Pushed aside everything,
Tried to see the wrongs in my own doings,
Took time to stop and think before I react.
You just respond with hurtful words to hurt me back.
Nothing I do is intentional.
I beat myself up enough for the things in the past.
I don't need someone like you reminding me of that.
PTSD creeps up on me when my mind tries to relax,
And you're just helping to fuel all that.
I can't have all the blame pushed onto me.
The intolerance of your behavior you can't seem to see.
I'm allowed to make mistakes,
But purposely tearing me down is so fake.
A friend isn't supposed to make you feel this way.

—Nahjah Phillips

GRIEVING WHAT WAS ONCE MINE

Nothing hurts more than losing a friend, knowing that your friendship or relationship or whatever is coming to the tail end of its adventure. It hurts even more when you think you're the only person in the friendship who's trying to save a sinking ship, that the other person is doing fine without you and they can live, they can breathe, they can sleep, knowing that whatever happens between the two of you is just what will be. They don't *care*, simply because they know that what happens, happens. And you? You care way too much about this simple person, a person who brought you joy and smiles and happy memories. Someone who could be described as the personification of sunlight in your life, a safe, warm spot that is everything and nothing to you at the same time. And you start wondering if they ever thought of you that way, that you were the moon to their sun, that you were someone that brought such happiness and light to their life, despite the fire that burned in the distance. That they'd want you there forever just like how you wanted them there forever. And then you start to spiral and spiral and spiral, like maybe you're the problem, maybe you don't try hard enough, aren't nice enough, aren't understanding, aren't kind, aren't good enough.

And maybe I wasn't good enough. Maybe I just wasn't enough to keep this friendship afloat. But the universe knows I tried so damn hard to keep the friendship alive. But I'm only doing CPR on a corpse. No matter how much pressure or air or tears I shed, the corpse will remain a corpse. And the dying friendship I'm trying so hard to rekindle is only what it is. Dying. And I can't save it. And they don't want to save it. So, I should learn how to let it go. But I don't know how, and I don't want to, but there's nothing I can do but face the music.

This is all happening to me right now, as I'm sure is so incredibly visible. But listen, I'm ever so desperate because...I don't know. I don't know why I keep trying. See, there's this guy. And he is, or, *was* my best friend. But it didn't quite start out like that. We were like fireworks, so pretty, so high on each other, but so explosive, and so quick to burn out. All that was left were ashes, smoke, and gunpowder. Nei-

ther healthy to breathe in nor be around.

His name is Salvador Perez and he has the clearest green eyes I've ever seen. That was my first thought when I saw him. So clear and bright, holding so much mischievousness, wonder, and pride in them. His black hair was tied in a ponytail with wisps floating to the front of his face, as he ran over to me. He introduced himself to me, and that was the first encounter we had, our lives forever entangled and our futures being dictated by each other. We had met at the library, both grad students living fairly close to the campus, and we were both there writing essays for our designated classes. And, honestly, I thank my professor for giving me such work that day.

Once we had met, we were inseparable. Everyone figured that if I was gone, I was with Salvador, and if Salvador couldn't be found, he was with me. And they were right. We did almost everything together. We would eat, watch TV, go on walks, explore the city, and just take naps together. We don't know why or how we got so close and so comfortable with each other in such a short amount of time, but it was fun, it was comfortable, and I felt the happiest I have been in years. The days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months, and he made the grayscale world I had been living in explode in a crazy show of wondrous colors, so spectacular and exquisite that I never wanted to leave. I mean, my last relationship was a few years ago and it had left much to be desired. Constant fights, gaslighting me over wearing clothes that brought too much attention, telling me that I was crazy for feeling unloved and even telling me that our relationship would end just like my first one. Over a text and a block...and that's exactly how it ended. So it was so surprising having such color brought into a world dimmed by others, and though I can't read minds, I'm sure he felt at least a quarter of the same way. It was all in the way he looked at me, how he always wanted to have me close and touching him, and how he always wanted me safe and content.

One night, after beating me quite badly in a game of *Soulcalibur*, we lay on his bed not speaking, letting the silence roll and settle around us. But then I heard some shuffling and movement beside me, and I turned my head to see Salvador already looking at me.

"Zaria," he said, his bright green eyes hitting my hazel eyes with an intense stare.

“Yeah, Sal? What’s up?” I said, kind of nervous, as he’d never looked at me with such intensity before.

“You’re really pretty, you know that?”

“Aw, thanks. I think I’m about a 6 or 7!” I joked around, still slightly confused as to where we were headed with this, but not shying away from the possibility of something more than a flirtatious friendship.

“No, man, you’re a 10 in my eyes. Honest to God, girl. And I know you’re not blind, and I know you’re not oblivious. I know you know I like you. And I think you like me, too. So, I was wondering if I have permission to kiss you?”

I just stared blankly at him. So many thoughts and feelings were rushing in my head and in my body and I just kind of...gaped. I didn’t know he knew about my feelings; snap, I didn’t even know my feelings, really. But it just goes to show you how sweet and attentive he was with me. And, of course, since we had gotten that far, I said yes.

And then there we were, kissing. It was slow and sensual at first, him giving me plenty of time to break away, to take his heart and leave him with nothing but a hole. He trusted me with such an intimate part of him, but what he failed to realize that night was that I gave him such an intimate and special part of me, too. My complete trust and loyalty in him.

Looking back on that now, though, I was incredibly naive. And I won’t blame him for that. I was a hopeless romantic with a bad string of my own broken hearts and I wanted to love and be loved. It’s all just a lesson that your heart should not be given so easily. But it hurts to see how naive and trusting I was.

The slow and sensual kiss turned feverish, as we started pulling each other closer, pulling and grasping at clothes, skin, hair, anything our hands could get on the other. Tugging on lips and biting on necks. We couldn’t get enough of the other, as I rolled to be on top of him and as he groped the sides of my hips. He moved his hands up under my *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure* shirt and caressed the sides of my waist, kneading and groping the rolls. And I placed my hands on his chest, feeling the muscle flexing with each trail my fingernail left on him. Each breath he inhaled he stole from my lungs, and vice versa.

That night, we didn't go far. Just some more touching here and there, but that night was one I committed to memory, because I was treated so sweetly and cherished so lovingly that I replay it over and over again.

But, unfortunately, you can't live in the past, because the present needs your attention and the future is quickly on its way. When we were sitting in the library again, the little secret nook we had found days after we started being friends, he said words I didn't expect him to say to me.

"Zaria, I really do like you and have these strong feelings for you, but I thought about it so much after you left. I don't think I'm ready for a relationship right now."

Those words. Oh, my stars, those words. I didn't think they would affect me like they did. I didn't show much on my face, just smiled and told him I understood where he was coming from, that I didn't want to force him into something he didn't wish to be in, and gave him a hug. He asked me if it would be all right if we could still be friends, that he would miss me in his life, that I brought him such happiness and he'd want me to stay forever.

And, like a fool, I said of course. Because I was some lovesick puppy, thinking that even if I couldn't have him the way I wanted, I'd be fine being his best friend, and I'd be happy knowing he wanted me in his life forever. But the embarrassment, shame, and annoyance I felt inside was debilitating. I almost wanted to punch him for making me feel so small, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. Because I told myself that what I was feeling wasn't fair. He said what he said and he felt what he felt, so I couldn't. I shut myself down and neglected to let those feelings out. And I don't blame him for that; it's all my fault.

After that, the days went on like normal. We would talk every day, go to places, and hang around. We would still even cuddle, and I tried to calm my thoughts but I couldn't help letting a few slip that maybe it could all work out. Maybe he'd consider trying to be in a relationship with me? I was desperate, I guess? And I don't know *why*. He was like every other person, and I gave meaning to him in my life. I put those things, those labels on him. And maybe that's why. I gave him meaning. He was more than just a person, a guy, Salvador Perez. He was the

person to bring back color to me. And that's a tall and imposing thing to place on a person, which is probably why I also just shut my mouth and my thoughts when we cuddled. I didn't want to put pressure on him, but I was unknowingly putting pressure on me.

The days were supposed to continue like that. Me living in an existential balance of bliss and craving whilst he lived in probably feigned ignorance. However, he started growing distant from me. Stopped answering as quickly as he used to, stopped calling me little pet names like "love" and "babe," stopped planning things out with me, stopped wanting to see me, stopped being there for me like I wished he would. In my heart of hearts, I knew the reason why, but I clung to every "no, it's not that" and "he's probably just busy" that his friends gave me. I wanted to still be in the illusion that everything was all right, that I was all right, that he was all right, that we were all right and that we were enough.

You and I already know that wasn't the case, though. I found out that he was talking to another girl, and that they had had sex, and that there was a possibility he would have started dating her if they hadn't had such a nasty falling out.

I was back at my mom's house helping her with her groceries when I heard about that, which came to me all at once. It was his friend that told me everything, and after the call, I thought and thought and thought some more (the only thing I'm good at, apparently). Then I exploded. I exploded so harshly that I rung him up, asked him to explain if he even liked me as a *person* anymore, and then flew into a rage of cursing, crying, and screaming. A lot of it I didn't mean, but I was hurt. And hurt people hurt people. And so many people wonder why I felt such pain, if we weren't even together or talking. I can explain it. I wasn't angry because he found someone else, or maybe I was, but I was so much angrier about the sneaking behind my back, the quickness of finding someone else, all of that. Of course I thought, "Why couldn't it be me?" so many times, but that's neither here nor there. I hung up on him, of course. I was done with him and the stupid relationship.

Until I wasn't. Because he texted me all these sweet little paragraphs and regretful sorries and flowery messages of his sorrow for causing me such hurt, pain, and devastation. I was a silly girl, you know? Therefore, I forgave him. We talked in person after I got back

to my apartment. He met me there, and we sat and had a mature discussion in which I asked him if he had feelings for me. He said no (that hurt), and I asked him about the girl. He said she was only really a fling and he wasn't thinking of me at all. I told him I needed a break from him and he complied.

That break only lasted three days. I know—there's something wrong with me.

Anyway, you will never guess what happened next. Or maybe you will. A week or so after that whole fiasco, I was in his room. We were sitting on his bed watching a little documentary when I decided to lay down. He followed my lead and laid down behind me. He wrapped his arm around my waist, I leaned back into him, he put his forefinger and thumb on my chin, moved my head to face him, looked me in my eyes, and kissed me. He. Kissed. Me. It was just like the first one, but filled with so much more regret and sorrow.

We didn't do anything more after that, either. But I did end up staying the night, which was a bad idea, but I just craved it. I craved him, I craved being loved, both or only one, I don't know. But I liked the feel of him near me, his warmth and presence on my back. His eyes locked on mine and his lips only on me and mine on him. I was only setting myself up for failure, but damn were the flames warm.

And after that, life was actually so good. We were close like we were before, he was texting me more often than not, we would kiss and cuddle and I would stay the night over his apartment frequently. But we weren't official, because he still kept his rule of not being ready to be in a relationship. But here we were, doing all these relationship things but without the stability, the reassurance of what we were, and the constant voice in my head nagging at me that he might do what he did again.

And that voice got louder and louder the more times he would drift away from me. The cycle would continue, a high and then a low and then a high and then a low. I would ask him if he was talking to someone else and he'd tell me no, and I would believe him. Or at least try to. It was hard to trust him when he did it once, but I forced myself to. I forced my insecurities down, my gut feeling down, everything negative, down. I wanted this to *work*. We were already so far into this, I wanted to see a relationship blossom and for everything to come to fruition.

There, I guess, was my problem. I couldn't force a relationship between us, I couldn't force him to talk to me or reassure me the way I wanted and needed, and I couldn't make him the person he used to be with me. I never wanted him to change into someone I molded, no. I wanted him to just be the person he showed me when we first met. The caring, kind, attentive, intuitive, beautiful mess of a human being. That wasn't what I got anymore. To this, day I still don't know what caused such a change.

Though, I guess it doesn't matter anyway, because it was all for naught. He sat me down one night and told me he thought long and hard about being in a relationship with me.

"Zaria," he said, "I'll always love you as a friend. You mean the world to me. I've kept you thinking and hurting with my indecisiveness and I apologize. You being hurt has hurt me more than you could know.

"But," he continued, "I don't think I'm the guy for you. Look at how many times I've hurt you. I don't think you should be with a guy who has hurt you so many times. I can't be with a girl I've hurt due to the guilt I'd feel. And, I also should focus on myself so that I can become a better person. I'm sorry."

That stung.

"Okay," I said. "Thank you for telling me this, and I appreciate you. I just need to think for a moment."

That's all I said, but my mind was reeling and my ears were ringing. And the more I thought about it in that moment, the more I started to feel. I thought I was going to be this stone-cold bitch but I was just a little puppy getting hurt again. So hurt, in fact, I started crying in front of him. And he started crying, too. He felt bad, I know. But I felt worse, because my fears came to light and I just couldn't fathom him not being there anymore.

"I-I-I'm not m-m-mad at you, y-you know," I said between gasps and coughs and sniffles. He looked at me so shocked and asked me why, when he didn't deserve such a thing.

"It's an understandable r-r-reason. I c-can't blame you f-for wanting to better yourself," I said.

He shook his head and told me thank you. He asked if I still wanted him around, if I still wanted him in my life.

“Do you still want me in yours?” I asked him.

“Of course I do, Zaria. You’ve done nothing but try to be understanding and love me and care for me. Of course I want you in my life. But I completely understand if you don’t want me in yours,” he told me, looking down at the floor.

I gave it little-to-no thought. I still wanted to be there. And I would try, and he would try. But we laid some ground rules. He would try to make an effort to plan and be there more, I would stop texting first since I wanted to see him actually try to want me around, and if there was an issue, we agreed to speak about it quickly. And lastly, if either one of us felt that the friendship wasn’t beneficial anymore, we should break it off.

I was nervous about the last one, but I didn’t think it would come to that.

Before we actually started this whole new friendship, though, we thought it’d be best if we didn’t talk for a good two weeks before trying. And so we didn’t. And during that time, I realized just how toxic we were to each other. We started out fast, but it was nice. But it slowly started to decay and decay and I was hanging on to a rotten thread. It was going to snap soon. I was glad we decided to replace that thread with another.

Once we started talking again, it was different. He treated me more like he treated his other friends, and I didn’t think about him or text him that often. It was such a fine and healthy arrangement. That was, until I saw him at the library again, sitting with a girl and a guy, laughing and smiling. I went up to say hi to him, and I don’t know what hit me. I gave him a side hug and saw his smile dim just a little bit. Something clicked, or maybe unlatched itself, but there was a wave of emotions coming to me. I saw myself and him last year, sitting in those same spots. Laughing and chuckling at things I don’t even remember.

And I realized that we’re growing apart. Our friendship is dying. And I didn’t know what to do because I didn’t want it to, but there is nothing I can do. I have to let it die. So, the only thing I can do is grieve a friendship. Grieve a relationship. Grieve what once was mine.

TO UNCLE WALLACE, FROM US

We little knew the day that
God was going to call your name.
In life, we loved you dearly,
And in death we do the same.

Don't think of you as gone away;
Your journey's just begun.
Life holds so many facets,
And this earth is only one.

A consciousness remains
Upon the silent shore of memory,
Images and precious thoughts
That cannot be destroyed.

We love you, we miss you, we want you to be happy.
Go safely, go dancing, go running home.
We will all stay in touch,
But it's time you traveled alone.

We will cheer behind you
as you walk to your throne.

FROM THE OLD LADY

If I knew the secret to life, no one would
Understand like a Negro can
So sit back and let me tell you a story
See, you like slaves back in the day
They had no money
We had no power
We were hit every hour
Some were weak
Some were strong
But they all kept pushing on
So fight to be equal
Fight to be free
But only fight non-violently
Some may say, it don't work that way
All I got to say is
It's time for a change
And I don't care who they have to hang
As long as my disrupted history and future achievements
Are written down for babies
And the next generation as an agreement.

—*Dajah Burrows*

HER FAVORITE HOLIDAY

“It’s almost here!” said Mrs. Grey to her roommate, Ms. Tay, as she got ready for the holiday.

The Expulsion was her favorite tradition and one of only two holidays that her town celebrated. She promptly put on the special outfit that she had laid out the night before.

“You’re not coming today?” said Mrs. Grey to Ms. Tay.

“No, not this year. I finally reached the age of exemption. It pays off to be 90, huh! Don’t forget your staff,” reminded Ms. Tay.

Mrs. Grey selected her favorite staff from the closet and made her way to the Expulsion mound. “30 minutes until the celebration!” she said to the passersby and townsfolk. “All eligible residents must come to the mound in 30 minutes!”

As usual, Mrs. Grey was the first resident at the mound. She found a comfortable spot on a rock so that she could get a good view of the celebration. As time got closer, all the eligible residents made their way up the mound; some were more enthusiastic than others.

“I hate this god-darn Expulsion!” said Mr. Wilson, father of the Wilson family. “It’s outdated and doesn’t reap benefits for us regular folk.”

Mrs. Wilson redirected her husband. “Now dear,” she said, “you know we have to be willing participants. It’s a tradition going back centuries. We wouldn’t be able to live in harmony without the Expulsion. Did you forget that we met at the 385th annual Expulsion? Oh, I remember it like it was yesterday. That was one of the better ones. The celebration is so much better when the participant is willing.”

Mr. Hodges shared sentiments with Mr. Wilson. “This year’s harvest was plentiful. There’s enough food to go around, so we should skip the Expulsion this year. Farmer Larry told me that he hates the Expulsion. Most years we have enough food, but y’all are so tied to this redundant holiday! A farmer denouncing the Expulsion, that has to mean something!”

Appreciating the build-up of her favorite holiday, Mrs. Grey took note of everyone walking up the mound to participate. First, there were the teens, Jack, Mack, Zack, and Alexander, who were all entering their first eligible year of the Expulsion. Their 13-year-old selves couldn't wait to finally participate in the annual holiday. Following closely was Ms. Grace, the widow whose husband was recognized in the previous year's celebration. She looked weary and nauseous coming up the mound. Behind her was Mrs. Leigh, the elementary teacher who brought her first-grade class on a field trip to view the Expulsion. The children were so eager to participate in such meaningful community service. With their fun-sized staves, they practiced jabbing motions on each other.

Among the crowd was Farmer Larry. Most of the other town farmers couldn't wait for the celebration. After all, the Expulsion was called "Farmer's Day" in some households. Why feed five hungry mouths when you can feed four instead? However, Farmer Larry held a different opinion. Most of the time the yearly supply of food was more than enough. To him, the holiday was useless and only served as a tradition.

Mrs. Grey noted two individuals bringing up the rear, walking side by side. The first was Mrs. Cherry, all 89 years of her. She waddled up the mound to her final mandatory Expulsion. In her right hand, she held her good luck charm that she brought to each celebration since she was 13. She had avoided the Expulsion for her entire life and she gave credit to the rabbit's foot now pressed tightly in her palm.

Beside her was Jethro. Jethro was not a striking figure. At 4' 10" and 95 pounds, Jethro was everyone's anticipated pick for this year's Expulsion. But not because of his size. Jethro belonged to a family blessed by the Expulsion. A member of Jethro's bloodline had been selected in the Expulsion for the last 12 years. How fortunate! Some called his family lucky, while others called them cursed. Jethro's knees buckled and his teeth chattered as he made his way up the mound. His cloak was drenched in sweat and he appeared frailer than ever. In his head, he just knew that he would continue his family's streak of Expulsion selections.

When the time came for the Expulsion to begin, everyone gathered on the mound, surrounding the Village Head. Next to him on a table was a large basket and writing tablets stacked neatly, one for each eligible participant.

Mrs. Grey was giddy with anticipation for the start of her favorite holiday.

“Gather round, gather round, as we commence the start of our 405th annual Expulsion!” said the Village Head.

There was a mix of cheers and boos from the crowd.

“For everyone that is new, we welcome you to the most important celebration in our town,” the Village Head continued. “The Expulsion is the most selfless thing that you can do, and as part of your residency in this town, you are to cheerfully participate. All who attempt to hide or flee from the Expulsion will be dealt with criminally. We frown upon anyone who does not participate in this holiday if they are eligible. They are the scum of the earth. A waste of breath. Unfit to live among us.”

Farmer Larry and others grumbled in disgust at the Village Head’s words. Larry spat on the ground in frustration. Conveniently, the Village Head was exempt from the Expulsion.

“Now, let’s begin! Everyone line up and select a tablet to write their name on. After you have finished doing so, kindly place your signed tablet in the basket.”

Adjudicators roamed the crowd, searching for anyone who attempted to write another person’s name or swap their tablet out for a fake one. After each person had placed their tablet in the basket, the Head fixed the lid on top. He then lifted the basket and violently shook it in an attempt to randomize the names. While covering his eyes, the Head selected five tablets from the basket. His adjudicators held up the five tablets with the names covered up. One by one, they revealed whose tablets had been chosen.

Jethro’s name was first, followed by Farmer Larry, Mrs. Leigh the teacher, 89-year-old Mrs. Cherry, and finally Mrs. Grey.

Everyone not selected breathed a sigh of relief.

Being selected in the top five was a common occurrence that most of the residents had experienced at least once. Mrs. Grey was honored that she had been selected in the top five. This was her second time in the honored position.

The Village Head then placed the five tablets back into the basket. Once again, he shook the basket with all his might, randomizing the names. This time two names were pulled from the basket.

The Head read them aloud. “Jethro and Mrs. Grey! What great fortune you two have! You are one step closer to serving your community at the most respected level.”

At the sound of his name, Jethro dropped to his knees and whimpered on the ground. He gripped the blades of grass between his fingers and watered the soil with his tears. The 12-year streak of his family was about to continue. He had seen countless relatives be selected for the Expulsion and he was about to be next.

Mrs. Grey’s hands started to get clammy. Her breaths shortened and the hairs on her arms stood on end. At this point, she was slightly worried but was showing no visible signs.

“What are the odds that I will be selected out of 500 residents?” she pondered. “A member of Jethro’s family has been selected for 12 straight years. The streak won’t end now.”

As per tradition, the Village Head discarded the tablets with their names and received two blank tablets from his adjudicators. He took a blade and scratched an **X** into one of the tablets, leaving the other one blank. He placed the **X** tablet and the blank tablet back into the basket. A final time he shook the basket with vigor.

He reached into the basket and held up both tablets, the **X** tablet facing away from the two finalists. There was now a 50/50 chance of the **X** tablet being selected.

The Village Head spoke, “Unless one of you volunteers to choose, I will randomly select who picks a tablet.”

To the awe of the crowd, Mrs. Grey spoke up: “I will gladly volunteer!”

This worked out well since Jethro was still clinging to the ground in fear.

The Village Head held up the two tablets in front of Mrs. Grey. To avoid the Expulsion, all she had to do was choose the tablet with the blank backside.

Simple. 50/50. Choose the blank tablet.

Unfazed by the pressure, Mrs. Grey pondered which tablet to choose. She uttered, “Left or right, left or right.”

The crowd grew restless at her indecisiveness.

“Left or right, left or right.”

At this point, Jethro was frothing at the mouth and his pants were warming with urine. He was laying on his back so that he could see which tablet Mrs. Grey chose.

“I choose left,” she uttered sternly.

The Village Head remained stoic. He slowly flipped over the left tablet so that the crowd and Mrs. Grey could see.

On the tablet, neatly etched out, was an **X**.

The crowd erupted, surprised by the results.

Jethro removed his soiled pants and pranced around the mound, high-fiving the townsfolk. He kissed the ground and danced to the delight of the townsfolk who congratulated him on ending his family’s streak.

“I did it! I broke the curse!” he shouted without bottoms on.

Mrs. Grey’s stomach dropped. Her face felt hot and she collapsed to her knees. She stared endlessly at the etching of the **X** on the tablet. Her distraught face sucked the energy out of the crowd. Everyone turned their attention to her as she yanked the other tablet from the Village Head.

“He cheated me! He cheated me! He must’ve put **X**’s on both tablets because he knew Jethro was in no shape to choose!”

She flipped over the tablet that she hadn’t chosen. It was blank.

The townsfolk collected their staves and surrounded her in a semi-circle formation.

“You have been chosen!” said the Village Head. “Accept your fate cheerfully. We commend you for your service and sacrifice.” He continued, “All right, everyone. You know the deal. Let the *real* Expulsion begin!”

The townsfolk pointed their staves at Mrs. Grey and backed her closer and closer to the edge of the mound. Each of the 500 townsfolk

now had a duty to keep Mrs. Grey from running from her fate. Even Mrs. Leigh's first-grade class joined the formation, their little staves poking at Mrs. Grey.

As the semi-circle tightened, Mrs. Grey exclaimed desperately, "This really isn't my favorite holiday. Who cares for this pointless holiday! We should cancel it starting now! What a perfect time! The crops were plentiful this year. There's no need for an Expulsion!"

The crowd continued pushing her toward the edge.

"I actually hate this holiday. I know it seemed like I enjoyed the tradition, but it's really unnecessary! Can we recount the tablets? Can I choose again?"

She was now inches from the edge of the mound.

"You're all devils, each and every one of you. How could you do this to one of your own! Farmer Larry!" she shrieked. "I used to feed your chickens when I was a little girl. Mrs. Leigh, you were my first-grade teacher. Help out a former student! Mr. Wilson, I lent you sugar and flour during the famine last year!"

Mrs. Grey was now teetering uneasily on the very edge of the mound.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey, for your valiant sacrifice!" the Village Head proclaimed.

With one final push of a stave, Mrs. Grey was shoved off the mound, falling aimlessly for what seemed like a split-second before splattering on the ground.

PAGODA

What if we were so tall the cities seemed like Christmas lights?
Could we even appreciate a view so grand?
Some can't even see beyond their own hands.
They only smell the air to breathe, not ponder.
Oxygen only provides us with more room to speak of each other.
There's an ancient word used for people of kindred spirits,
Currently overused,
A word that mends wounds the size of canyons,
That blasts rivers of tears and blood,
A word that braids severed ties cut by the pressure of waterfall floods,
A word spoken by blistered and decayed tongues
Of the uncomprehending and ungrateful,
Their bellies get full of its mention,
A blessing, truly:
Love.
A word we use to cast spells of perpetuity and longevity,
A word we use as commonly as our hands in greeting,
Turning time into waves that push against the shore,
Constantly bringing us back into the comforting thoughts of each other.
We get lost in the sound of each other.
There was a time man used the sky to tell time,
A time of pure faith, giving the sun our eyes.
Clocks only tell us of the time we are losing,
Clocks only gauge our time apart;
The sun shows we still share a planet,
Us seeing it the same way as our ancestors did.
The moonlit skies blanket my dreams of you.
I am a monk, sheltered by you, my pagoda,
Realizing nirvana in your embrace as meditation.

SO THIS IS LOVE

Love isn't instant attraction,
obsession, lack of distrust and full of lust.
No, Love isn't bumblebees and la da dees,
humming the day away and constantly
thinking of that one.
Love is duty. It's after the honeymoon,
after the feelings settle
and that fire turns into a simmer.
You Love because you want,
not need.
It's respect, a duty, trust and honesty.
It's an ability.
You give, you sacrifice,
you create healthy boundaries.
It's a superpower many don't hold,
because of how fleeting the wish for it to come and go,
but once honed,
it's magical.

RAINY NIGHTS

Sweet-smelling scents,
eyes closed, mouth stretched,
smile gleaming on her lips.

A hand runs its fingers,
a whistling tune from his mouth,
eyes filled with love and wonder.

A head on a lap,
rain on window sills,
and a thunderclap in the distance.

Television in the background,
arms wrapped around each other,
soft pillow talk, eyes focused on eyes.

A small kiss is shared,
whispers of more to come,
fingers wrapped in hair.

Hands under shirts,
pulling each other closer,
listening to slow heartbeats.

Together, they lay on each other,
in support of one another.
They fall asleep basking in the warmth of the other.

—*Kaliyah Greene*

WALKING RED BANNER

“I am going on a date with him this weekend. Do you want to come along?” my sister asked. She knew I didn’t approve of the date, but she still wanted me to go anyway.

“You know I don’t like the guy, so why do you want me to come along?” I shook my head as I walked out of our room, trying to avoid where I knew this conversation was going. We shared a room because it was the only thing we could afford after moving out of our parents’ house against their wishes three months ago. Before moving out, we lived in a two-bedroom bungalow on the mainland that my parents rented. The mainland’s purpose was to house as many people as it could, whilst they looked onto the island, envious of the billion-naira apartments that littered the many pieces of land surrounded by water. Tinuke brought up moving out because she didn’t want to have her “freedom trampled on,” but I think she was jealous of the friends that lived there and were able to take vacations out of the country. Our pockets were not ready for the soft life we wanted, though, so we shared a room to afford the rent.

“I’m asking you to go so you can see that you’re wrong,” she said, blocking my escape.

“I’m not wrong,” I said, my escape thwarted by the conviction to prove my sister wrong.

“You are.”

“Why do you want to go out with him? You got out of a relationship like two weeks ago!”

“Exactly. That bastard just posted a picture with the idiot he cheated on me with. Imagine the audacity!” Tinuke’s expression soured with the memory.

“That’s no reason for you to go out with a guy that says his hobby is counting money.” The silence hung like a blanket over us.

“Where is the date?”

“An art museum.”

I figured that that would allow me to be as far away from them as possible.

“Whose idea was it?” There was no way Mr. Money Counter could have suggested going to a place where you spent money to get in but couldn’t touch anything inside.

“He did.”

Weird. “How are you getting there?”

“He is coming with an Uber to pick *us* up.” Tinuke tilted her head at me.

“Does he know that you want me to come along?”

“No.”

“Fine.” She ignored my deadpan expression and proceeded to squeeze the breath out of my lungs.

Fashola came on time. He wasn’t bad-looking, either. He had on dark blue jeans and a graphic T-shirt. He smiled at Tinuke and smiled even brighter when he saw me.

“I’m sorry to intrude on your date. Tinuke insisted I come with her.”

“It’s no problem. You’re her friend, right?”

I looked at my sister in confusion and her sheepish expression confirmed that she had not informed her date that someone was tagging along.

I turned back to answer him. “No, I’m her sister.”

“Aburo, I still don’t mind,” he said as he moved to open the car door for Tinuke.

At the museum, my sister laughed at the ridiculously unfunny jokes her date was making and I regretted agreeing to be the third wheel. He was talking about his friends breaking car windows as a prank. I knew this was a bad idea. Thankfully, the museum was a stark

contrast to how the date was going. It was not large, but it was beautiful. Terracotta pottery from Benin and Ife decorated the walls, rusted guns and cutlasses hung in display cases, and tie-dyed fabrics acted as wallpaper. My eyes traced a painting of Aje, the Yoruba goddess of wealth, to the ceiling, and I couldn't help but notice the absence of the familiar red light from the security camera positioned there. I didn't meet many people on my self-directed tour, but I enjoyed myself the further away from them I was. I tried not to go far, though. I didn't trust the guy.

Tinuke had met him on Instagram. That was the first red flag. Tinuke's Instagram was filled with pictures of her lounging around in places she has never visited, with location tags of said places. But she insisted that people have met their soulmates by sliding into DMs. His profile had two pictures. One with him posing with his back facing the camera in front of a bungalow. The location tag said Ikoyi, and the caption read, "Just got blessed with this property." The second picture was of him posing with two bags of money on a table. Second red flag. Only celebrities and scammers post pictures of themselves with money. A Google search didn't find anything on him. Then they had the craziest conversations.

"What's your idea of the perfect relationship?" Tinuke had asked him once. Her phone was on speaker at my request. He had just told her that if he had to choose between women getting equal pay and ten thousand naira, he would choose ten-thousand naira.

"The man should be a provider," Fashola said. "I would want to be able to give my wife money to take care of the house."

My sister and I raised our eyebrows at each other.

"What if your wife does not want to be a housewife," Tinuke stuttered. "I just think that it would be hard to take care of a household with one income."

"My wife will not go to work. She will stay at home to take care of me and our children," he said, the conviction clear in his voice.

Third red flag. Tinuke still said yes when he had asked her to go to the museum. She defended herself, saying he was going to be paying for everything in the future. Then I asked her if she really thought he was worth the red flags, and she refused to answer.

Because the museum was so small, it did not take very long for me to finish my self-directed tour. I had no choice but to walk closer to them. They continued to talk about money and values, and I lost count of the red flags. I spent an hour listening to Tinuke feebly trying to interject a rant about how a wife ought to submit to her husband's will. The museum was already closing, and the dim lights echoed the absence of people.

"I need to withdraw some money from the ATM," he said and walked off.

I rolled my eyes as I watched him leave. "Remind me why we're here again?"

"To admire art and culture, na."

"I want to go home."

"Not yet. I still need to get dinner out of—"

Tinuke's words were cut short by a steel pipe to her head, and my cry of fear was cut short by the same steel pipe.

"I told you he was creepy," I sighed as I wiggled my tied wrists.

"I'm sorry," my sister said, and the anger died in me.

We were in a damp, dark warehouse. The rotting smell of metal invaded my mouth, and it felt like coarse sand underneath my legs. Then the fear came in, slowly, closing my throat and clouding my eyes. I grabbed my sister's hands and felt the tension mirror mine. All the humor I had prepared in case of a situation like this vanished. No *Mission Impossible* scenario or true crime documentary prepared me for how I was feeling. I was feeling helpless, and I hated it.

Fashola walked in and the light from outside made his silhouette fill the already small room. He took his time walking toward us, a flashlight bouncing between our faces.

"What did we do to you?" Tinuke was on the verge of tears.

"Nothing prepared you for this, *abi*." He grinned, twirling the steel pipe in his hand.

“You know, I’ve been watching you for a while.” He squatted in front of us, the steel pipe acting like a walking cane. “This is the first time it’s been two of you at once.” He turned to me. “I didn’t plan to kidnap you, but see jackpot, *na*.”

“Please let us go. We won’t tell anybody,” my sister sobbed.

“I mean,” he shrugged, “there’s nothing anybody you know would be able to do anyway. I don’t want to kill you, though.” He walked across the room, dropped the pipe, and dragged a chair over to sit in front of us. “I just want money, and your parents have money. They just bought a house in Ikoyi, and that means they can afford twenty-million naira. Ten-million per head. I would say that’s not a bad deal.” He smirked as he stroked Tinuke’s face with the back of his hand. The disgust on her face was not a deterrent. Ransom kidnapping in Nigeria was not uncommon, but like every other bad thing that could happen to a human being, we thought we were going to be free from harm.

“Our parents don’t have that kind of money.”

“Oh, they’ll have the money.” He brought out Tinuke’s phone from his pocket to show a text to our parents. There was a picture of both of us unconscious, and the text underneath read: “Twenty million or their corpses by midnight.” The clock in the corner read 9:00 pm.

“Can you give them more time, please? There’s no way they’ll have the money in time.”

“You know, everyone seems to say that, but come midnight, they’re all on their merry ways to their houses.” He leaned back in amusement. “You can pray that they will, though.” He laughed and set the flashlight on the ground. He set himself comfortably in his chair and closed his eyes.

The light allowed me to see that the room was much smaller than I had thought it was. And it didn’t really look like a room. The walls and ceiling were corrugated, and a test to see what the walls were made of earned me a look from our kidnapper.

I began to feel relaxed enough to try to think. My sister was sobbing silently, and I could only hold onto her hands. I felt a loose piece of twine while I was comforting my sister and I tugged on it until it came loose, making sure to hide my relief. I reached behind me to my sister’s wrists and did the same thing. The only exit I could see was

the door Fashola came in, and the bastard had camped himself right in front of it. Waiting was the hardest part. He weighed more than the both of us and I wanted to make it out alive. I prayed harder than I ever had in my whole life.

Then the notification came, and he walked out. I grabbed my sister's hand and rushed to the door.

Fashola stood by the side of the shipping container in which we were tied up. He was reaching his phone over his head, looking for a signal, I assumed. The wind whistled through the trees and the moon was taking cover behind the clouds. Darkness was my only view, and I felt grateful and apprehensive. I gripped Tinuke's hand tighter and made a run for it. The sound of crunching leaves alerted us and our attacker. We ran faster, and we let go of each other's hands at a point. The bastard was getting closer, and the faster I tried to get away, the closer he felt. Then I tripped, over my cursed feet no less. I only managed to pull myself up when I felt a huge bang over my head. *Shit*, I thought, as I fell into another deep sleep.

Liquid seeping into the sleeve of my shirt woke me up. There was a puddle of blood by my head. Tinuke sat across the room from me, her back against the wall, feet apart, holding the steel pipe that was dripping with blood. Her eyes lit up when she saw that I was conscious.

"Where is he?" I stood up, my eyes darting around.

"He's gone."

"Like dead, gone?"

"Maybe."

"What does that mean?"

"I hit him with this." She raised the pipe. "There was blood everywhere, then he ran away."

"Okay."

"I don't know what to do." Tinuke's confusion only gave me motivation to be more clear-headed.

“Let’s just get out of here first.”

I took the pipe from her and dropped it on the ground. She grabbed my arm and let me lead her out of the room. On our way out, I saw a phone by the pool of blood, and picked it up. We followed the sounds of people starting their day to a main road, the morning light basking us as we trudged along. We managed to book an Uber on Fas-hola’s phone before it died. The Uber driver was alarmed when she first saw us, and even more so when we asked to use her phone to call our parents. She didn’t ask any questions after that, and we were not in the mood to answer any.

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

What is a woman?
Women are the galaxy.
We shine like the sun and the moon.
We are ahead like light years,
Stand out like the evening star,
And get deep with you like black holes.
We take your breath away.

WOMEN ARE THE WORLD!

We grow like trees,
Soar like birds,
Bloom like the daffodils that rise from the Earth.
We are the soil but be down for you like the roots.
We are the foundation,
The base, the first.

Women are the givers but always seem to be taken,
Taken from our freedom,
Because rights were never enough for you.
I guess now what happens with my body
Will never be my decision to make.
And still you take.

TAKE my serenity,
Take my quarter-tank identity,
Because my face is no longer my face;
It's copied and pasted to the next race.
You are oblivious to my reality.

These people think our dreams are not meant to be fulfilled.
They have an unfulfilled mentality.
They think that our minds can hold a certain capacity,
but they don't know that we **EXPAND** like the galaxy.

We are more than just cooks and nannies;
We are the next engineers, hustlers, innovators and life-changers.
We can't throw in the towel whenever we feel like it,
No matter how much crap we go through,
For it is a 365-day-a-year job to be a real woman.

We are judged by the curves of our bodies
That are so smooth like melodies,
Something they can never understand.
It's such a complexity:
No puzzle, no novel, no view or opinion can compare.
So, when I ask you, "What is a woman?"
You better come up with a good answer.

How Will We Address the Disproportionate Death Rate of African American Mothers and Infants?

Why are African American maternal and fetal death rates so high? African American women on average are 3 to 4 times more likely to die compared to Caucasian women from avoidable pregnancy-related problems. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two out of every three labor and delivery deaths are preventable (CDC, 2022). In an article entitled, “Eliminating Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Mortality,” the authors reveal that African Americans have the highest infant mortality rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States, with their children dying before their first birthday twice as often (Hananel et al., 2019). The United States of America must get its policymakers and healthcare professionals to collaborate. Maternal and infant mortality are intertwined, but policy discussions regarding maternal and newborn health are frequently conducted independently. Updating the training of providers and healthcare professionals to address racism and stereotypes will result in a more humane healthcare system, one that can give care to all people of color without discrimination. This will create a healthcare system that these women can trust with their lives. This approach also benefits the general health and well-being of families of color, ensuring that African Americans have better future health outcomes. Racism is at the root of inequity and disproportionate maternal and newborn mortality rates. African American women often receive lower-quality treatment than white women, caused by structural racism in health care and social services (Hananel et al., 2019).

Racism’s long-term psychological impact compromises the lives of African American mothers and their newborns because it puts them at risk for a variety of medical disorders. In fact, “Structural racism and the experience of racial discrimination across the life span have deleterious consequences for physical and mental health. Importantly, these effects are distinct from those of poverty; racism is a fundamental cause of socioeconomic disparities, which in turn are principal drivers of health disparities” (Lugo-Candelas et al., 2021). Health care providers need help identifying and addressing social factors influencing maternal health in a holistic way. These factors include unstable housing, transportation access problems, lack of food, substance use, violence, and racial and economic inequality.

In a journal article entitled, “Taking Action on the Social Determinants of Health in Clinical Practice: A Framework for Health Professionals,” the authors argue that by inquiring about the patient’s social history, offering them guidance, directing them to nearby support resources, easing access to these

programs, and serving as a trustworthy resource throughout the process, health care providers can better support patients dealing with social obstacles (Andermann, 2016). Professionals who are skilled at inquiring about social difficulties are more likely to be reported as assisting their patients in addressing these issues (Andermann, 2016). Health care professionals should receive training on how to be more alert to clinical red flags and patient cues, so that they can integrate social history questions seamlessly into consultations. Once social determinants of health are identified, the health care provider can make a social prescription. Social prescribing is the practice of connecting patients with non-medical programs or interventions that are intended to lessen the burden of healthcare problems. These interventions can include giving information about staffing agencies, offering free financial courses, creating prenatal community groups, and more.

Closing the coverage gap can aid in the reduction of African American labor and delivery deaths. For more than 800,000 women of reproductive age, the Medicaid “coverage gap” inhibits them from receiving ongoing medical coverage (Solomon, 2021). Federal authorities should rectify this by addressing the coverage gap in upcoming recovery legislation and broadening Medicaid to all women with low-incomes. A plan to solve the black maternal health problem must include increasing and improving Medicaid coverage, because more than 40% of births in the United States and 65% of births to black mothers are covered by Medicaid (Solomon, 2021). According to statistics, Medicaid expansion leads to lower rates of maternal mortality, especially for black women. The vast majority of the 810,000 black and Latina women who were uninsured in 2019 and lacked access to affordable health insurance resided in the South (Solomon, 2021). However, crucial preconception treatment is unlikely to be accessible, and being uninsured before pregnancy is correlated with a higher occurrence of risk factors that correlate to poor pregnancy outcomes.

States should use the American Rescue Plan’s option to prolong Medicaid pregnancy coverage for 12 months following the end of pregnancy rather than the 60 days mandated by existing law in order to remedy some of the maternal health issues (Solomon, 2021). Meanwhile, a number of bills in the current Congress would spend money on transportation, housing, nutrition, health care, and doulas. These kinds of investments are required to combat the various issues that contribute to high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, particularly among black women. Coverage will be key to reducing maternal mortality and morbidity for women of color.

Furthermore, trauma-informed care should be normalized in healthcare settings. Pregnant women’s experiences with sexual trauma, such as harassment and assault, can affect how they manage their healthcare. Examples include avoiding gynecological exams or sexual history discussions with someone who has experienced sexual trauma, both of which are crucial for establishing a safe pregnancy and delivery (Nast, 2019). According to the 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey conducted by the CDC, 22% of black women surveyed said they had been sexually assaulted, and 41% said they had been raped. The delivery experience for black people can be improved by addressing this trauma. Teaching patients exactly what will happen

next and why, allowing them to keep a trustworthy companion in the room, asking for permission to touch a patient, and emphasizing that a patient can ask for an exam to end at any time are all part of trauma-informed care. Many doula and midwifery training programs emphasize the value of informed consent in medical settings and teach trauma-informed care (Nast, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to have trauma-informed care classes for providers as a standard policy. In addition to trauma-informed care, all hospitals should survey their patients on their experiences. This primary data can inform policymakers about how well the newly implemented changes actually affect patients. By providing insight into their patients' perspectives, patient satisfaction surveys have assisted decision-makers in developing meaningful patient-provider relationships, effective and constructive communication, and care based on sensitivity and respect (Patient Satisfaction Surveys, 2018).

The recommended intervention is to have policymakers and healthcare professionals come together to find a solution to decrease the extremely high numbers of African American maternal and fetal deaths in America. The goal would be to lower African American maternal and infant mortality rates after a year of implementing new OB/GYN rules and policies governing care for people of color. Finally, the outcome will determine if intertwining the discussions of policymakers and healthcare professionals creates new and better policies. These policies should greatly decrease, and hopefully eliminate, mother-baby death rates in the hospitals of America.

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AS A DARK-SKINNED GIRL

As a dark-skinned girl, life wasn't easy.
I spent many hours looking in the mirror,
Wishing I didn't have to be.
As a dark-skinned girl, many times I found
Myself embarrassed, and quickly mastered
The skill of being able to tell
When I was the darkest in the room.
Like a magnet, "I was as dark as"
Bullies clung to me. From the first grade,
I was conditioned to think that
The shade of my skin and the texture of my hair
Were something to be ashamed of.
As a dark-skinned girl, natural hair
Was not an option. I remember begging
My mother not to make to go to school
With a ponytail or two,
Because I knew the result.
Before I even knew the benefits,
Beads and weave were the only way.
I was not confident in my natural hair
Until my senior year of high school.
As a dark-skinned girl, I'd imagine
A life where I was lighter—not even white,
Just lighter, because I understood that
I didn't have to be white to have it easy;
I just couldn't be this dark.
As a dark-skinned girl, I never fell in love
Or interested myself in silly crushes,
Because I knew I was "too dark"
For any of the boys around me,
Even the ones who looked like me.
As a dark-skinned girl, compliments were
The worst. Even after I realized that it's

Rude to tell people they're wrong,
I still didn't believe them.
There was *always* that voice inside.
However, my life as a dark-skinned *woman*
Has been different.
As a dark-skinned woman,
I know my worth, I know my deeply
Melanated skin is beautiful and
Works best with bright colors and reds.
As a dark-skinned woman, I know my curls
Cannot be duplicated, no matter how hard
One may try. As a dark-skinned woman,
I know my black is beautiful,
And the stunning smile is the cherry on top.
As a dark-skinned women, I know it is my job
To uplift every dark chocolate baby
Who may have these big feelings
But doesn't know how to handle them.

DECEPTION OF THE EYES

The sparkle announcing itself when looking into her eyes,
How her lips part ways as she smiles,
The movement of her body showing compassion and interest,
Seeing the indentation when her lips curve upward.

Beauty is seen at first glance,
How every strand of hair is perfectly in place,
The way her skin glows when coming into a room,
Eyes sparkling so bright you'd believe it was the sun.

So far away, yet when glancing at her skin, it looks so smooth.
Seeing the look of curiosity on her face as she cups her cheek,
Walking across the room making sure everyone notices her beauty.

But behind those sparkling eyes is a lifeless soul.
No visible scars on her body, yet they're found deep in her heart and mind,
A feeling of emptiness coursing through her veins.



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled #1*



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled #2*



Jayana Chyna/*Untitled*



Jayana Chyna/*Black King*



Jayana Chyna/A Bright Young Mind



Jayana Chyna/The Girl Behind the Canvas



London Banks/*Flower Boy*



Destin Marshall/*Bleecker St.*



Daeyahn Elliot/*Delight*



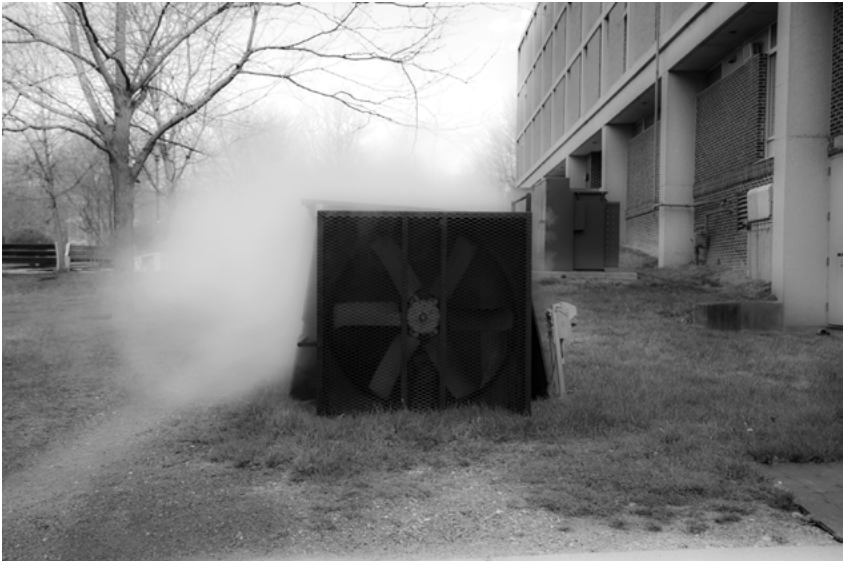
Daeyahn Elliot/*Fortunate*



Jaden Harrell/*Untitled*



Kania Pollock/*Untitled*



Freddie Young/*Untitled*



Lakya'h Young/*Where To?*



Lakya'h Young/*Trust*

Women's History



Grace Quiah/*Women's History*

MIRAGE

I rolled in slowly on my wheelchair. I had to see her. My eyes were fixed on her stout figure as the chill of the room gently surrounded me. My heartbeat slammed in fury, and I winced at the pain in my arm, which hung from a sling around my back. Her face was blank; I couldn't guess how she felt. As I came to a stop in front of her, her only acknowledgement of my presence was her gaze shifting to my face. There was a lump in my throat when our eyes met. I felt the rage course through my veins, going deeper with each passing second. This woman was on trial for murder. She had dug a knife in my father's throat repeatedly, her murderous eyes glistening in thrill, the sound of her screams filling the whole house, until the police arrived. She was the most horrific of people to walk the earth. She was also my mother.

Later that day, I was back in the hospital, staring into the distance through my window. It was a different kind of pain, the kind of pain that hurts even more because there is no remedy. I remember just a month before, I had woken up from surgery. I had been in a car accident that almost cost me my life. The police had been summoned immediately to investigate the case of the 14-year-old who crashed her father's car. There had been a lot of questioning and a slow journey to recovery, but the most frustrating part was the fact that I had suffered memory loss. I didn't recall how I had gotten in the vehicle, where I was going, whose vehicle it was, and most importantly, who I was.

The presence of someone else in the room jolted me into reality. It was a nurse who had brought me my medication. I smiled tightly as she handed me a tiny bowl filled with drugs. I had always hated the smell of medicine. I held my breath and gulped down everything. I didn't want to taste it at all. As I held out the empty bowl for her, a sudden rush of *deja vu* engulfed me. The red color of the bowl, the obligation I felt to take the medication, the nurse muttering, "Very good" as she exited the room—everything seemed so familiar. As I sat there, staring at the open door, my memories that had been out of reach for so long began to slowly creep into my mind. I remembered papa, I think I called him that. He was standing in front of me with a belt coiled

around his hand. His eyes were cold, unwavering, and showed no love. He was waiting for me to finish taking my drugs out of the red bowl. I remember picking out the drugs one after the other; with each tablet I gulped down, my hatred seemed to increase. As I handed the bowl back to papa, he muttered under his breath. It was almost inaudible, but it was there.

“Very good.”

My heart was racing when I got back to reality. That was the first memory I was getting back. Even better, it was a memory of papa. My heart sank when I realized that we probably didn't get along. I must have been a naughty child, always giving him troubles. I took a paper and pen to write down what I had just remembered. My therapist would be thrilled to know that I was getting my memory back piece by piece. As I scribbled away on the paper, I felt an obligation to bring my mother to justice. She would rot in jail, and I would never refer to her as my mother again.

The next day, I sat at the back of the courtroom as the proceedings went on. I didn't understand what was going on. I fixed my eyes on her, the murderer. For the first time, I saw a hint of emotion in her face: it was fear. My rage simmered down when she began to wipe her face with her sleeves.

Was she crying? How dare she? You are so confident when it comes to murder, but facing the consequences makes you unhappy?

Our eyes crossed once again, and I gave her the coldest look that I could. As I sat there, I began to feel as if I was going into a trance. My therapist had encouraged me to welcome any foreign feeling, as it could be a gateway to my locked memories. I sat still, and let myself be submerged in my own mind. I remembered decorating a room. It looked like a baby's room. Happiness flowed through me as I picked out the color and theme of the bedroom. I loved Disney princesses, and I wanted that to be the theme. I would wake up every morning and get to work. My scissors, pencils, and cardboard paper were always in use. I created several stickers, and plastered them all around the walls of the room. I was going to be a big sister, and the best one at that. I remembered rubbing mama's belly each time she sat down. I would pretend to talk to the baby as she pressed an icepack to her swollen eye.

The eye usually started out black and shut. She wouldn't be able to see out of it for a few days, but gradually, as the days passed, it would open up and become better. On a few occasions, before it could heal up, it would return to the black color with even more swelling. Sometimes she'd get lucky and he would hit the other eye next. It gave each eyeball some time to recover. Most times, however, he always hit the same side of her face.

I remember one night, a few weeks before she was due to deliver, there was a loud argument coming from their room. I recall hearing a few crashes, and then dead silence. Papa would later drive her to the hospital, and they would return without a baby.

Nobody would speak of the pregnancy. We would all pretend that it never happened. The only proof would be the decorated room, and me crying myself to sleep at night. He had robbed me of my sibling yet again.

This time, the jolt to reality was caused by the judge slamming his gavel to adjourn the case. I felt guilt creep slowly into my heart. What if papa had been a complete monster? What if he deserved it?

Mama refused to see me after the court proceedings. I had gone back to the hospital to once again stare at the window. Rain splattered against the floor outside as I got lost in my thoughts. My mind went back to another occurrence. I had been staring outside my bedroom window; it had also been raining. Maggie had dragged her box across the large compound on her way out of the property. She had been instructed by mama to leave. I remember wiping tears off my face as she left, trying my best to contain the rage that burned within me. I loved Maggie. She had initially been a ball of sunshine. She would do her work diligently, and still have a lot of extra time to play with me. However, after only a few weeks, she started to have the swollen eye syndrome, a syndrome that took away her joyful demeanor. Papa would hit her at the slightest opportunity.

She forgot to clean. He hit her.

He didn't like the food. He hit her.

She refused his sexual advances. He hit her, and then raped her.

A few days prior to her leaving, mama found out that Maggie was

pregnant. She instructed her to leave with her bastard child. I contemplated suicide that night. Life began to seem like a struggle I was not well-equipped for. I hated papa with every inch of my soul.

I realized I had been crying when I came back to reality. He had been cruel, very evil. I recalled the conversation I had with mama just the day before. I cringed at all the horrible things I had said. In that moment, I couldn't help but ask a question. The same question that was on every body's lips.

“What really happened that night?”

When I sat in front of mama the next day, I felt guilty. She looked very tired, and beneath her blank stare I could tell there was sorrow.

“What happened that night?” I asked her.

“I killed him.” It was barely a mutter that escaped her lips.

I stared deep at her and tried to fathom what could be on her mind. “Talking with you, reconnecting with you, is bringing my memory back. Papa was not a good person, was he?”

Silence followed. I stared at mama expectantly.

In the first minute of the awkward silence, I thought she was simply trying to gather her thoughts. In the next thirty minutes, I thought she was thinking of the best way to tell me. In the following hour, I stopped thinking. In the following 24 hours, when I was seated at the back of the court room, I realized she wasn't going to tell me.

It was the final hearing; the judge was about to make a ruling. I stared blankly into space. I needed answers. Was I to be angry with her or him? As I got deeper in thought, my mind wandered once more to my lost memories. This time, I was in the kitchen, mopping up some pasty liquid from the floor. Mama had been terribly sick; papa had not cared. Both her eyes were swollen, and she had a big bruise on her side. Just the day before, she had passed out from a severe beating. As I scrubbed the floor, I heard it. Papa hit her again, and she collapsed. I shut my eyes in pain as I heard his fist connecting with her body. It went on, and with each passing second I felt a new kind of rage. This rage was fierce and unwavering. All the hatred I had ever felt for papa curled up into one big fury.

I felt the anger take charge of my body.

I let it blind me.

I was at the mercy of my rage; it screamed for vengeance.

The events of that evening were like a trance. I only regained my senses when I was holding a blood-stained kitchen knife, with papa's lifeless body in front of me.

I remember mama screaming from her deepest of hearts. "What have you done!"

I screamed myself back to reality. Everyone in the court room turned to me.

The ruling had been made.

Mama was being escorted out.

PHINEAS AND FERB AND POSITIVE MASCULINITY

In contemporary social discourse, there are endless discussions regarding toxic masculinity, but rarely do people talk about its more benign relative: positive masculinity. Even more out of the ordinary is when a popular TV show promotes this version of masculinity. Despite this, the Emmy award-winning kids' show *Phineas and Ferb* managed to exemplify positive masculinity throughout its impressive 129-episode run.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, toxic masculinity is “a set of attitudes and ways of behaving stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men and on society as a whole.” For example, on Lincoln University's campus, you can't publicly hold hands with your girlfriend or you'll be seen as soft. I, *personally*, would make fun of someone who showed any affection toward their girlfriend, as I sadly suffer from extreme amounts of toxic masculinity. *Pray for me!*

The opposite of toxic masculinity would be positive masculinity, which is “the expression of attitudes and behaviors that have been embodied and enacted by males for the common good, both individually and for the community” (“Positive Masculinity”). There is a drought in the portrayal of morally upright men on TV, especially when the show is animated. When one thinks of animated males on TV, characters such as Homer Simpson, Peter Griffin, and Eric Cartman are the first to come to mind. Phineas and Ferb aggressively break this stereotype in their show.

If you haven't watched it, *Phineas and Ferb* focuses on the two titular characters who spend every day of their summer vacation trying to live life to the fullest. Each day they come up with a seemingly impossible idea, such as building a roller coaster in their backyard or creating a time machine, yet they always have the engineering capabilities needed to achieve said goal. Unbeknownst to them, their older sister Candace spends each day trying to expose their wild antics to their mother, but Candace's attempts always fail.

While the show's premise is simple and even repetitive at times, its characters are where it truly shines. Both Phineas and Ferb showcase positive masculine traits such as creativity, kindness, courageousness, authenticity, and chivalry whenever they're on screen. Due to the traits they embody, Phineas and Ferb are great role models for the children who view the show.

When it comes to creativity, it is clear that Phineas and Ferb both harbor high levels of this characteristic. Whenever they plan an activity for the day, none of the plans they use are ever generic or uninspired. They generate wild and creative ideas and trash anything that seems boring. Instead of going to the beach, they'll decide to build a beach in their backyard. If they get tired of the summer season, they'll create their own season called “S'winter,” a mixture of summer and winter. These ideas are unrealistic and inapplicable

for the average kid, but the general sense of creativity that they display is very inspiring.

Another inspiring trait that the characters display is their kindness. Throughout the show, Phineas and Ferb are constantly being judged and attacked by their older sister, Candace. Despite this, whenever Candace needs help, they will quickly put everything down to help her. While it is possible that the 10-year-old boys are simply naive to her true nature, it is also likely that they are kind and forgiving brothers that don't hold grudges. Not only are they kind to their sister, they are kind to their friends as well. For example, they build a giant climbable tower just to help their friend Baljeet overcome his fear of heights. They also build a giant robot to help their friend Irving overcome his shyness and become more confident. These are just two of the countless instances in which the brothers showcase their kindness.

Phineas and Ferb are as kind as they are courageous. In one episode, Dr. Doofenshmirtz, the show's antagonist and self-proclaimed evil villain, ends up creating an alternate dimension where he takes over the world. Usually, a character known as Agent P deals with Dr. Doofenshmirtz, but in this episode Phineas and Ferb are needed. While most people would decline to help due to the immense amount of pressure involved in this situation, the brothers step up to the challenge. Phineas and Ferb put their lives on the line and end up saving everyone. This is a clear sign of courageousness.

A beautiful quality that both Phineas and Ferb showcase is their authenticity. Throughout the show, they are constantly berated by their sister; yet, they never allow her to change who they are. Also, many times when the brothers are building something, they get questioned by adults and are asked: "Aren't you a little too young to be doing this?" Instead of lying, the brothers are honest and authentic, stating, "Yes, yes we are." This authentic response leads the interaction to end in a positive manner. Finally, Ferb is a character that does not speak much. He is described as a "man of action." There are multiple moments in the show where people expect Ferb to talk, yet he remains silent and allows other people to speak for him. Ferb is a character who is very true to himself, and I believe that his authenticity is very encouraging to the viewers.

Finally, both Phineas and Ferb show their chivalrous nature through how they interact with the female characters in the show. In regards to Phineas, there is a character named Isabella who has a huge crush on him. Some characters would use that infatuation for their own benefit, but Phineas never once takes advantage of Isabella. In regards to Ferb, he has a crush on Dr Doofenshmirtz's daughter, Vanessa. There are many times where Ferb saves her life, and he really wants to be in a relationship with her, but he respectfully lets her go when he finds out that she has a boyfriend. These two characters show their young audience how to treat girls with respect, and that is something that you don't see often on TV.

With that, I hope you can see how impressive *Phineas and Ferb* is in its portrayal of positive masculinity through its two main characters. Phineas and Ferb distinguish themselves amongst other popular animated characters through their positive qualities, such as creativity, kindness, courageousness,

authenticity, and chivalrousness. One can hope that kids learn from these characters and integrate these positive traits into their own lives.

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TRANQUIL RAGE

Patience is something you must earn through misery,
Misery that loses your past,
Misery that haunts your present,
Misery that dooms your future.

But rage...

Rage makes you feel unweighted by patience,
Rage always seems to be the final resolution,
But my journey of misery has allowed me
To bear witness to what my heart now practices:
Tranquil Rage.

ANALYSIS OF CLAUDE MCKAY'S “IF WE MUST DIE”

Written by Jamaican-born writer and poet Claude McKay, “If We Must Die” takes on the structure of a Shakespearean sonnet, bringing to light the violence and oppression of Black individuals in America. Although it is known that McKay sought to defend Black rights and call for retaliation against the many acts of prejudice and abuse, “If We Must Die” is widely believed to transcend the specifics of race. It is valued and held as an inspiration to oppressed people throughout the world. In this message, McKay presents a theme of resilience and nobility as he urges oppressed Black individuals to stand in nobility, even “if we must die.” What becomes clear through the analysis of this work is Claude McKay’s effort to emphasize and inspire his fellow men to honor their lives despite the doom that stands before them.

In the first four lines of the sonnet, McKay urges his fellow men to see the inhuman way that their lives are being taken from them in an effort to inspire feelings of resistance.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot. (1-4)

It is here that McKay preaches that if they must face death, “let it not be like hogs” (1). This comparison, which is brought out through the use of simile, likens the death and lives of the oppressed to hogs. The reader sees that these people have no true value or worth to their oppressors, who, in a figurative parallel, bark as “mad and hungry dogs” who are personified to “mock” the “accursed lot” of hogs. McKay’s use of figurative language allows us to see that the oppressors have no remorse or pity for these individuals, but rather find pleasure and amusement in their demise. The oppressed appear to be domesticated animals, “hunted” as though they had been raised to be killed. Both parties involved in this situation are stripped of their humanity, and,

in instances such as these, McKay wants his people to know that they must take back their power by first realizing that there is a problem with their treatment and finding a solution. By painting such a bold and blunt image of their current struggles, McKay shows his kinsmen their barbaric reality in an effort to provide clarity to the feelings of injustice amongst them. In stirring these emotions, he hopes to invoke anger, refusal to accept this reality, and retaliation.

In the second quatrain of the poem, McKay makes a paradigm shift. Rather than speak of the savage and animalistic ending of their lives, the author offers a more dignified approach to death.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed in vain;
then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead! (5-8)

Through the use of onomatopoeia, McKay draws attention to the importance of nobility in death. He shows dehumanization in a more direct light, suggesting that a noble death will change the dynamics of the current situation. No longer will the oppressed individuals die “in vain,” but the “monsters” who seek to destroy them will honor their lives (7). Although this message seeks to encourage the resistance of the oppressed, it is a troubling argument. If McKay gives the ability to “honor” to his oppressors, then the oppressors ultimately still control the dynamic of the situation (8). The oppressors still get to decide the value of the lives they take. This is exactly the problem the poem is trying to overcome: the oppressor’s role as dictator over the humanity of the oppressed. In these lines, then, the speaker hints at exactly how difficult it is to take power away from oppressive groups despite the bravest resistance or sacrifice. McKay attempts to show his fellow men that fighting and resistance demand recognition and respect from their oppressors. It affords them the opportunity to reclaim their dignity even in death. They refuse to be hunted as dogs, but instead choose to “defy” their oppressors (7).

McKay, in his third quatrain, moves from a less specific place to an exact method of restraint.

O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave? (9-12)

By using short sentences like “O kinsmen,” the author is attempting to draw attention to the importance of his message. He is emphasizing his “kinsmen” need to meet the “common foe” (9). In this quatrain, it is also important to note the aliases that the author has given the oppressors and the oppressed, proposing that all oppressed people have a “common foe” and that they are all “kinsmen.” Despite being considerably outnumbered, the speaker proposes that the oppressed should show courage as they deliver “one death blow” in response to the multiple attacks they receive from their oppressor (11). It is here that the reader truly sees McKay’s message, which is to confront violence with violence. McKay, it seems, does not accept the teachings of pacifist intellectuals and activists, such as Martin Luther King, Henry Thoreau, or Gandhi, who continued to preach that oppressed communities should use non-violent methods of resistance. Instead, the speaker encourages violent resistance even if the price is one’s life.

It should be noted that the speaker does not blatantly offer any alternatives and dismisses the costs of such a strategy. In line 12, the speaker acknowledges that some readers may have doubts about the course of action, or may be unwilling to lay down their lives. The speaker combats this by using *aporia*: instead of arguing or even directly acknowledging these doubts, the speaker simply moves them aside with a rhetorical question: “What though before us lies an open grave?” (12). The phrase, “open grave,” symbolizes the impending doom that the oppressed group will face. The reader can infer that perhaps the author is not entirely comfortable with openly outlining the consequences of such violent resistance, despite his bold and confident tone throughout the poem. Nevertheless, he is encouraging the oppressed to fight back in the face of fear.

In the sonnet’s final couplet, McKay summarizes his argument.

Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (13-14)

McKay says that although they will face the metaphorical “murderous, cowardly pack,” the crucial difference is that they will die “like men” (13). This simile is coupled with the author’s simile from the poem’s

first line. The author offers an ultimatum to his fellow men: to die as men or as hogs brought to slaughter. McKay suggests that they should reclaim their dignity and humanity through aggressive resistance rather than silently suffering, “Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (14). The speaker shows the essential difference between being hunted as hogs in comparison to fighting for their rights and lives until the very end. It is in this stance that the oppressed take back the power to reclaim the value of their lives. Through this resistance, they show the “murderous, cowardly pack” that they are more than hogs raised to be slaughtered, but are human beings, worthy of a dignifying end.

WORKS CITED

McKay, Claude. “If We Must Die.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44694/if-we-must-die>. Accessed 20 April 2022.

SECOND THOUGHT

Dreams wither away
because of a second thought.
Don't give into doubt.

NIGHTMARES

My heart is pounding so hard that if you put your hand on my chest you can feel it come towards you. This rush of adrenaline is going to my veins, making everything I see go red. The thoughts that are being processed in my brain are crossing with others and mixing things together and nothing is becoming the truth anymore. Having to believe everything that was told to me was a lie.

“Look, don’t do anything that you’ll regret. It was meant to happen. Not everything was going the way I wanted and I couldn’t lose you.”

I felt numbness when I looked into his eyes. Every emotion that was once love, admiration, respect, and passion had all gone away.

“What I do with my life is nothing of your concern. You chose to do what you did for your own selfish benefit and didn’t think about what it could do to someone else in the process,” I yelled.

Hell had finally frozen over and every worst nightmare had come true. When I was a little girl, I was very curious as to why nightmares were nightmares. The pain it caused people in their sleep, waking up screaming and yelling at something that wasn’t in front of them or wasn’t real. Falling back to sleep after a nightmare would be the hardest part because then you were just setting yourself up to be messed with again. Every dream looks like a nightmare, dark and shady, not being able to fully see the faces of other people.

If we were living our nightmares, would it have been easier to go to sleep at night? Not having to worry about what was going on in our real life and just dream about getting away? You never thought that the nightmare you were living through when you were awake would bring you so much pain while you were asleep, letting you know that it actually happened and you can’t get over it.

THE TRUTH

I busted my ass to get into Brown University. Speech, debate, rowing, cheerleading. I made the College Board seem juvenile by scoring fives in twelve Advanced Placement classes, seven of them being self-taught. Every weekend I could be found at the marine wildlife sanctuary helping baby sea turtles get a second chance at life. Freshman year I did debate, student government, senate, and hall council; sophomore year I became president of the Student Government Association, joined three honor societies, remained on the hall council, and now, halfway through my prime, after scoring the Harvard forensic science internship of my dreams, I sit before my Anatomy and Physiology professor waiting with boulders flying around my stomach as he marks my midterm exam retake.

My leg bounces without my consent. I'm not a horrible test-taker; I'm actually pretty good at it. My only problem is that once the test is over, all the information leaves my brain. So sitting through an unplanned retake after a long weekend of post-midterms drinking (someone told our professor that they saw me cheating) leaves my chest in knots as I sit in the classroom, too nervous to use my phone, with the ticking clock to keep me company.

Professor Jones flips to the front of the exam, writes down a grade, circles it, and looks up with a sigh. My heart drops as everything I worked for slowly slips away. This is it: they're kicking me out of school. He looks into my eyes, shaking his head as a smile grows on his lips. "I never doubted you for a second, kid."

"Wait, what?" My shoulders straighten, and my leg finally stops.

He lifts the paper and turns it to face me. 100%. Even better than my last grade.

"Oh, thank God!" I exhale, feeling like I ran a marathon with a broken leg. Picking up my bag and tossing it over my shoulder, I approach the desk with newfound confidence.

"Listen, Ajay, in life, not everyone is your friend. You'll be surprised who envies you," Professor Jones says.

He's not allowed to tell me who snitched, but I already know who it was. It's Jake. He wanted that Harvard internship even more than I did. There were only two spots available and we all thought it was a competition between me, him, and my best friend, Lea. She and I are dying to know who snagged the other spot. Probably some sophomore with Daddy's connections.

Professor Jones hands me my exam and we say our goodbyes so I can go back to my room and open the e-mail I received midway through class. It's my acceptance or rejection letter from the Yale forensic internship, also known as my backup plan in case the Harvard one fell through. I really don't care what it says, I already got my top choice, but Lea and I have this tradition of opening acceptance letters together so I have to wait until I get back to the suite.

The air is lighter, fresher even, and the sun covers my body in kisses. It's the first clear day we've had in over two weeks. If we were in a drought before, we aren't anymore. The rain has not only added to my midterm stress, but it took away my only source of escape—sitting at the top of Alumni House while the campus is quiet and the moon is bright. There's a slide connected to the rooftop, a senior week project care of the last graduating class, and the school hasn't gotten around to taking it down yet. They have the slide taped off, and anyone violating the yellow tape is subject to suspension. I've only ever used it once when I came up here devastated over my failed situationship at the beginning of the semester. I don't know what came over me. It was one of those moments when I just needed to step out of my comfort zone and put myself back out there.

Walking into my apartment building, I bump into Jake. And to think, I thought we put the petty competition behind us. I actually started cheering for him at his races this semester. As Professor Jones said, not everyone's your friend.

"How was the retake?" he says with a smug smile, towering over me. His muscles aren't huge, but his biceps make a guest appearance beneath the sleeves of his shirt.

"Perfect, actually. Thanks a lot. You raised my score. Maybe next time choose a more believable lie or try therapy. Jealousy is a disease."

"If you're talking about yourself, don't worry. There's enough of me

to go around,” he winks. “Especially if you give me another show.”

I raise both of my middle fingers, sticking to our routine and taunting him with a laugh. “I’ll give you a show from Harvard, bitch.”

“I’ll give you a show from Harvard,” he mocks me, rolling his eyes as he walks away.

Asshole. What girl in their right mind would date him? Sure, he looks good enough. I guess he’s smart, an athlete, and his dad is filthy rich, but other than those things, what does he offer? Really?

Heading up the elevator, my heart beats in excitement for Lea. After getting denied by our top choice, she needs this internship to pull through. The elevator takes me up to the third floor and as I step out, a notification goes off on my phone.

It’s a threat from an unknown number. “Tell Lea about Sai before Friday’s costume party or I tell Harvard about your show last Halloween.”

“What the fuck?” I say. The green bubble stares back, taunting me. Who has an Android in 2022?

“Are you okay?” asks my neighbor from across the hall, whose name I can never remember.

“Yeah, thanks,” I return with a smile.

Sai is Lea’s ex-boyfriend. She introduced me to him last July but I met him last May at a Cinco de Mayo party. He was her first boyfriend and she was already crazy in love with him when she introduced us. How was I supposed to tell her that I knew him...biblically? If I tell her now, it would do more harm than good. She broke up with him two weeks ago because she thought he was cheating on her. What good would the truth do now?

I push the thought of Sai aside. The thought of his hands traveling my body, his lips touching mine, his deep brown eyes locked on mine as he lays on top of me, promising to be gentle...

“Heard ya!” Lea exclaims as the suite door flies open before I get the chance to turn my key. She laughs at my fright and pulls me into the living room, moving blankets and pillows from last night’s movie night off the couch and onto the floor, so she can sit me down beside her laptop. “Come on, I’m dying to know.”

“That gym has made you violent,” I laugh, slightly sore.

Lea already stands taller than me and is built from playing volleyball since middle school. She’s been in the gym extra-long since the breakup, and it’s paying off.

“Ajay, I swear to God, if you don’t open your laptop in two seconds, I will combust.”

“Dramatic,” I say with a sing-song voice while following her instructions. Together, we open the e-mail from Yale’s Forensics department. The only word I can read in my letter is “Congratulations” before Lea jumps into my arms.

“I got in! I’m interning at Yale, bitch!” she screams. “Thank God,” she lets out a breath.

“Okay, this winter we’ll be two hours away. That’s not bad. We’ll visit on the weekends and we’ll make it work.” It’s the words I told her when we found out that only one of us had gotten the Harvard internship.

“Yeah, sucks to be you, though. Guess who you’ll be working with this winter.”

“Who?”

“Sai. He got the internship, too. He posted it on his story yesterday.”

“I thought he blocked you.”

“He did. I used your account to look.”

“Oh,” is the only sound I manage to get out.

“It’s a good thing we have no secrets. It’s what keeps us close.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth.” I shift in my seat. “Are you coming with me to the cafe?”

“Hell, no. My waist beads said ‘You’re pushing it, bitch’ when I ate a sandwich a half-hour ago,” she laughs.

I can’t relate to this. My waist beads are on the verge of falling off. I barely ate last week and I’ve been in a state of hunger ever since. Even my anklet, the one that matches Lea’s, feels too big while latched on the tightest hole.

Lea disappears in the bathroom while I head to my room. A moment later, I get another message. This one’s a video of me dancing topless

on a table in a Red Ridinghood Costume.

Shit. Why can't this video just die? That entire night was a blur. One moment Lea's handing me shot after shot after shot and the next my chest is cold and I'm throwing up in the host's bathroom. The next morning this video existed. I asked Lea what the heck happened that night but she said she lost me midway through the party, and when she found me, it was too late. My senses betrayed me that night, and memories of the night come in vague waves. I could have sworn I asked Lea to help me tighten my costume top, but I must be imagining things because she swore that didn't happen, and she was less drunk than me.

Sure, that night it was our mission to help me get over my cheating ex, John, but getting *that* fucked up was not in the plan. Both Lea and I had a crush on him at one point. It's a good thing I'm the one that ended up with him. Lea would've died instantly had the roles been reversed and the video of her had circulated.

A text comes through: "The party's tomorrow night. You have twenty-six hours. The clock is ticking, slut."

Hopefully, Sai isn't at the party tomorrow like he was last week. It was another night of less-than-stellar decisions. When I got to the post-midterms party, Jake shook his head and said, "You look like a slut."

"That's the point, Jake. Some of us have an actual personality outside of school. You should try it sometime." I accepted the sip of his drink that he offered me.

We bickered back and forth like we'd done hundreds of times before. Getting tired, and slightly buzzed from the pouch I had drank on my way there, I left him arguing with himself and found my way to the makeshift dance floor of the alumni house. I was dancing with a group of girls I vaguely remembered from class when someone slipped behind me, put their hands on my waist, and spoke into my ear.

"Are you stalking me?"

I spun around, disoriented, to see a tall, dark-skinned guy with dimples and deep brown eyes. It was Sai. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to talk to someone?" he laughed. "Where's your friend?"

"Lea's home. Bad cramps."

“Is that code for something?”

“Someone’s still upset.” I pointed out the obvious.

“Actually,” and he pushed my braids behind my ear and lifted my chin up so our eyes met. “I’m over Lea. I came to see you. You’ve been avoiding my messages.”

“No answer is an answer, Sai.”

He had been texting me since the second they broke up, trying to get me to go on a date with him. “It’ll never happen,” I explained. I told him from the jump that the last thing I wanted was a relationship. He pretended to be heartbroken, but before I could blink, he was confessing his undying love for Lea, someone who actually wanted a relationship. I don’t know what changed since then. Their breakup has nothing to do with me; I just want to wash my hands of everything entirely.

“Don’t you miss what we could have had?”

“No,” I lied.

“You were the best I’ve ever had.”

“I realize that,” I laughed. When we were done having sex for the first time, he pretended to propose. “But, like I said. It’s Never. Gonna. Happen.”

It happened. Twice that night, actually. And I’ve felt like shit ever since.

“Come on, just one sip.”

Lea hands me her cup, already stumbling after half a drink. I may be somewhat of a lightweight, but Lea is worse.

“I can’t,” I whisper, instinctively covering my chest even though I’ve incorporated a black turtleneck into my costume. “You remember what happened last year.”

I’ve been a nervous wreck all freaking day. Not only is this the same party where I performed topless last year, but I’ve been getting vague reminders on my ultimatums countdown all freaking day. Lea ignored me for a week after I said yes to being John’s girlfriend. If she found out about Sai, she’d never forgive me. I’d call the texter’s bluff but

if Jake lied on me to Professor Jones, he'll have no problem e-mailing that stupid video to Harvard.

"Oh, right," she nods. "Maybe it's for the best."

Being at the party sober is painful. How do people do this all semester? I dance around with Lea all night, following her bursts of energy as she says hello to everybody she sees until I can't take it anymore. I need a drink. I make my way over to the kitchen and take a shot of the first clear liquid I see. I need to play catch up.

Three shots. Not mixers. My throat burns and my eyes begin to water. I try to find Lea on the dance floor but I can't. The only thing I can focus on is how hot I am. I need some air. I escape to the rooftop and sit on the edge. The house vibrates underneath me as the cold of the night nips at my fingertips. I'm beginning to regret pairing this turtle-neck with such a short skirt. Next time I'll opt out of a slutty Elizabeth Holmes costume for a more conservative version. My phone goes off with a notification: "Time's up, bitch."

A foot pushes my back, sending my phone falling three stories down and almost sending me along with it. I turn around to see someone in all black and a *Scream* mask lunging at me with a knife. It grazes my thigh as I move out of the way. I run toward the exit door to take me back to the party. It's jammed.

"Jake, I swear to God, I'll kill you." I turn around to face the masked person walking toward me.

Surprisingly, the person with the knife is unfazed by my threat. He brings his arm back and drives it forward with a purpose. I manage to dodge it, pushing him back before he can bring his arm back again. He stumbles slightly before trying a third time. I kick his arm, sending the knife across the rooftop near the slide. If there was any alcohol in my system right now, it's gone. The fog is gone and there's only one thing on my mind: staying alive.

I run for the knife, ready to take my dominance. He lunges at me, sending my head to the floor. Wind echoes throughout my brain as he tries to go for the knife, but I stop him. We toss and turn, each one taking dominance for a moment before the other steals it. I'm on top, stuck in a state between driving my fists into his mask and trying to pry it off. I can't see a thing, but I know I'm doing damage.

“Give me a break!” I yell as he gets on top. He picks up a rock and forces it into my eyebrow, before heading toward the ledge for the knife. With blood blocking half my vision, I rush over to him while he’s bending down and push him over the edge.

I look, half expecting him to be gone, expecting this to all be a dream. But there he lays, his mask tilted to the side and his foot bent at an unnatural angle. I go down the slide, and meet him on the ground, bending over to unmask Jake.

A brown, heart-shaped face with closed eyes and a bloody nose looks back at me. It’s Lea. The howling wind stills as I stand frozen in space. I cannot think of a single thought because the pieces start coming together and I stumble back, feeling my world tilt off its axis beneath my feet. Her being upset about John last year, passing me repeated shots, the memory of her fixing my top, someone recording that video—it was all her. She’d kill for that Harvard internship and she’d kill to have Sai. She must’ve read his texts or found out about us hooking up. The texting, the blackmail, trying to push me off the roof. Was it all for love? Was it for a dumb internship? I don’t know. Maybe that’s why she did it. I guess everyone has a breaking point.

CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION?

Why does this world make you
wander and wonder without answers?
I am lost.
My mind is clouded with judgments. Why this? Why not this?
I have so many questions,
And I am still waiting for answers.
I am imagining things, unfulfilling things.
I heard them say: YOU CAN FLY!
Yet it's all a lie; you just need to work hard.
Why are there so many lies about how we should live life?
I get it.
Life is not all that, but we make things too hard.
We take things too literally; it should not be so serious.
Why make me think that I can fly
When I don't have wings to fly?
Are we birds now?
Because even if I fly, there will always be someone
Who will want to bring me down.
How can we live life?
Sometimes I feel like I'm just asleep,
That someday I'm going to wake up from this dream.
Thus, am I even living?
Or am I just sleepwalking?
I can see, but I'm not seeing things like how they should be.
I want to create change,
But I'm afraid of how that'll be.
Why should I be frightened by my own change?
It's because it breaks me.
I am broken by so many changes.
Is it not benefiting me?
We make a tiny change to only benefit us now,
But what about this NOW?
What about us NOW?

Struggling to breathe through every change that can't ever be changed,
Living through our parents' grief.
What is change when you can't do anything?
When you are limited within and abandoned by change.
Where does that leave me?
Because now I'm an ordinary thing,
Since you can't be bold and transparent with me.
You lavish me with your boasting and fame,
And I am left with nothing when you have used me and have everything.
Who even created all these things?
First, you tell me I can do anything.
Now you're saying I can't be anything.
What about the other child that is listening?
Won't they compromise themselves just to be something?
Why isn't the world listening?
Yet we carry on evil deeds,
Work hard for things.
Things will change.
Why am I the only one who is frightened and fighting for change?
Why lie to me when you can be transparent with me?
Why make me seek things that are not comfortable in my skin?
Why should I be the only one working ten times hard to change things?
Should I change the color of my skin for you to be true to me?
Or for permission to be who I am?
Why can't I live without being something other than me?
Why should I always be the one compromising things and changing?

I WHO

I was born not to speak of what I think.
I was vocally drained, silent, with my tongue put on hold.
I had no voice,
And my mother was the same.
She had no voice.
I do not think any woman had any voice, because it did not matter.
I who was put to shame for being me,
I who am discriminated against for saying something,
Hoping for things that are far out of reach.
I who never had my way,
I who work till my last days and wander without a place,
I who was taught only silence, quiet, and to follow what men say,
I who am ashamed for wanting what I can't feel,
What I can't breathe or even think.
I who am afraid to share my own feelings.
Therefore, I seek them in other things.
Sometimes, I do not know how to express myself.
My mother, too, does not know how to express herself.
Perhaps she might think I can't hear her, either.
Her language may be from a different race;
Thus, I can't understand the other woman,
Would stop her from saying anything.
I who am put to silence,
My mind crowded with affluent thoughts.
Sometimes I wish I could bust out a speech
That would make me feel a little relief.
I urge to grow tall hands, legs, and head,
So I can hear only the trees' breeze.
Maybe my silence wouldn't matter,
Since they would be the only ones hearing me.
I who have a heart that no one sees,
I who people think they know,
I who always see things, but can't speak a thing,

I who am listening, yet no one wants to hear me.
I who the world has abandoned, yet I am still fighting.
I who am equally yoked to you, yet I am the one you stand against.
I who have the mind of an army, yet you battle me.
But when I release, you will fear me.

— *Grace Quiah*

WHERE IS HOME?

Home,
A hundred-thousand miles from here.
Home,
A faraway place.
A destined nation? Nobody knows.
Home.
I don't like my home;
I cry for home.
—I wonder, I wander, I stop.
I did not find my home.
My home was somewhere else
—I can't reach.
Home
—was my heart
Home
—was in my heart.
I could not reach home,
But I searched in my heart
And I felt at home.

—*Grace Quiah*

ARAWAK CAY

Locals, tourists, the young and old,
There's no discrimination when having fun.
Thursdays through Sundays, we eat, laugh, and drink.
There's something here for everyone.

Sun, sea, and playing cards:
It's a poor gambler's dream come true.
Locals may be banned from the casinos,
But with fritters and beers, Bahamians make do.

It's a mini-tropical city
Where the rules don't apply.
No ID needed; just hand Special
Two dollars and he'll give you shots all night.

Enjoy the home-cooked meals from Oh Andros
And daiquiris from Twin Brothers.
Everything here is low vibrational.
Big Mama's peas and rice would make you shudder.

It's a paradise, it is,
An escapist fantasy.
Come as you are. Wear your work clothes.
Who cares if your boss sees?

It's a laidback type of vibe,
A true island way of life.
Win a game, lose a game—
Just remember to enjoy rolling the dice.

PROFILES

Student Small Business Owners

In addition to taking classes and participating in clubs and organizations, a growing number of Lincoln students are running their own small businesses. Rather than waiting until after graduation to start their careers, these campus creatives are getting a jump-start on their professional lives, offering a wide range of products and services to the Lincoln community. Staff members reached out to some of the school's small business owners and asked them about their unique talents, artistic inspiration, and plans for the future.



Nafisah Abdul Raashid-Mays

Age: 21

Hometown: Philadelphia, PA

Classification: Junior

Major: Music Performance

Small Business: Mujah Beauty

Contact: muhjah22@gmail.com

Established in 2019, Mujah Beauty provides unique make-up looks for proms, weddings, date nights, birthday parties, baby showers, and more. As a young girl, Nafisah would play around with her mother's make-up, experimenting with different products and application techniques. Since then, she has launched her own lip gloss line, worked on several fashion shows, and rendered services for a wedding. Nafisah has collaborated with Lincoln's Ziana Fashion Club, and believes that the school creates a supportive atmosphere for entrepreneurs like herself. Known for her precise eyebrows and expert loc maintenance, Nafisah hopes to land a full-time job as a celebrity make-up artist while expanding Mujah Beauty's reach to cities like New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Atlanta.



Kaiden Groves

Age: 22

Hometown:

Queens, NY

Classification:

Senior

Major: Mass

Communications

Small Business: MY EYES VISUALS



Kaiden provides photography and videography services for models, athletes, and businesses, and likes to approach his subjects in a slightly unorthodox way. He started MY EYES VISUALS in 2022, and has primarily done portrait and event work. He belongs to the staff of *The Lincolnian*, our campus newspaper, for which he photographs sports events. Envisioning the future, he wants to direct music videos, especially his own, since he's also a recording artist. Someday he hopes to open his own studio where he can act as creative director.



Ayana Holt

Age: 23

Classification: Alumna

Small Business:

La'Don Prodiges

Social Media:

@atq_____



Ayana specializes in hand-painted and reconstructed clothing, as well as custom, 1-of-1 pieces that she makes available through her Instagram page. She started La'Don Prodiges during her freshman year at Lincoln, after she customized a pair of sneakers for a fellow student. Her creative process doesn't involve much planning; Ayana prefers to freestyle her pieces, seeking inspiration from American fashion designer Mike Amiri. Her HBCU-oriented designs



have drawn the attention of actress Aisha Hinds and celebrity stylist Devon Milan. In the future, she wants to participate in an HBCU tour/showcase and eventually open up a shop where she can sell her clothing, art, and home décor.



Zoey Tate

Age: 21

Hometown: Baltimore, MD

Classification: Junior

Major: Health Science

Small Business: Zainted by Zoey

Contact: zoeytate06@gmail.com

Website: www.zainted.as.me/

Established in 2019, Zainted by Zoey provides make-up services for birthdays, weddings, and photo shoots. Zoey works in different styles, such as natural, bold, and glam, and prides herself on making the face look “snatched and glowy.”

Inspiration for her company came from the comments she would receive on her own make-up. She truly enjoys making women feel beautiful, and has benefited greatly from Lincoln’s talent showcases and interactive workshops. Her goal for the future is to open her own make-up suite and turn Zainted by Zoe into an LLC with international appeal.



11:59 P.M.

POV: You're a horrible procrastinator and the assignment is due at 11:59 p.m. It's 10:40 pm and you've finally gotten the motivation to start. You spend 30 minutes sitting with the screen open, and watch as the black insert cursor blinks. You continue to draw cards with blank ideas and absolutely zero knowledge of how to start. You are not ignorant of this problem. You're fully aware of this disease, and you keep telling yourself, *"Tomorrow, I will be better tomorrow. I will reverse this disease, and I will finish on top."*

However, every morning at 7:35 a.m., you wake up in cold sweats to the sound of your alarm going off. Before you can throw the blankets off, you're already telling yourself, *"It's too cold, too early. I can always start tomorrow."* You stayed up late last night to send that final text, play that final round, or get "lit" a little longer, because one more hour, one more ounce, one more lap won't hurt. Now your eyelids protest to open, and your limbs lie idle to your commands; the only deed your body will allow is molding your arms to the three-inch thickness of the cotton comforter. Therefore, synchronously, your mind is flooded with an assembly of reasons for why extending your sleep by eight minutes wouldn't hurt.

You will have to ask yourself, *"When will I stop taking the path with the least resistance? I'm repetitively finding myself in these situations, where day after day I'm confronted with a new conflict and issue."* The second you are attentive to the moment, you aren't anymore, and you are faced with thousands to millions of disarranged trails, each with a brief description of what's ahead, guaranteeing comfortable, undemanding challenges. This description makes zero promises and no guarantees. It won't be easy, and during the process there's a high probability you won't be pleased. Nevertheless, imagine for one second you turn your back on what's comfortable, what your peers and society tell you is okay, and you see a mountain so high, you couldn't see the top with a telescope.

However, at the top of this mountain, the rewards are so outstanding and incomparable that you decide to climb. But that's only the first step. The higher you get, the more complex and treacherous the journey; things that seemed possible before, that seemed reachable, attainable, start moving two times as fast, and you can't keep up. They say your mind gives up before your body does. But when your body is clawing away at the skin from the inside, aggressively telling you it's over, it's easy to say the brain can be persuaded. And the trails you left behind sound okay; after all, the easy way out will always be there.

To summarize, you don't need more time; you need more focus.

SIMPLE IMPERFECTIONS

The mirror chuckles as eyes begin to watch—
My eyes, that is.
I watch as every piece unravels,
Causing me to be truly blinded.
Simply I cry,
Fighting the insecurities that I face,
Trying to stop the urge to accept defeat.
This is the mirror of which I speak,
The mirror that is full of lies.

CONSEQUENCES

You sow what you reap and reap what you sow.
Although the past is ever-present and the future approaches slow,
The divine forces of the mind will enable you to grow
Into things and experiences you have yet to know.
The present is a moment long-forgotten and fleeting,
But the here and now is what you should be meeting.
For each and every action, the reward is there awaiting,
Whether it be good or bad, the outcome you are creating.
It is a fact of life that whatever you do matters:
Your actions can bring about joy or result in disasters.