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WINNERS

2025 POET LAUREATE CONTEST

First Place ++ Zion Spotwood, "From the Pavement to the Stars"

Second Place ++ Raniyah Lawrence-Ashford, "Choosing Me"

Third Place ++ Kairi Webster, "I Came, I Saw, I Conquered"

10TH ANNUAL GUY A. SIMS SHORT FICTION COMPETITION

First Place == Chinyere Offor, "What About Me?"

Second Place == Talia Simpson, "XX, Elias"

Third Place == Joan Ojukwu, "We Were Born in Hell"

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FROM THE PAVEMENT TO THE STARS

West Philly nights, sirens wail like wounded dreams,
Broken streetlights flicker—half hope, half memory.
I was born in the shadows of struggle and steel
To a mother barely grown, yet carrying the weight of two lives.
Eighteen-years-old, a child with a child.
Her love was fierce, but the world was cruel.
Bars behind bars, she faded in and out like static.
Letters unread, calls unanswered, time stretched between us.

A father? No, just a ghost in my story—
A name without a face, a silence that spoke too loud.
He never cared, never reached, never stayed.
A man who taught me lessons through absence,
Who showed me what love shouldn't look like.
Now we walk separate roads.
No words left between us—just distance, just silence.

Pain was my first teacher, and struggle my second.
I studied hard in the school of survival.
Each brick of West Philadelphia's cracked pavement,
A lesson in resilience, in standing tall when the world tries to break you.
No silver spoon, only rusted dreams;
No soft landings, only concrete truths.
But I learned that hunger builds warriors,
And darkness sharpens vision.

Hard work became my gospel.
Every sweat-drenched hour, every restless night,
Laying bricks of my own foundation,
Carving a path where none existed.
I chose a rich mindset over a poor inheritance.
I saw gold in books, saw wealth in wisdom,
And learned that a legacy isn't what you're given;
It's what you build with bare hands and raw will.

Music carried me through when silence was heavy;
Beats became my heartbeat, lyrics my escape.
The rhythm of ambition drowned out the echoes of absence,
And in melodies I found my own voice.
Not just surviving, but thriving.
Not just enduring, but becoming.

No chains can hold me—not of blood, not of past,
Because strength is more than muscle;
It's standing unshaken in the face of storms;
It's choosing to rise when the world tells you to stay down.
So here I stand, no longer bound,
Not by history, not by pain, not by doubt.
From the pavement to the stars,
I write my own name in the sky.

I AM FROM

I am from cocoa shea butter,
Price Right and Sharp Shoppers.
I am from the quiet streets.
I am from the sun flower, the sun-kissed.
I am from beach trips and comedians,
From Michelle and Monea and Bradley.
I am from the observe first and ask questions later.
I am from respect your elders and elbows off the table.
I am from old church hymns.
I am from “stay in front of the house,”
Black Foot Indian, cornbread, and collard greens.
I am from “Do these white people know how to cook?”
From Red Lobster and the oldest sister’s birthday.
I am from the Boston brick air smacking my face.
One night we had went up to Boston,
And we took a group picture
In our coats at a bowling alley.
I am from everywhere.

LINCOLN

Let me leap into the large steps of Larry Neal
and look

Into the lofty legacy of Lincoln's lasting might.

Now,

Nurture me with the noble nourishment of knowledge, and

Calm me with the chords of Cab Calloway in Lincoln hallways.

On the wings of these paragons of progressive power,

Let me soar and

Listen to the whispers of wisdom in the Langston Hughes Memorial Library.

Now I stand like Kwame Nkrumah,

a towering, tenacious treasure of transformation,

shattering the shackles of inequality—

for I am a Lincoln Lion.

LOVE OR LUST

Once there was love
That needed no proof

Words were an axe,
That needed no wood.
Stares were arrows,
That needed no quiver
There was no rush—
No touch to hatch love.

When did it change?
To a bed-made challenge
A precipitate test?
A signature of love to append,
Attending to the lust that lasts not.
Only a friend after bed?
What an evil knot!

Because of Love,
Must flags be lowered?
Without a twitch of shame.
A cord of love to annex
Who said must be sex?

Bed-made-love
End-mode-love

Gone are the days
But all is not gone

I will not sin
To trust the unseen

—*Tonny Itabari*

THE SOUND OF HARLEM

The very first time I set foot into the Savoy Ballroom, I could feel the pulse of the music vibratin' through my chest. The liveliness of Chick Webb's band drew the largest crowds of music enthusiasts, dancers, and escapists who came to forget the harshness of the outside world—where Black and White individuals were just people in a room drinkin' and jivin' together. Harlem, with its hum of energy, wrapped itself around me like a blanket, every corner alive with possibility.

I'd dreamed of singin' here for as long as I could remember—dreamed of the stage bathed in soft light, the crowd swaying to the sound of my voice. I was only twenty, but I felt older when I sang.

"Ma baby's got an old soul."

I heard my mother's voice echoin' in my ears. The ache in my soul came through in every note, every whisper of my voice. I wasn't just singin' songs; I was tellin' stories, givin' pieces of myself. Just like Bille would do. Ella, too.

One night, after the band played a brassy number and the room fell silent, I took the mic in the corner. My heart pounded as I sang an original—"Summer-time"—just like I'd rehearsed it a thousand times in my bedroom mirror. The room was smoky, full of the sweet scent of gin. My voice wrapped itself around the melody and held it tight. I could see the dancers—shufflin', twistin', movin', lost in the rhythm.

And then I saw him. He was standing by the bar, a tall man with smooth, dark skin, his eyes fixed on me. He was listening like no one else, like my voice was all he needed to hear. I kept singing, but there was a spark in me, like I was singing just for him. His eyes never left mine.

When I finished, there was a long pause, and then the room erupted in applause, but it was his eyes that stayed with me. He walked up to me slowly, the way you approach something fragile but precious, and said, "Your voice...it's like you were singing just for me."

And maybe, just for that moment, I was.

PEACE

The ears of peace are open,
The arms of peace embrace,
The head of peace leans forward,
The lips of peace don't haste.

The words of peace are soothing,
The tone of peace is true,
The trend of peace is uplifting,
Its path is hard to subdue.

The song of peace is calming,
The voice of peace is light,
The glow of peace is shiny,
The stars are not as bright.

The cry for peace is blaring,
Its message pierces the soul,
The gift of peace is life,
Peace will make you whole.

When anxiety starts to fill you,
And the enemy's about to win,
Keep peace down in your heart,
And your mind will cease to spin.

The lack of peace surrounds us,
This world is oh so flawed,
But the crown of peace is truth,
And the Prince of peace is God.

The width of peace is unbounded,
So vast it cannot fall,
Hold peace in your heart, and love in your soul,
Peace shall conquer all.

I CAME, I SAW, I CONQUERED

I came because I knew what I could conquer,
Not by what I had seen,
But by facing the fears that once held me captive,
Bound by the weight of others' expectations.

My hands still tremble,
But even when doubt tries to swallow me whole,
I won't let them see my vulnerability,
Not to the unknown,
Not to the forces that seek to break me.

The walls that try to cage me—
Not from insecurity,
But from the confines others built around me,
Telling me I wasn't enough,
That I was too much for them to bear.

The lies whispered that I wasn't worth fighting for,
Echoing inside, making me feel small,
But I refuse to be swallowed by them.
I stand on the precipice, undaunted and unfazed,
By those who wish to see my light extinguished.

I conquered those fears.
The fears from the shadows of my past,
The fears of the unknown that once held me back.
I faced them all and walked through fire,
Not untouched, but resilient.

The ghosts of my past may whisper,
But they will not cloud my future.
The doubts that gnaw at my every step
Cannot shackle me.
I refuse to be imprisoned by the fear of what I can't control.

I conquered not because I was unbroken,
But because I chose not to remain shattered.
Not because I never stumbled,
But because each time I fell,
I gathered the strength to rise again.

LABEL

A name label would suffice,
simple, just one word to carry me—
but no, you give me a dozen,
none of them fit.

“Crashout”

You call me this,
But do you know why?
Is it because you don't understand
how my feelings are dismissed,
how I keep pushing,
only to crash against walls
of silence and misunderstanding?

“Crazy”

Why am I crazy?
Is it because my emotions don't fit in your neat boxes?
Is it because you can't handle the weight of what I feel—
the depth, the confusion,
the hurt that you can't see?

“Gay”

You think you know my truth,
but you don't.
I know my masculine energy
fights with my feminine,
but that doesn't make me what you want me to be.
I haven't walked that path yet—
Why do you need to label me before I know?

“Bisexual”

You call me this,
but how can I know
if I can't stand either side?
I'm not sure what love feels like,
not sure who or what I'm supposed to want,
so why do you insist on labeling
a part of me I haven't figured out yet?

Stop trying to put me in your boxes,
stop labeling me for the comfort of your own understanding.
It's not your business to know what fits,
to tell me who I am before I'm ready to say it.
Every one of your labels leaves a mark,
weighs heavy on my heart,
because I don't even know how to label myself.

I can't keep up with your definitions.
All I have is the name my mother gave me—
the one I wear,
the one that is mine
until I find the words
to wear something else.

—*Kairi Webster*

RE-WHITING AMERICA

In October 2021, the Alabama State Board of Education passed a resolution banning schools from teaching “concepts that impute fault, blame, a tendency to oppress others or the need to feel guilt or anguish to persons solely because of their race or sex.” This resolution reflects a broader national effort to sanitize American history by avoiding discussions of systemic racism and oppression. Historical narratives in the United States have always been contested, with one of the most prominent examples being the Lost Cause myth. This myth romanticizes the Confederacy and reframes the Civil War as a noble struggle rather than a fight to preserve slavery, effectively downplaying the horrific realities of racial oppression. A modern parallel to this historical revisionism can be seen in the backlash against Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT argues that systemic racism is embedded in American institutions—from education and housing to employment and healthcare—shaping social and economic inequalities. Rather than acknowledging this reality, opponents of CRT claim that such discussions are divisive and anti-American. This debate reflects a larger cultural and political struggle over how history is taught and remembered. Many Americans, particularly those aligned with white Christian nationalism, are actively attempting to “re-white” history by erasing the realities of colonialism and systemic racism. CRT provides an essential framework for understanding and resisting this revisionist effort, ensuring that history is not rewritten to serve a narrow ideological agenda.

Throughout American history, there has been a persistent effort to white-wash certain aspects of the past that might cast white people in an unfavorable light. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the Lost Cause narrative, which attempts to reframe the Civil War as a struggle over states’ rights rather than a conflict fought to maintain slavery. This myth has been perpetuated through textbooks, monuments, and school curricula, shaping generations of Americans’ understanding of history. In recent years, a new example of historical revisionism emerged when a 15-year-old Texas high school student noticed a glaring inaccuracy in a McGraw-Hill history textbook. In a section titled, “Patterns of Immigration,” the book states that the Atlantic slave trade brought “millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.” The phrasing deliberately downplays the brutality

of slavery, falsely equating enslaved people with voluntary laborers. The fact that this textbook went through multiple levels of review—being written, edited, published, and distributed to schools—demonstrates a broader, intentional effort to reframe history in a way that minimizes white culpability in racial oppression. This is not an isolated incident but part of a larger pattern of distorting historical truths to promote a white-centric perspective.

One of the most direct challenges to this whitewashing of history is *The 1619 Project*, a 2019 book and journalistic series by Nikole Hannah-Jones. *The 1619 Project* argues that America’s true founding occurred in 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in the colonies. This challenges the traditional narrative that America was founded in 1776, asserting that slavery—and the racial hierarchies it established—were central to the nation’s development from its inception. While the project was widely praised for its groundbreaking perspective, it also faced significant backlash from historians and conservative politicians. The American Historical Association critiqued some of its claims, arguing that it overstated the role of slavery in shaping the nation’s founding. However, the most aggressive opposition came from Republican lawmakers, particularly Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton, who introduced the “Saving American History Act,” a bill aimed at preventing federal funds from being used to teach *The 1619 Project* in schools. The backlash did not stop there: in his first term, President Donald Trump responded by establishing the 1776 Commission, a group dedicated to promoting what he called “patriotic education.” Trump described CRT, *The 1619 Project*, and similar initiatives as “toxic propaganda” that threaten to “dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together.” The creation of the 1776 Commission was a direct attempt to counteract efforts to address historical racism, reinforcing a sanitized version of history that omits the lasting impacts of slavery and systemic discrimination.

Republicans argue that CRT is a radical movement designed to dismantle capitalism, tradition, and constitutional principles. They also claim that poverty, rather than systemic racism, is the root cause of disparities in family structure, educational attainment, and workforce participation. However, these arguments misrepresent CRT’s actual purpose. CRT is not an attempt to overthrow capitalism or rewrite the Constitution; rather, it is a scholarly framework used to examine how racial disparities persist in American institutions. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, argues that CRT divides Americans by rejecting “colorblind” legal principles and categorizing individuals based on race. However, this perspective ignores how historical injustices—such as segre-

gation, redlining, and discriminatory hiring practices—have created long-term barriers for Black Americans and other marginalized communities. The claim that poverty alone explains racial disparities overlooks the structural inequalities that have shaped economic opportunities for generations. Policies like Jim Crow laws, exclusion from the GI Bill, and redlining prevented Black families from accumulating wealth at the same rate as white families, leading to intergenerational economic disadvantages. By attributing racial disparities solely to individual choices or cultural factors, critics of CRT ignore the systemic forces that continue to perpetuate inequality. CRT does not seek to divide Americans but rather to expose and address these longstanding injustices.

The current push to erase discussions of systemic racism from American education is part of a broader effort to reframe history in a way that benefits those in power. Legislation banning CRT, attacks on *The 1619 Project*, and misleading portrayals of slavery in textbooks all point to a deliberate attempt to control historical narratives. As the political climate shifts, particularly with figures like President Donald Trump advocating for the rollback of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, it is more important than ever to ensure that history is taught accurately. Education is a powerful tool in the fight against historical revisionism, and silencing conversations about race and inequality only serves to maintain the status quo. If history continues to be rewritten to serve a narrow ideological agenda, the nation will fail to address the injustices that persist today. To resist this effort, students, educators, and activists must continue to challenge these distortions and advocate for a truthful, inclusive understanding of America's past. Only by confronting history honestly can we work toward a more just and equitable future.

BLACK BOY'S ROOTS

In a world of colors, a boy once stood,
A black boy searching for his roots, his blood.
From the streets of home to lands afar,
He ventured forth, beneath the guiding star.

Through dusty tomes and ancient tales untold,
He traced his lineage, his story to unfold.
From the shores on the west to the east embrace,
He found his ancestors, their spirits filled with grace.

In tribal rhythms and ancestral chants,
He heard the echoes of his heritage's dance.
Their wisdom whispered through the winds of time,
A tapestry of stories, oh so sublime.

He saw the strength within his ancestors' eyes,
Their resilience mirrored in the starlit skies.
They fought for freedom, for their rightful place,
Their spirit unyielding, their pride in every embrace.

From the pyramids of Giza to Timbuktu's golden sands,
He learned of empires, civilizations grand.
Kings and queens, warriors bold and brave,
Their legacies forever intertwined with his fate.

The boy's heart swelled with pride and newfound might,
His roots now firmly planted in the light.
Africa, his motherland, a beacon of embrace,
He knew his journey had found its sacred place.

So let him stand, this black boy strong and true,
His heritage a melody, his roots forever new.
For in his veins, the blood of kings does flow,
A testament to his past, his present aglow.

PARKER SISTERS' FIGHT FOR LIBERATION

Although the liberated African sisters Elizabeth Parker and Rachel Parker shared the same last name as the African warrior William Parker, they were not related to him. However, sharing the same name created an association, especially for anti-Africans in Maryland angry about the Christiana Resistance and death of Edward Gorsuch. On December 30, 1851, Rachel Parker, who was 17 and lived and worked as a domestic in the household of European American Joseph C. Miller in West Nottingham, Chester County, was abducted by the infamous European-American kidnapper Thomas McCreary (Kashatus, 2002). Two weeks prior to Rachel Parker's kidnapping, her ten-year-old sister, Elizabeth Parker, who resided in the home of European-American Mathew Donnelly in East Nottingham, Chester County, had also been kidnapped by Thomas McCreary (Kashatus, 2002). European-American Reverend John Miller Dickey, founder of Ashmun Institute that would later be renamed Lincoln University, was instrumental in raising funds for Elizabeth Parker and Rachel Parker to be released, even though Dickey was not an abolitionist but rather a believer in colonization who supported the American Colonization Society, a racist organization. The kidnappings of the Parker sisters, as well as his support of the American Colonization Society, are some of the reasons for why Dickey founded Ashmun Institute, the first degree-granting Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the United States of America, located in Chester County. Like the Christiana Resistance, the kidnappings of the Parker sisters became a national news story. A little over a year after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Christiana Resistance and the kidnappings of Elizabeth Parker and Rachel Parker brought a greater sense of urgency to Africans in Chester County and the surrounding area.

Elizabeth Parker and Rachel Parker were the offspring of Edward "Ned" Parker and Rebecca "Beck" or "Little Beck" Parker (Maddox, 2016, p. 46). Rachel Parker was born in West Nottingham in 1834, and Elizabeth Parker was also born in West Nottingham in 1841. In addition, the Parker sisters had a sibling named James Parker and possibly three other siblings when their mother lived with an African man named George Glasgow (alternate spelling Glasco) after Edward Parker and Rebecca Parker's marriage ended; however, historical records do not confirm the exact number of siblings besides James

Parker. Residents of the area during the mid-nineteenth century believed George Glasgow and Rebecca Parker had at least two children, with the possibility of four (Maddox, 2016). According to Marianne H. Russo and Paul A. Russo's *Hinsonville, A Community at the Crossroads: The Story of a Nineteenth-Century African-American Village*, George Glasgow was accused of bigamy by his wife, Nancy Glasgow, when he and Rebecca Parker began dating. It's possible George Glasgow was also the brother of Samuel Glasgow from the African community called Hinsonville, located in Upper Oxford, Chester County (modern-day Lincoln University), but records are not able to confirm it. However, there is strong evidence that indicates they were related, because Nancy Glasgow's daughter, Sylvia Glasgow, sailed with Samuel Glasgow and other Africans to Liberia in 1859 (Russo, 2005). But according to Ella Forbes's *But We Have No Country: The 1851 Christiana, Pennsylvania Resistance* (1998), Rebecca Parker's family was related to the Glasgows in Hinsonville (Forbes, 1998).

Similar to her mother, Elizabeth Parker was living with and working for European Americans at around the age of four, while Rachel Parker began doing the same around the age of ten. Both sisters began work around the time their parents' marriage came to an end, and most likely they began to work because Rebecca Parker could not support them on her own. In late November 1851, Elizabeth and Rebecca Parker had a disagreement that resulted in them not being on speaking terms until the former's kidnapping trial over a year later. Shortly after Elizabeth Parker's disagreement with her mother, she began to work at the home of Matthew Donnelly, where she was kidnapped. It was never proven that Matthew Donnelly participated in the kidnapping of Elizabeth Parker, but the Africans in Hinsonville believed that he did participate and received assistance from an African who lived in Hinsonville, rumored to also be a kidnapper (Maddox, 2016). The African is referred to as "Farmer X" in Pauli Murray's *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1999) (Murray, 1999, p. 98). Farmer X is believed to have been George Walls, although there is currently no evidence to prove its truth. However, some of his descendants believe it to be true, because it is unknown how he accumulated enough wealth to invest a substantial amount of stock in a Chester County bank and will each one of his children a home after his death (Forbes, 1998). It is possible William Parker also referenced George Walls in his narrative of the Christiana Resistance. Although William Parker never named George Walls as the culprit, Ella Forbes believes it is possible. Other descendants of Georges Walls believe he assisted rather than kidnapped African warriors, since his home had a trapdoor and was still standing after the time period William Parker and other Africans took action against

the African kidnapper whose house was burned down (Forbes, 1998).

The kidnapping of Elizabeth Parker happened on a December evening in 1851 when Matthew Donnelly asked her to retrieve a slop bucket, even though he had just been outside for 15 minutes. Elizabeth Parker was cleaning up dishes from dinner between Matthew Donnelly and European-American John Merriitt when she went outside to bring in the slop bucket (Maddox, 2016). When Elizabeth Parker went outside, she was gagged and tied up by two kidnappers, Thomas McCreary, and an unknown “whiskered man,” according to Elizabeth Parker, and taken to Baltimore by McCreary (Maddox, 2016, p. 65). All four men were suspected to have been active participants in her kidnapping. Along the journey to Baltimore, Elizabeth Parker was held captive and still gagged at McCreary’s home in Elkton, Maryland, while waiting for a train to come the following night. Elizabeth Parker was ordered at gunpoint by Thomas McCreary to refer to herself as Henrietta Crocus and lie that she was an African warrior from Baltimore previously enslaved by a European American named Hannah Dickehut. In Baltimore, Hannah Dickehut was represented by her son-in-law, Luther Schoolfield, to confirm Elizabeth Parker’s identity as Henrietta Crocus. The real African warrior Henrietta Crocus, along with her African warrior mother, Juno Crocus, and African warrior sister, Eliza Crocus, liberated themselves with their liberated African father, Allan Crocus, in April 1847. McCreary would lie again when he kidnapped Rachel Parker two weeks later, claiming she was Eliza Crocus (Maddox, 2016).

Elizabeth Parker was held captive in Baltimore for two weeks at one of the largest enslavement chambers in the United States, owned by the European-American brothers Bernard Campbell and Walter Campbell, the latter to whom she was sold for 600 dollars. Elizabeth Parker, along with about 20 other Africans, were shipped from Baltimore to New Orleans on December 18, 1851, aboard the enslavement ship *Henry A. Barling*, headed by the Campbell brothers. After about a month journeying across the ice-filled sea that caused the enslavement ship to be frigid, she arrived in New Orleans on January 12, 1852, and two weeks later was sold again at auction for 900 dollars to a female enslaver with the last name Churo (Maddox, 2016). While enslaved in New Orleans for five months, Elizabeth Parker labored at the market, selling flowers, milk, and molasses candy from morning until night, and also performed domestic work.

One night in June, 1852, she was stopped by a watchman for being out past 8:00 p.m. For an enslaved African in New Orleans, being out past 8 p.m. without an approved permit often resulted in jail, physical labor ordered by a

magistrate, or whipping (Maddox, 2016). Elizabeth Parker stated that she was enslaved by Mrs. Churo, but the watchman didn't believe her. He arrested Elizabeth Parker and had her jailed until the next morning, when she would be seen by a magistrate to decide her fate. On the following morning, the magistrate sent for Bernard Campbell to prove her identity with a bill of sale, which he could not produce. This led to the magistrate visiting Mrs. Churo at her home, and that resulted in Elizabeth Parker being ordered back to Baltimore a month later (Maddox, 2016).

Elizabeth Parker was ordered by a magistrate to be returned to Baltimore from New Orleans by Walter Campbell under the charge of kidnapping, but only with the assurance that he be compensated 1,500 dollars as collateral in case she really was Henrietta Crocus. It is not known for certain who raised the finances, but John Miller Dickey was recognized for gathering the funds to pay Walter Campbell, although the Chester County newspaper, *Village Record*, credits seven or eight unnamed citizens of Baltimore with raising the money (Maddox, 2016). However, records indicate John Miller Dickey convened a meeting on February 6, 1852, in Chester County to secure funds for Rachel Parker's trial and Elizabeth Parker's return, even though it had not been discovered where she was at the time of the meeting. After the money was collected and received by Walter Campbell, Elizabeth Parker was held at the Campbell enslavement chamber in New Orleans until circa July 1852, before boarding a ship and making a two-week journey back to Baltimore.

In Baltimore, Elizabeth Parker was held captive amongst about 40 other Africans at the Campbell enslavement chamber and forced to labor as a cook, even though she was sick and had no shoes. Meanwhile, Luther Schoolfield was arguing against her not being Henrietta Crocus. When it was discovered that Elizabeth Parker was in Baltimore, a group of men from Chester County came to the city to vouch for her true identity. To test their claim, Walter Campbell allowed them to enter the yard of the enslavement chamber, where 25 African girls and women waited, but none of the Chester County men greeted any of the women as Elizabeth Parker. A short time later, Campbell let a second, smaller group of African females into the yard, Elizabeth Parker amongst them. The group of individuals from Chester County greeted her and she them, thus confirming her identity. Walter Campbell then released Elizabeth Parker from the enslavement chamber to officials who put her in the city jail where Rachel Parker was also being held at the time.

After regaining her freedom on January 13, 1853, Elizabeth Parker was

interviewed by a European-American man named Toby of *Village Record*. Her story of being kidnapped was published on January 25, 1853, and February 1, 1853. At the time of the interview, Elizabeth Parker was living with Rebecca Parker and Samuel Miller in Lancaster County (Maddox, 2016). In the interview, Elizabeth Parker acknowledges that Matthew Donnelly and John Merritt were in the home of Donnelly when she went outside to grab a slop bucket. She says that she was grabbed, gagged with a thick stick, tied up, and put into a wagon headed for Baltimore by Thomas McCreary and an unknown whiskered man. The gag was painful and cut her mouth; it took weeks to heal and it injured her teeth. It was not removed when she was at McCreary's home, but when she arrived at the Campbell enslavement chamber. It was there that Thomas McCreary pulled out a six-barreled rifle and forced Elizabeth Parker to agree to the name recommended by Luther Schoolfield, which ended up being Henrietta Crocus. If she did not do it, then McCreary warned he would shoot her down on the floor of the room (Maddox, 2016).

Parker states that there were about 30 Africans at the Campbell enslavement chamber, and they remained there for about two weeks. The Africans had to secure their own food: corn cakes, potatoes, and rice. About 20 Africans were aboard the enslavement ship headed for New Orleans, with half enslaved by Bernard Campbell and Walter Campbell, and the others by an unnamed man. In New Orleans, the Campbell enslavement chamber was operated by another Campbell brother. Here, there were 50 Africans in one room, with men on one side and women on the other. Elizabeth describes the activities at the enslavement chamber, revealing that the Africans were only able to walk around the premises when an enslaver came to make a purchase, at which time the Africans had to stand and be examined, especially their mouths, since scars on the teeth indicated that they had at one time resisted being fed. Because Elizabeth's teeth were damaged during her kidnapping, she was not purchased by the first male enslaver who examined her, which was two weeks after her arrival at the enslavement chamber.

However, about two days later, an unnamed African man purchased Elizabeth Parker for 900 dollars on behalf of his enslaver, Mrs. Churo. The sale was approved because Walter Campbell would not sell Elizabeth Parker to a male enslaver, especially one from the country, though Parker provides no reason as to why. Elizabeth describes Mrs. Churo as an African herself (she used the term "Creowl [sic],") with two daughters (Maddox, 2016, p. 206). Parker confirms that she was tasked with selling flowers, milk, and molasses candy at the market.

She even sold flowers to Africans at the theatre when they held dance parties there on Saturday nights; however, she always stayed to herself and never built a relationship with anyone in New Orleans.

It was after selling flowers at a dance party that a watchman asked if Elizabeth Parker had a pass, which led to her confessing she was a liberated African that was kidnapped, and it was this confession that enabled her to return to Baltimore. The interview ends abruptly as Elizabeth Parker is describing being a cook while sick at the Campbell enslavement chamber in Baltimore. Because she still was sick and coughing badly, the interview had to be stopped. The interview is one of two in which Elizabeth Parker was able to voice her experience of being kidnapped and enslaved, detailing her own agency rather than that of the European Americans attached to the story (Maddox, 2016).

After Elizabeth Parker lived with her mother in Lancaster County, she resided in northern Chester County. By 1880, she was a widow with the last name Miller and living in West Chester, working as a housekeeper, but it is unknown who she married. In West Chester, she lived on East Marshall Street with her two children and an additional child named Lottie J. Miller, who may have been her daughter. By the early 1890s, Elizabeth Parker still resided in West Chester but at a different address—427 East Barnard Street, where she was interviewed for a second time about being kidnapped. Her story was published in the *Daily Local News* and later republished in 1941. In the second interview, Elizabeth Parker states that she was beaten and tortured in New Orleans, was on board the *Henry A. Barling* with 259 other Africans rather than 20, and was sold in New Orleans for 2,000 dollars as opposed to the 900 dollars originally reported (Maddox, 2016). Pauli Murray also confirms that Elizabeth Parker was sold for around 2,000 dollars (Murray, 1999). By 1900, Elizabeth Parker still lived in West Chester with her two children. However, by 1920, she lived in the city of York, York County, where she owned a home on Salem Avenue. It is not known when she died (Maddox, 2016).

Because Rachel Parker was older than Elizabeth Parker, she did not begin to work until around the age of ten, when their father left the home. Her first employer was a European-American farmer named James Y. Smith, who coincidentally was married to the niece of her future kidnapper—Thomas McCreary. Afterwards, the Smiths found Rachel Parker employment at the home of Joseph C. Miller in West Nottingham, where she worked for the next seven years before being kidnapped. While living with the Miller family, Rachel Parker sometimes attended school with Joseph C. Miller's children, but never became

literate (Maddox, 2016). Unlike Elizabeth Parker, Rachel was kidnapped in the morning around 11:00 a.m. Thomas McCreary knocked on the door of Joseph C. Miller's home and asked Miller's wife, Rebecca Miller, for directions. Upon hearing someone at the door, Rachel Parker looked to see who Rebecca Miller was talking to, which caused McCreary to push past Rebecca Miller and grab Rachel Parker, while John Merritt waited outside in a buggy. While Rachel Parker was being apprehended, she and Rebecca Miller began to scream, which alarmed Joseph C. Miller, who was outside working near his home.

Before arriving in Perryville, Maryland, the kidnappers and Rachel Parker stopped at a tavern where she informed the owner that she was a liberated African being kidnapped. The tavern owner's wife then provided food for Rachel Parker and attempted to persuade the kidnappers to leave her there, but to no avail. John Merritt stayed behind while Thomas McCreary and Rachel Parker continued on to Perryville to board a train for Baltimore. At the train station, Rachel Parker informed several individuals she was a liberated African being kidnapped, but again was unable to receive any assistance, unfortunately (Maddox, 2016). Like her sister, Rachel Parker was taken to the Campbell enslavement chamber in Baltimore. This led to McCreary being arrested and charged with kidnapping before she could be sold. The pursuit of McCreary would cost Joseph C. Miller his life, while the former would never be convicted for the kidnapping of either Elizabeth Parker or Rachel Parker (Maddox, 2016).

Eventually, Rachel Parker was moved to a Baltimore jail where Elizabeth Parker would later be imprisoned. Rachel Parker and Elizabeth Parker were two of four young African girls jailed there in 1852, and two of three young African girls held for "safe keeping," which was essentially false imprisonment (Maddox, 2016, p. 147). During that same year, 148 adult African women were also imprisoned at the city jail, with eight of those being held under false imprisonment (Maddox, 2016). The Baltimore jail was often overcrowded, with only 12 rooms available to house upwards of 140 prisoners (many were only being held to await trial), and Rachel Parker would be imprisoned there for a year. On January 1, 1852, she was falsely identified as Eliza Crocus by several European Americans gathered by Luther Schoolfield, who was defending Thomas McCreary in his upcoming kidnapping trial. The defense's weak argument was that Rachel Parker resembled Allen Crocus and Juno Crocus; therefore, she must have been Eliza Crocus. However, McCreary's lawyers called a last-minute surprise witness—the kidnapper John Merritt. He convincingly lied that Joseph C. Miller was involved in the kidnapping of Rachel Parker, which resulted in his alleged suicide

out of guilt for taking part in it. It was enough to convince the biased Maryland judge, Augustine Pennington, to have all charges against Thomas McCreary dropped, and he was released. As a result, Rachel Parker was to remain imprisoned for another year until her trial began.

Rachel Parker's trial did not begin until January 4, 1853, which was more than a year after her kidnapping in December of 1851. At the trial, there were large numbers of Africans in attendance to support her. Elizabeth Parker, Rachel Parker, and Rebecca Parker were all in attendance from the beginning of the trial, but were not permitted to testify because Africans were not legally allowed to in Maryland. James Parker and Edward Parker began to attend the trial on the sixth day of court. Testimony in support of Rachel Parker lasted for seven days, with 49 witnesses, mostly from Chester County. Another 30 witnesses were also set to testify when the trial ended. The number of witnesses was so overwhelming that Luther Schoolfield announced to the courtroom on January 12, 1853, that the defense was withdrawing its case, but not without indicating that the actions against the Parker sisters were meant as vindication for the anti-African European Americans in Maryland, who viewed the Christiana Resistance as a grave injustice. The *Frederick Douglass Paper* went even further by stating that the trial for Rachel Parker was staged by friends of the enslaver Edward Gorsuch as retaliation for the Christiana Resistance (Maddox, 2016). According to Pauli Murray, Thomas McCreary was never heard of again after Rachel Parker's trial, but the kidnappings of Africans continued, carried out by Matthew Donnelly and Farmer X from Hinsonville. The trial cost Pennsylvania 3,000 dollars, with an additional 1,000 dollars raised by John Miller Dickey to assist Rachel Parker (Murray, 1999).

After being released from jail on January 13, 1853, Rachel Parker returned to Joseph C. Miller's home in West Nottingham. She stayed at the home with Rebecca Miller for a few weeks before moving to a farm owned by Hart G. Coates in Lancaster County. Rachel Parker resided there with his family for 12 years before marrying. In 1865, she married the African George Wesley, a Civil War veteran who served in the 13th United States Colored Infantry (Maddox, 2016). While married, George Wesley and Rachel Parker lived at the home of Hart G. Coates for eight years, during which time Wesley's sister, Mary, also worked for the Coates family. Eventually, George Wesley and Rachel Parker gave birth to four children: Lucinda (Lucy) Wesley in 1865, Joseph Wesley in 1868, Elizabeth Wesley in 1869, and Judith Wesley in 1872. In 1873, George Wesley and Rachel Parker separated, but Rachel Parker continued to live with

and work for the Coates family. Rachel Parker's two children, Elizabeth Wesley and Judith Wesley, remained with her. It is unknown why Rachel Parker's other two children did not live with her. Rachel Parker would live with and work for the Coates family for another 25 years after her separation from George Wesley, but by 1900 she was residing with her daughter, Lucinda Wesley, and her husband, James R. Jones, in Lower Oxford, Chester County. Rachel Parker lived with Lucinda Wesley until she died in 1918 from "infirmities of age" (Maddox, 2016, p. 192).

Although their story is convoluted by the false accounts of several European Americans, the Parker sisters' fight for liberation showcases the horrors of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and its effects on the Africans living in Chester County and the surrounding area.

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AFRICAN WOMAN

to Women/Mothers of African Countries

African Woman.

I am a woman.

So what?

I get into an argument

With a man; he slaps me.

I feel the pain.

They tell me I provoked him:

I should have been quiet,

I should have been patient,

I should apologize.

I get into an argument

With a man; I slap him.

They tell me I have no respect,

No home training and

That my mother did not raise me well.

I should have been quiet and patient.

Because I am a woman,

I don't have any right to be angry,

And the degree of my innocence

Is directly proportionate to the degree of my silence,

Even in the face of oppression and brutality.

Because I am a woman,

My husband cheats on me and

I am told to tolerate it, to save the marriage.

It is in a man's nature

And DNA to cheat,

But I should slim down,

Dress better,

Cook better,

Pray harder,

And be more
pleasant to him.

I cheat and I am called a whore and
All the dehumanizing names under the highest sun.
I committed an abomination and
Don't have any right or reason to look elsewhere
For the love and emotional support that I lacked at home.
Am I irresponsible for expressing my truths
And giving voice to my pains?

I am sent packing—
But with nowhere to go—
From the home we both built,
With all my earthly belongings and
One tiny luggage balanced, steadily, on my head,
And a still-sucking baby securely wrapped at my back:
My child,
Only infant,
Now “tagged” a bastard.

He is thirty-years-old and runs a company,
He is wonderful, hardworking, career-oriented,
He is successful at a very young age.

She is thirty-years-old and runs a company.
“Hmmm...She is not even married, she can't prioritize her needs.
She loves money. Let her get married and leave man's domain.”
Tell me if being successful
Has gender attachments and limitations?

I am an African woman.
I am an African woman.

Don't I have wits?
Should I not have financial empowerment
And be treated with respect without a man beside me?
Rather, I am considered a generous leg-opener,
A run-down and out-of-control girl

With no realization that I actually had to
Go through ups and downs in order to get to where I am.

I am an African Woman.
I am an African Woman.

A man loses his wife to death
And marries again after a year.
He is right to get another wife.
Congratulations to him.

A woman loses a husband
And marries again after four years.
“Ah, so soon?” they ask.
“Is one sure she was not sleeping with her new lover
While her husband was alive?”
Just because I am woman,
It does not make me less of a human.

I am an African Woman.
I am an African Woman.

She is quiet a trillion times,
Whilst balancing the many truths running through her mind.
She stares at you and wonders
Why she loved and loves you.
Broken & taken for granted,
She still remains standing
By your side.

I am an African woman.
I am an African woman.

What great strength.
What great might.
What great pride.
What great fight.
I am an African Woman.

MAKA NDI UTA

I write poetry.
A very dishonest way to say
That I'm depressed,
Anxious,
Broken.

I write poetry
For the girls and the gays
The Thems and the Theys
For goth plant moms
And alt-colored women.
For the closeted feminine look
For the pseudo-personas on Medium
Like myself.
I write poetry for them
And live it,
For me.

I write poetry for STEM women
For *Grey's Anatomy* stans
For women like me who want to be on TEDx
Who love bright lights
And hate attention
Who watch cat fights
And feared detention
Who own empty journals
And scarred hearts
Verbose bodies
And silent mouths.
I write poetry for them
And live it,
For me.

I write poetry for night people
Who don't quite get refraction
But live for rainbows
Who want to go to Med school
In the face of all their unpublished books
Who are attached to their iPads
And need their doses of caffeine
Who are best friends with melatonin
And share a bed with trauma.

I write for people
Who can,
Regardless,
Who will,
Despite.

I write for dissatisfied women
For assertive women and part-time bullies
For "misandrists" and feminists alike
For those whose pronouns don't exist yet.
For small art businesses that are undervalued
For indie category authors and artists
For alleyway rappers
And single moms
And single dads
And orphan babies
With a dream beneath their lids
For aspiring wallstreet black men
And Nobel Laureates-in-waiting
For tired Engineering majors
With LED-lit rooms
And programmers who need debugging.
I write poetry for them
And live it,
For me.

I write poetry for Savage Fenty models
And SHEIN reviewers
For those in therapy
And those who aren't,
For those who are thriving
And those merely existing
For activists who have no choice but to fight
For those whose rights continue to be fodder for intellectual conversations
For those who have no more spirit left
For those who trust in beings unseen
Because the alternative is simply
Bleak.

For those who have nothing to fear
In the face of pain
And unspeakable horror,
For survivors who will be gaslit in a minute
For crazy Gen-Zers
For gamer girls
Fellow assault statistics
Who don't quite count
For booted legs and glossy lips
For corporate rejects
Who can't forget
For those unseen
Unheard
Untouched,
Unloved,
Unknown.

I write poetry
For rising heart rates
And inactive parasympathetic nervous systems
For those who only know flight mode
For the hooded faces and the empty eyes
For those with horror movies for souls
For hearts mourning absent bodies
For lovers left out in the cold.

I write
That I may survive another day
And that my people will be there with me
At the crack of dawn
And the blue of sunset
To fight the coming night.

—*Ugochi J. Nwachuku*

WE WERE BORN IN HELL

I felt the familiar sting of the cold harmattan wind in the back of my nostrils. It carried with it the scent of burning fields mixed with the foul stench of gunpowder and death. We were in the year 1968, less than a decade since we gained our independence, and Nigeria was drowning in war. The struggle for Biafra had turned bustling towns into graveyards, the cries of hunger echoing much louder than the sounds of gunfire.

I was born in this war—my very first breath was drawn in a world where survival was the only language spoken. The moment my father first laid eyes on me, he looked to the heavens and cried. My mother named me Chinelo, a name that means “God is with me,” although sometimes it felt as if he had abandoned us all. My father, a schoolteacher before the war, traded in his chalk for a rifle, leaving us behind with the promise of victory. The day my father left, I stared intently at his face as though that would be the last time I saw it. I quickly forgot what he looked like. He never returned.

We lived in a refugee camp in Onitsha, a place where sickness spread like whispered gossip and food was as rare as peace. My mother, once a woman of elegance and class, now wrapped her frail body in tattered cloth, her eyes hollow from grief. Every morning, she would whisper the same prayer under her breath, a desperate plea for the war to end, for her children to see another sunrise, and for her husband to return safely. I often stared at her wondering who was at the receiving end of this prayer. Perhaps there is a backlog of prayers to be answered and eventually it will be my mother’s turn.

But the war did not listen.

One evening, as the sun blazed on the horizon, the sound of approaching soldiers sent the camp into chaos. The Nigerian forces were advancing, and we had no weapons, no protection, only the will to run. My mother clutched my younger brother, Ekene, to her chest, as if her love alone could shield him from the approaching horror.

“Chinelo, hold onto my wrapper, *osiso*, and don’t let go!” she commanded, her voice sharp with fear.

I obeyed, my small fingers clutching the frayed fabric as we disappeared into the thick bushes, the sounds of war chasing us like hungry beasts.

We ran and ran until my legs burned, until my breath came in ragged gasps. The night swallowed us whole, and in its darkness we found fleeting refuge. But fear never left us; it lurked in every shadow, whispered through the rustling leaves. We were like animals being hunted.

Days turned into nights, and nights into days. We scavenged for food, drinking from muddy streams, eating whatever the land so graciously offered. My mother grew weaker, her once strong arms trembling as she carried Ekene. I knew she was starving, giving what little she found to us instead.

Then, one morning, we stumbled upon a deserted village. The houses were abandoned, the air thick with the silence of death. Bullet holes scarred the mud walls, and dried blood stained the earth. My mother hesitated, but desperation overruled caution.

“We will find food here,” she said, but she did not sound convinced.

We searched the houses, rummaging through overturned furniture, shattered clay pots, and remnants of lives long vanished. In one home, I found a bag of garri hidden beneath a broken bed. My heart pounded as I called for my mother, holding the sack like a treasure—no: like a bottle of water in the desert.

She smiled for the first time in weeks, a weary, fragile thing. “God is with us,” she whispered, though the war had long made us doubt.

We sat in the crumbling house, sharing our meager feast. We did not hear them coming. The footsteps were silent, practiced. Soldiers.

The door burst open, and before we could react, rifles were pointed at us. My mother gasped, pushing Ekene behind her. My breath caught in my throat.

One soldier stepped forward, his uniform covered in dust, his face hardened by war. He looked at us, three starving souls, and for a moment, hesitation flickered in his eyes.

Then, he spoke: “What are you doing here?” His voice was not unkind, but it held the weight of authority.

My mother knelt, her voice trembling. “*Biko*, we are just trying to survive. Please...”

The soldier studied us, then gestured to another man. “Give them food.”

Shock rippled through me. The war had taught me to expect cruelty, not kindness. But as they handed my mother a small bundle of bread and dried fish, I realized that even in hell, humanity could still be found.

The soldiers left us there, and we continued our journey, moving further into the unknown, always running, always praying, always hoping.

War had stolen our home, our family, our innocence. But it had not yet stolen our will to live.

We were born in hell, but we would not die in it.

IF ONLY THE QUIET COULD TALK

I am a moth drawn to complexity,
I circle bulbs of thought, aspiring to find which way is up
I simply thought I had found peace of mind

I wonder what emotion you accompany with silence
I noticed the more docile the person, the louder the thought
I understand solely deaf ears have heard you

I never know what you're thinking, you speak not in words but in gravity
I never been intimate in the company of such a still person
I am avoided by your kind

I thought I was loud, since voided by your taciturnity
I learned of my quiet sigh, to your thoughtful blare
I learned, if only the quiet could talk.

“BE SURE TO WALK AS IF NOTHING IS WRONG”: PAIN, STIGMA, AND THE PRESERVATION OF SELF IN ALICE WALKER’S “THE ABORTION”

Set in the latter half of the twentieth century in a rural town in the American South, Alice Walker’s short story, “The Abortion,” was first published in 1971, as the eighth of fourteen stories in her book, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*. The narrative follows Imani, a married African-American woman who decides to terminate her pregnancy and subsequently follows through with her plan. As the story unfolds, Imani also recalls a previous illegal abortion she underwent as a single woman. This paper will discuss the protagonist’s reflections on her two abortions, which, while similarly marked by trauma, differ in their legal status—one illegal, the other legal.

When Walker wrote “The Abortion,” the Supreme Court had not yet issued its landmark ruling in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which legalized abortion nationwide (Harper et al. 504). At the time, abortion was legal on request in only four states, beginning in 1970. As Walker’s story was written in 1971, Imani’s second abortion is legal, but only because the protagonist travels from the South to New York, one of only four states where the procedure was permitted without restrictions. Notably, New York was the only state that did not impose a residency requirement of at least thirty days to get an abortion, unlike Alaska, Hawaii, and Washington (Gold 10). Thus, while traveling to New York provided an option for women seeking abortions before 1973, this alternative was largely limited to those who could afford the costs of travel, lodging, and the procedure itself (11).

Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka argues that, throughout the story, Imani is unable to integrate the experience of a traumatic abortion into her narrative of self, leading her to symbolically reenact her pain as a form of self-punishment (121). However, this paper suggests that said reenactments do not only play the role of unconscious punishment but also become a means for Imani to process her pain. In addition, these reenactments function as a narrative device that helps readers recognize that much of Imani’s suffering stems not solely from the abortion itself, but from inadequate medical care, a lack of familial support, and the absence of a socially defined notion of abortion. As Julia Ryniec observes,

the legal, public, and literary ambiguity surrounding abortion perpetuate the stigma attached to the procedure (7).

A striking example of the stigma surrounding abortion appears in Imani's memories of her first abortion, which was illegal. In view of the illegality of the procedure, the wife of the doctor who performs Imani's first abortion instructs her: "When you leave, be sure to walk as if nothing is wrong" (Walker 68). The fact that both the doctor and his wife would think it possible for a woman who has just undergone a surgical procedure to walk like nothing has happened, and therefore conceal any signs of distress, underscores how stigma—along with the fear of legal repercussions—takes precedence over the patient's safety and well-being. Regarding said stigma, Anuradha Kumar et al. define it as a "negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy, that marks them internally or externally, as inferior to ideals of womanhood" (628). Since definitions of womanhood vary from time to time, depending on the society, abortion stigma will vary accordingly, they argue. Yet there are several common assumptions held about women and their "essential nature" that are challenged by abortion. (628)

The aforementioned "essential nature" of women remains heavily constrained in contemporary Western society, particularly in how it limits women's decision-making power over their own reproductive and sexual health. For instance, abortion in the United States is highly dependent on the religious beliefs embedded within certain political ideologies, leaving women's health subject to decisions made by those in power. Moreover, as seen in Walker's story, women may feel compelled to justify even a legal abortion to themselves due to dominant discourses of what constitutes a "good woman" (Ryniec 20). In the story, the protagonist is a married woman with a daughter. Given the prevailing social narrative of the "good woman," she is expected to embrace motherhood unquestioningly, welcoming another child into the family with contentment and fulfillment. Within such a restrictive framework, I suggest that the concept of womanhood is oversimplified, as the concept reduces women to their reproductive capacities rather than acknowledging their full humanity.

For Imani, her role as a mother is fulfilled with the child she already has, and she is certain that she does not want any more children. As she expresses: "Another child would kill me. I can't imagine life with two children. Having a child is a good experience *to have had*, like graduate school: But if you've had one, you've had the experience and that's enough" (Walker 65). Imani takes responsibility about the well-being of her family, including that of her unborn

child, and herself. She knows that having a second child would overwhelm her, leaving her deeply unhappy and unable to function normally. In this scenario, Imani recognizes that she would not be able to properly take care of herself or her daughter. With her refusal to bring a second child into the world, she is acting like a responsible parent, prioritizing the well-being of the child she already has. I identify this idea as the “preservation of self,” which encompasses prioritizing one’s own physical and mental health before caring for others.

I find the “preservation of self” to be closely linked to the written accounts of traumatic experience. Writing can serve as a powerful tool for maintaining a stable sense of self amidst internal struggles such as the ones that might arise before, during, and after an abortion. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s work, Cathy Caruth discusses the aftermath of traumatic events, noting that their profound impact often exceeds the individual’s immediate comprehension, as such experiences are too sudden and overwhelming to be fully known (Caruth 4). This inability to completely process the event is evident in how individuals may struggle to articulate what happened and often turn to writing as a way to make sense of it. Thus, Imani’s written testimony, while fictional, holds social relevance because it conveys authenticity. The concept of authenticity in fiction writing does not mean factual accuracy but rather a sense of truthfulness embedded within the social context of the created scenario.

While there are many ways for an author to achieve authenticity, one technique that Walker employs in her story is the portrayal of social abandonment and inadequate medical care endured by women who undergo abortions. Since the stigma surrounding the procedure does not allow the discussion of abortion to be normalized, not even in a medical context, the lives of women are likely to be at risk before the abortion takes place. This stems from the near absence of doctor-patient communication on abortion, in a social environment where, despite its legalization, abortion remains taboo.

In “The Abortion,” female patients are often treated condescendingly, reinforcing the notion that medical professionals view women who seek abortions as children who have done something wrong. Such consideration might significantly damage a woman’s self-esteem and overall psychological well-being by making her feel irresponsible or even a “bad person” because of her decision. With regard to the inadequate medical treatment that Imani receives, she recalls that during her second, legal abortion, “she was less happy to notice, once the doctor started to insert the catheter, that the anesthesia she had been given was

insufficient” (Walker 69). As a result, Imani faints before the procedure can continue. The doctor’s failure to address the risks of the procedure likely reflects a broader lack of proper analysis and discussion among medical professionals, given the stigma surrounding abortion. Despite the procedure’s legalization in certain states, the inadequate care Imani receives during her legal abortion mirrors the treatment she experienced during her illegal one seven years earlier. She explains that, at the time, she “did not feel any pain” after the abortion, but that later she “hemorrhaged steadily for six weeks, and was not well again for a year” (68).

In contrast, Imani recalls the kindness of the doctor who performed her first abortion, which, I argue, she remembers in order to alleviate the emotional pain caused by a lack of social support, poor medical care, and nonexistent communication with others. Imani remembers taking the bus home after her first abortion, likely because she felt there was no one she could trust with her secret. Given that abortion was still illegal at the time, she probably felt she had to hide it from her family on account of its illegality and the stigma surrounding the procedure. This absence of familial support may explain why she mentions the kindness of the doctor who performed that first abortion, stating, “he was so kind, and he was smiling benignly, almost fatherly, at her (and Imani realized how desperately she needed this ‘fatherly’ look, this ‘fatherly’ smile)” (Walker 68). Since young women are usually used to being treated condescendingly by men—especially those in a position of power over them—Imani is thankful for the doctor’s kindness, which she highlights as something remarkable, when, in reality, any medical professional should feel a moral obligation to treat their patients with kindness and compassion.

When it comes to her second abortion, the protagonist continues to face a striking lack of familial support, exemplified by the lack of emotional support from her husband, Clarence. He neither accompanies her to New York for the procedure nor actively listens when she discusses the strenuous surgery. When she talks to him about the abortion, he pales, and Imani notes that “she knew he wanted her to stop talking” (Walker 70). This excerpt highlights an interesting rhetoric that aligns with Siân M. Beynon-Jones’s observations about the abortion discourse in England and the United States. As she explains, based on a literature review from past decades, “women talk about *not* talking about abortion,” and many “describe not disclosing their abortion(s) in particular discursive contexts as an accepted, reasonable, taken-for-granted, social practice” (238). As this “culture of silence” has long been internalized in society, it is remarkable

that Walker, more than fifty years ago, would dare to tell a story that challenges conventions surrounding the abortion discourse.

Both the authenticity of internalized stigma and the need to deconstruct the established silence are evident in the ways Imani discusses her situation throughout the story. By allowing the reader into her loneliness and exposing the lack of both medical and personal support she faces during her two abortions, she condemns the pervasive silence around the topic. When it comes to the authenticity of the narrative, Imani speaks in her own voice: she is confident in her decision to have an abortion and hence resolves to “preserve herself,” while still allowing herself to grieve the loss of her unborn children. This, I argue, is a crucial way in which Imani’s narrative challenges the found discursive labor that women have long felt compelled “to engage in in order to negotiate an anti-abortion repertoire of (inevitable) regret” (Beynon-Jones 237). In this story, what we encounter is not regret, but a space where women are allowed to feel sadness and pain, regardless of their decisions or experiences.

In this paper, I have provided a consistent analysis of how stigma influences medical practice and, consequently, threatens the health of women who undergo abortions. To support this argument, I have examined the narrative of a literary character who describes her two abortions in detail. In her account, Imani highlights the lack of emotional support and poor medical care she receives, which probably intensify her pain and distress towards the situation. I have analyzed the main character’s narrative as a way to “address language as a form of social action which can offer alternative insights into women’s accounts of abortion” (Beynon-Jones 238). Through language, the author constructs a powerful representation of abortion in twentieth-century America, enabling readers to understand the stigma and pain associated with the reproductive and sexual health of women.

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A LONG WALK

When I took my first steps, I didn't know the miles ahead of me
I stumbled a few times, gravity holding me, unsteadily,
Unreadily for the life ahead of me
I didn't know all the possibilities that my mind could reach
Or the capabilities that lurked within me
No, when I took those next steps, all it was
Was shapes and Play-Doh, thoughts of Legos
Few more steps thinking where my life will go
House and kids was the typical
Life in the suburbs with a white picket fence
Now walk ahead, those thoughts are invisible
Clouded by the unexpected that life will throw
1800 miles, thousand memories lay there
Once wanted to be a Bison now I'm roaring like Lions
Changed my professions so many times
That they think that I'm lying, thinking I'm indecisive
Just tryna find my way without having navigation displayed
Walked a long while now the path is deferring,
Stuck between left and right my mind is blurring
Focus, focus, focus, if all else fails
You got ya mind, body, spirit, then all will prevail
Just walk a little more even when you're tired,
And though the finish line is unknowing
Take this walk with pride
Because the walk is long but the rewards will be deserving.

LIKE A CYCLE: PRINCESSES BECOME KNIGHTS

She was tired of it—the demeaning half-light-hearted, half-evil-inducing complement of a man who saw her as a child. Because her eyes were as wide and brown as a fawn’s and her body was as fragile and weak as a babe. And her voice, oh, her voice was as soft as a widow’s and as raspy as an emery board.

“Get away,” she had said, meek and shy (how her voice often betrayed her). And like a wolf pouncing on his prey, he continued to follow her around the room. He had taken it as a school game, one that only little boys would play to irritate girls. Like he’s pulling her hair as a tease and does it again and again and nobody will tell him to stop because that means he likes her.

He likes her.

She had slammed shut the door to her room, the loudest thing to be heard in this hollow tower of hers. She clicked the top latch and shucked a piece of wood against the wall and the door, placing it on the metal holders that kept monsters in the dark out. Yet, he kept banging and banging and banging so much that she could feel the room shake. There was an urgency when she fell to her bed. She used a pillow to block out the noise until the sounds got lower and lower and eventually faded.

When she awoke the next morning, it was lightly raining. She thought: *I cannot go out, it’s pouring.* And then she thought it again: *I cannot go out, it’s storming.* And again: *I cannot go out, it’s impossible,* until she believed herself entirely.

She looked at her mirror: its squiggly-round exterior made it seem like it was made in a fun house, yet her face never became distorted. On days like these, dreary like her emotional state, she flipped over the mirror so that all that was left for her to fixate on was the floor, her paints, and the plants on the window sill that were withering away due to the season changing. And because she had fixed the creak in the floorboard, she decided to pick a paint brush and decorate the only canvas she knew best. Red dots going down the lightest part of her hand and up to her brown shoulder. She filled in the blank space with silver curved lines, up and down, as if they were hills on top of the sun. She

then painted aimlessly, like she was using the other parts of her body as scrap paper—unable to find inspiration for an actual piece. And when she could not reach the thoracic part of her spine, she decided it was time to stop and wash off in the bath.

She slowly unlocked the door, peeking through to make sure the man from yesterday had not decided to sleep over or invite any guests. Then she swiftly tiptoed down the stairs, making sure to lock the front door, and ran to the bathroom to ensure her safety, slamming the door in much the same way as she had slammed it in the fellow's face last night. As she turned the faucet on, she put her left arm underneath the water; red trickled down the silver like soldier's blood in the river.

Yesterday, she went out for the first time in ten years. The day started off glorious: birds chirping, fresh air seducing her senses, sunrays hugging and kissing her skin. She knew she had to go out, she could not miss a rare day like this. She put on her dress and practically ran out of her home. And once she'd reached the town, she'd felt out of place. The stares, some curious, some friendly, some...not to be described. Yet, as she continued to wander, a few recognized her face, went to say "hello," yet she did not remember them. Some, who had wrinkles on their skin, asked about her mother and... her father—questions she could not properly answer, lest she get herself caught up in a lie that she could not keep track of. But the younger ones stayed fascinated throughout the day. Some men even approached her, inviting her back to their home, but she declined every time. She knew how her parents' relationship had gone; she could not repeat it—she *wouldn't*. But one man was persistent, and he solidified that she did not belong out in this town. He said words to her that she would not even repeat to herself in the mirror. And she remembered how he walked—boisterous and convinced that everything he said to her was true. She'd read stories of men like these. She'd flipped through pages and pages, and despite understanding the psychology of why, she still couldn't process it.

So, yes, she was tired of it yesterday, and just as tired from the altercation today. The sludge color in the bath made her stomach hurt. She pulled the drain and took a second to catch her breath, reminding herself that she was not in that situation currently. She opened the door and took her time upstairs. She watched as the sky got darker and darker. She felt tired.

She could not stop thinking about yesterday (which was not quite yesterday, though it did feel like it was). It played on a loop like a nightly play, yet

she could not improvise or mess up any of the lines; it went the exact same way every time: she was the damsel in distress but nobody came to save her.

When her father was still alive (and her mother had still seemed to follow his word obediently), he used to tell her that princesses were to stay in their towers or smile and accept. And while she could sit with that when she was young (hell, she'd sat with it ten years ago), her mother's whispers always followed her. She was quietly stating otherwise, and her small words had grown bigger and bigger since she'd left. And since yesterday, she had been pondering his words vs. hers, and what it meant to be herself. It seemed that every inch of herself was planned out like a book, as if it were her own bible, but she was disturbed by the ending, for it did not match her reality, and this she could no longer accept.

Lancelot, Quixote, Beowulf. She remembered how, as a child, she had been entranced by their lives, only to be pushed back by her father, who explained, "One day you'll be swept up by some monstrous fellow, or if you're lucky enough, a dragon, and right before the moment of your demise a man just like him will come in and save you."

"Lucky how?"

"The more dangerous the stakes, the more admiration he'll get—and *we'll* get once you marry him."

Nobody was there to save her. No praise from the town. She was botched.

But she knew the fix.

Two days after "yesterday," she decided enough time had passed. Her wardrobe shifted from pastels and jewels to silvers and metals. Like a stallion preparing for battle, she put oversized armor on. She shielded herself from danger, from the virulent world, the intolerable suitors—and her mind, where her father resided while Hell got his bedroom made for him, and where her mother visited her from a new home, the name of which she could not tell.

Seeing the world through a new identity was fascinating. The looks were only slight, like a person glancing at a building. She felt like she belonged, despite the janky feeling of the metal suit. She had to whisper quietly, "Left, right, left, right," to make sure she didn't fall over herself.

As she continued to walk, she bumped into a gentleman whose face was as silver as a dime, shining as bright as her armor. And she recognized this man—who wouldn't? The way he talked: "Sorry sir." The way he stared for a moment

too long, eyes widening the moment he noticed the facade: “Ma’am? I’m sorry, *ma’am*,” he chuckled, like he was laughing at his own joke.

It was a sort of degradation. They had met before, and she recognized him immediately. When her father still had a soul (a living one, at least), he would take her along to his job. He started as a knight, penny-bronze skin proudly accepting his title to serve, but as he grew older and less able to continue his duties, he had been forced to give away his title. There she had met this checker-haired gentleman before her. Younger at the time, yet not as young as her then, he had caught the attention of her father. He said, and she would always remember, “He’s the perfect replacement.” And her father was never one to call something or someone perfect. And he mentored him until he became the gentleman he is today.

“Why are you, with such beautiful and galaxy-like eyes, wearing a silly costume?”

She cringed, his words snapping her back to reality. He had said the forbidden secret, and embarrassment set deep in her skin. Did the townspeople truly accept her in her knighthood or was she seen as a strange costume-wearer to be shunned? Embarrassment built up, but she tried to shake it off.

“It’s not a costume,” she said. She tried to hold herself above him, adjusting her helmet, yet he laughed again, this time more uproarious, and the passersby started to stare.

“Princess, what happened? Did some strange old lady put a spell on you? Maybe one of the town’s boys coerced you into putting this silly thing on?” He paused, eyes widening at her reaction. “Oh, so that’s it,” he smirked, like it was some kind of “gotcha.”

She profusely shook her head, enough that the large headwear fell off, slamming on the sidewalk with a loud CLUNK. *How embarrassing.* But what made it even more embarrassing was that tears had started to fall.

Overwhelming attention on her, the gentleman’s eyes seemed to soften from siren to doe. “Like I said, I apologize.”

It wasn’t necessarily that he was genuine, but when he opened his arms up, she couldn’t help but fall into them.

“My name is Sir. What’s your name?”

She sighed. He wasn’t comfortable to be around, per se, but he was familiar: the way he spoke to her gave her the one home outside of home. She hadn’t felt

any sense of familiarity in ten years.

“I don’t have one,” she said.

“A princess without a name? That’s like,” he huffed, exasperated as he let her go, “that’s like a dog without a collar!”

“It’s not that big a deal. Plenty of people don’t have names.”

“All commoners—lesser people than you.” He hushed her before she tried to speak again. “You look tired. Let me take you to my palace. I can have you washed up and put in a beautiful gown.”

He turned around and she stared as he marched forth, then he paused and looked back at her face that was still processing the entire interaction. He held out his hand and said, “Come, girl.”

She held his hand and let him lead the way.

“You’re so strange, yet I can’t help but feel utterly drawn to you.” He put his fingers into her kinky hair, letting the suds slide through the coils. “Were you even there at my coronation? I didn’t recognize your face when I first saw you.”

“No,” she said.

A more inquiring mind would have asked a question back, but she truly did not want to know what had changed in these past ten years, after he had gained his princely title, where he was wandering to when they bumped into each other, and yet, Sir told it all.

“I didn’t ask,” she said.

“But you were curious,” he insisted. To argue with a gentleman of his caliber would be to ask a wall a question: pointless.

She stood up, water dripping back into the bath like rain into the ocean. He was fascinated by her. She could not say the same about him, yet she still took his hand when he reached out again. Familiarity over affection: she couldn’t not accept him.

Sir dragged her to his bed, the bed which two days later was their marital bed. Daggers piercing inside her like a sword slaying its victim. A pain that she had to accept to satisfy this gentleman. And once the three days passed, she could not help but feel angered at the man she slept beside. Though, deep down of course, she felt most mad at herself for smiling and accepting.

It was months into their marriage, their disastrous marriage based in familiarity on both parts. Sir usually started off their breakfast with a mischievous smile, which made her cringe and roll her eyes. She'd insist he was no gentleman the way he looked at her, and then daggers swiftly afterward. Yet today was different. He had started the conversation.

"Ah! I've got it," he snapped his fingers proudly.

She tilted her head, eyes wide. (It always made him nervous when she did this, like he was in love with her whenever she expressed child-like wonder).

"What?"

"Your name, princess, *your name!*" He climbed onto the table, making a fanfare out of the conversation. Dramatic as always, he shouted, "Birdie! Your name is Birdie!"

She looked off to the side to try to make eye contact with one of the knight's eyes—yet the knight just shrugged. She could not believe the show Sir was putting on, explaining all the reasons that *she* was "Birdie"

"...and plus, you're quite weak and innocent, delicate as a feather, quick to always want to escape me like a falcon! Don't you see, Birdie?"

"Fine," she said in an apathetic tone, wanting to end the conversation even though Sir would not allow it. He continued to go on and on about her "name," jumping down from the table with a thump, exclaiming how annoying it was to work around names especially when writing letters about their wedding. She huffed and said she was "going back to bed." This husband of hers, annoying as sin.

She remembered, when she was younger, her mother had encouraged her to not do what she had done: "*Don't move into his home too early. Don't let him choose your name. Don't let him change your identity.*"

No wonder her mother no longer guided her through her head. Her father must be clapping in the fiery pits. Every day she got more and more angered by this: the acceptance and the smiles, staying in her own little castle, which, this time, wasn't even her own. Sir's demeaning half-light-hearted, half-evil-inducing compliments which she couldn't even run away from. She simply gave glances to the knight standing guard, which read, "Are you seeing this shit?" and the knight's head simply shook in disappointment, adding comedic relief to her day-by-day entrapment.

One night, the wind outside was whistling louder than a morning bird. She had woken from the thunder, her body forcing her to leave the bed, and slowly walked down the dizzying silver stairs. She was careful to not wake Sir from his slumber; she would rather not hear his complaints, his queries, his pleas for her to come back to comfort him. She simply wanted to sit and watch as the rain pattered the porch.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Like the sweat on Sir's face, his body is always overheated and moist. Like a sponge, his holey faux personality absorbs all her energy. She wished she could run away, but there was no point in doing so, as she would wind up back in the tower or this castle. Cycles go in circles, and she couldn't get off the track.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Like the tears she'd shed when her mother had hugged her tight. Her tiny brain was fuzzy, dizzy by the scene at hand. How her mother had told her, "*You're inside my heart*," how she cried, "*I'll love you forever*." And when she opened her eyes, the room looked much dimmer. Breezier without her mother, she turned around and looked out the window. Out there—kinky brunette curls brushed against the wind, fading further and further away.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Like the blood that spewed from her father's metallic skin. It had spilled like a river, long sword damning his body. And the creator of such a dam standing tall, half-proud, half-scared. Her mother watched how the blood trickled and pooled. Her mother had shivered when she released the sword, as if, somehow, she was not the one who had driven it through. Her mother's hand remained on her heart. Minutes or hours passed and she continued to stare at the still body. Finally, with a tight blink of her eyes, she turned around, not facing any parts of the world, just brick.

Her vision became blurry, as the raindrops and trees started to mesh. In the corner of her eye, she saw a dark shadow. Her heart raced and she immediately turned around, only to be met with an unexpected surprise: Sir's knight.

A metal frame covered the knight's body, making it look as if it was a silver plate with a helmet against the wall. The only distinction was its open, sun-golden hand.

"Um, hello," she said. She was nervous to approach the knight, yet she was enchanted by the glimmering hand. Like a planet to the sun, she became attracted.

Then the knight *spoke*: “I’m sorry.” The voice was that of a woman, light and friendly, like an angel’s. “I just heard sobbing and I needed to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh.” She could only stare at the knight’s distinct hand. “Not truly.” Then her eyes drifted toward the helmet. “I didn’t know you spoke.”

“Neither does Sir.”

She raised her hands and lifted off the helmet. And there she stood, her pure golden skin illuminated in the most beautiful way due to the moonlight. She was like the rarest diamond she’d ever seen.

“Is there anything you need currently?” asked the knight.

“No,” she said, looking into the knight’s eyes—deep dark brown, sucking her in with their own glimmer. “I mean—well, do you have any paints?”

The knight put her helmet back on and disappeared into the darkness. It took a few minutes of looking at the rain for her to come back with a basket of paints. “We have no canvases but I could ask somebody to go to the market.”

“There’s no need.”

The knight nodded and went on her way. She began to paint her skin. Brush strokes calmed her down from the world. The paint felt smooth on her skin, like she was bathing in a golden fountain.

This routine happened almost every night. And sometimes she would get a visit from the knight, whose company she enjoyed. She was glad that someone in this castle could make her smile. Their conversations ranged from basic to philosophical, tiptoeing between friendship and something closer.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Dawn,” said the knight, hesitantly, “though nowadays I’m just called ‘Knight.’”

Her mouth was agape, about to make a consoling comment.

“Don’t look so down,” said Dawn. “I chose this life. The only way to protect myself is to be a knight.”

“I understand,” she said, and lay her head on Dawn’s shoulder, focused on painting her fingers a red tint, “but how can you pretend to be a knight without getting noticed?”

“Because it’s not pretend,” said Dawn, as she played with a loose bantuknot, raveling it up around her finger. “It’s a part of me.”

“Oh.”

The independence and uniqueness that Dawn exuded stunned her. How she had chosen to hide her golden skin, her voice, her personality, behind metal. Not for protection from a fight but from the world. She wished she had that much of a drive to commit to being her own knight. Her failed attempt only caused her to give in to her father’s words, blinded to the fact that others, like Dawn, had done what she failed to do. Though she did not dwell on it too hard. She had Dawn to protect her, to give her comfort, to confide in—and Dawn had the same in her.

One morning, she was reading the paper—reports on commerce, recent marriages, and, most notably, Sir’s earnings. The story went on about how he’d “saved a princess from herself, making him most noble,” and how she had tried playing dress up, perhaps even attempting to off herself in battle. Making up stories, starting rumors, all painting Sir as this hero and her as someone incapable of going outside.

“Did you write this?!” She pressed the page on the desk where he was sitting. She imitated his voice to make it sound loud, even though she was on the verge of breaking down and crying.

He smirked with his crooked-pointed teeth. “I don’t like to write...” he said.

There was a pause, and she filled the void with an energy she did not imagine her passive self to possess.

“...but I do like to tell a story.”

She shook her head. “Are you kidding me?” She squeaked like a mouse, which made him laugh. She slammed her hands on the desk and tried again, lacking emotion, mimicking the man closest to her once more. “Are you *kidding* me?!”

He was shocked for a moment, but only for a moment, as he stood and said, “I’m not.” He put his hand on her chin, smoothing it out. “Meek little Birdy,” he said like a flirt, “what are you going to do?”

She looked toward Dawn in the corner, and the knight seemed to be debating internally: palm squeezing the sword, then unsqueezing, then squeezing once more, as if on a loop. One night they had talked about how Dawn was ex-

tremely loyal, even to those undeserving. She pushed Sir's hands away from her and walked to the corner, abruptly grabbing the sword out of Dawn's scabbard. The hand was loose; she allowed her to take it.

When Sir turned around, he had no smile. He looked as if he wanted to beg for his life. She sent the blade through him swiftly, red trickling down the silver, soldier's blood in the river.

She collapsed in front of his body; it was like a part of her was gone. The part that held on to her father's word secretly, the part that did not want to believe her mother's words. She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up. Dawn, the shielded beauty, stood there looking down at her.

"You need to go."

Words that allowed her escape, *true* escape. Once Dawn gave her permission, she nodded, and with her hands still bloody, stood up and walked out of the palace without a thought.

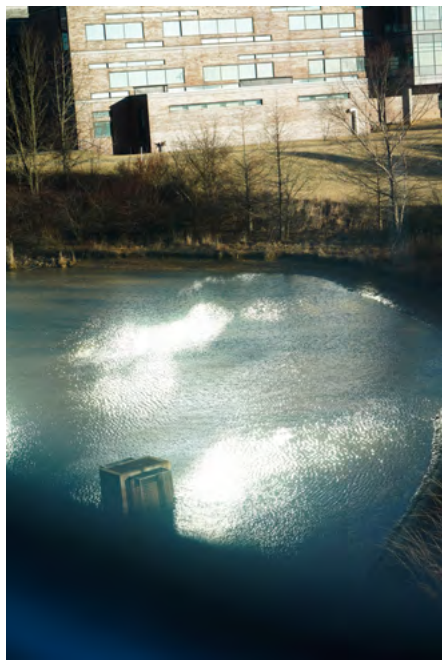
The familiar stares came back almost immediately, but this time they were more somber. The people did not try to interact with her or follow her. To kill a prince, would that be to kill a town? She was reminded of her mother, and as the sun started to set, she looked back at the place: it seemed far away. She regretted having left Dawn behind, and yet she walked in dead silence, the town getting smaller and smaller.

When she reached the outskirts of the woods, her mind finally caught up to her brain and processed what had just happened. She killed Sir, the man who reminded her of her father. Stuck inside his home as she was stuck inside her father's home. Familiarity gone, now it was up to her to keep the family lineage. She had abandoned Dawn, as her mother had abandoned her. And though she did not want Dawn to take the fall, she knew she would. She only hoped that resentment would not take over that knight's kind heart.

She looked down at herself in the river: brown skin and a proper face, though her eyes told horror stories. She felt a wave of *déjà vu*, and she couldn't shake the feeling or the pit in her stomach for the next few days as she followed the river.



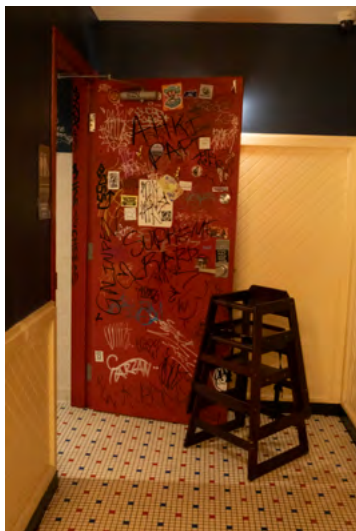
Kamani Johns / *Eclipse*



Kamani Johns / *Glare*



Jayana China / *Movement Between Two Worlds*



Jayana China / *Untitled*



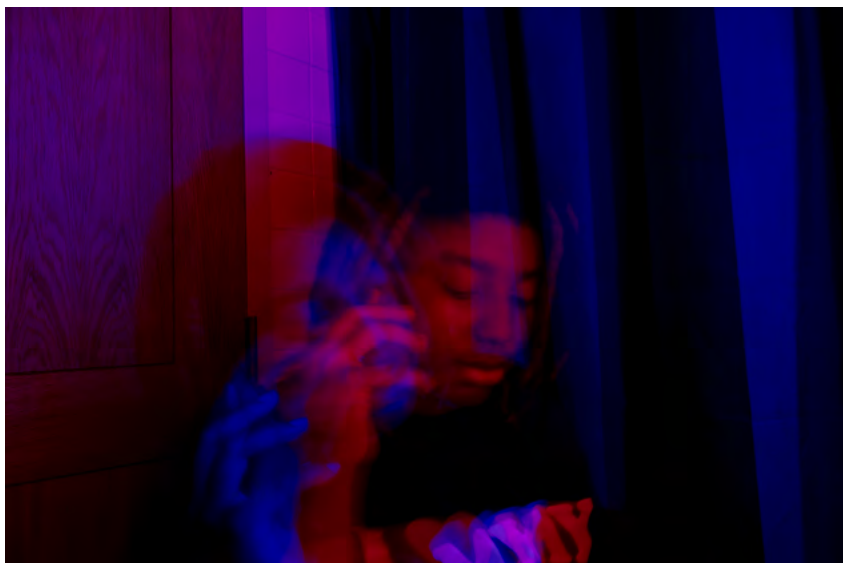
Jayana China / *In the Neighborhood*



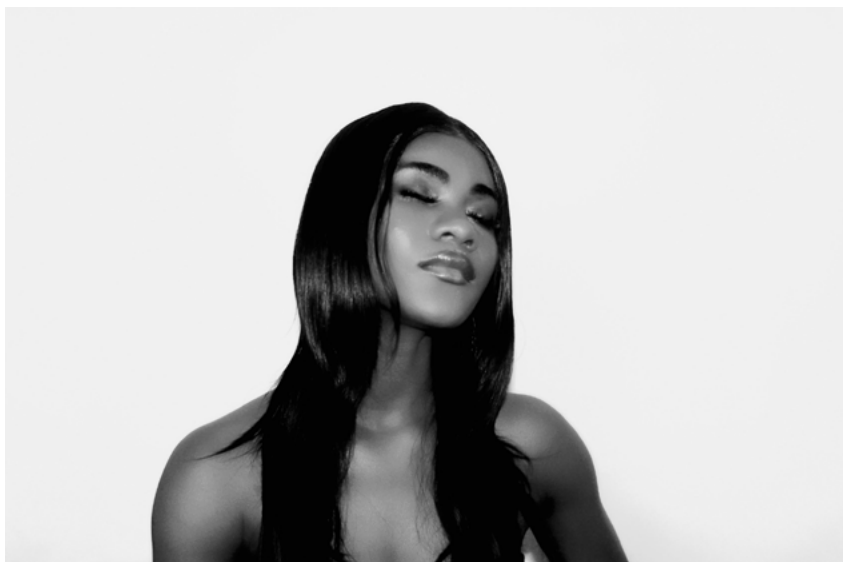
Amani Adams / *Couples Winter Break in FTL*



Amani Adams / *What's Hanging in the Greenhouse*



Nasherah Tucker-Heron / *Eclipses of the Heart*



Grace Quiah / *Every Step Forward is a Step Closer to Her*



Sai-Aja Bradley-Cross / *Still Life*



London Banks / *O.B.J.*



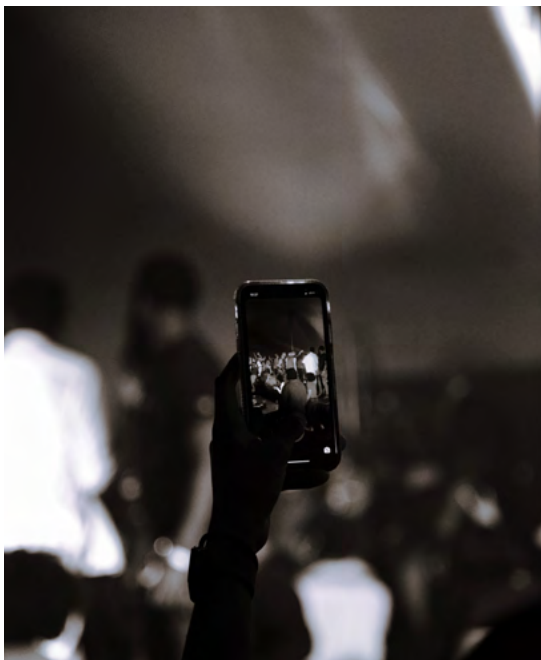
London Banks / *Gemini Rights*



Sidney George / *Joy*



Freddie Young / *Invisible Cage*



Freddie Young / *Borrowed Vision*

XX, ELIAS

It had been weeks—months, rather—and Nyomi had barely been able to pick up a pencil, a paintbrush, something, anything. Since the passing of her boyfriend of four years, she'd lost her creative spark—the one thing that usually kept her mind at ease. She took a glance around her art room and sighed heavily. It was a mess. Dozens of unfinished canvases were scattered all around the room, crinkled wads of paper filled the trash bin to the brim, and the smell of stale, sour paint resulted in a frown forming on Nyomi's face. Her art room was never the cleanest—it was an art room for crying out loud—but she was never careless with her supplies. Elias's death was taking a toll on her more than she'd like to admit.

She had met Elias almost five years ago at an art gallery where her work was being presented for the first time to the public. They had clicked immediately, and they became the best of friends before he asked her to be his girlfriend nearly a year later. He'd been there since the beginning of her career, and had been her biggest fan with any and everything she created. With him gone, Nyomi didn't know how to move on. He was her inspiration, and his death didn't make sense to her. He was healthy. How could someone so young and healthy leave just like that?

Forcing herself out of her head, she got up and headed into her bedroom. Their bedroom. It had been over two months and she had yet to go through his belongings.

"How could you leave me?" she choked, blinking back tears. Nyomi opened their closet to begin pulling his items from the space. A sob bubbled in her throat, and she couldn't hold back the tears as she pulled his favorite leather jacket from the back of the closet. Folded pieces of paper fell from the pocket, and Nyomi picked them up with shaky hands, wetting the papers with her tears.

They were letters, all addressed to her, and scented in his cologne. They were also dated—from before they started dating all the way to a month before he passed. Why didn't he give these to her? Anger, confusion, and curiosity all filled Nyomi's head as she tried to wrap her mind around the fact that he'd written letters to her but she had never received them.

One by one, Nyomi picked up the letters and read them aloud to herself.

August 8th, 2019

I met the most gorgeous girl about a month ago—that's you by the way—and maybe I'm just a hopeless romantic, but I think she's—you're the one. You're funny, confident, spunky, and everything I could have ever asked for in a woman. Can I be vulnerable for a bit? That scares me. I've never met anyone like you, and I'm scared I won't be able to keep up with your fast-paced energy, or your carefree lifestyle. I'm scared I won't be able to be the person you deserve. But I'll try.

xx, Elias

“You were everything to me, Elias,” Nyomi whispered, her voice so quiet she barely heard herself. “You were exactly the person I deserved. We deserved to be happy together. We did.” Sniffing, she folded the letter, and picked up the second one.

December 25, 2023

Merry Christmas, my love. I had the most amazing Christmas with you. The most amazing year with you. Probably my favorite year we've spent together thus far, but I have a confession. I was going to propose to you today.

Nyomi gasped and brought her hand to her mouth. More tears stung the backs of her eyes as she fought to keep the tears at bay. He wanted to marry her?

Yes, he wanted to marry her. Not knowing what to feel, she continued the letter, determined to know why he didn't propose that day.

While we were ice skating in Rockefeller Center, I had the ring in my coat pocket, ready to get down on one knee. You're the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. You're the love of my life, and I don't know what came over me, but I couldn't. Something was holding me back—maybe I still doubted I was the one for you, but I do love you, Nyomi Carter. More than you'll ever know. I hope you can forgive me for not going through with it. I'm going to keep the ring, though. For when I am ready.

xx, Elias

After folding that letter, Nyomi scrambled to her feet to run back to the closet. She rummaged through all of his pockets, all the boxes, until she came across the jacket he wore that Christmas day, tucked beneath the pile of clothes in the corner, and there, in the pocket, was a small black box. She stepped from the closet and opened it, her heart dropping when she found the ring box empty. He didn't keep it.

“I would’ve married you in a heartbeat, Elias,” she whispered. “I loved—love you.”

Wiping her eyes, she bent and picked up the last letter—the one dated exactly one month before his death.

September 1, 2024

This is probably the hardest letter I’ve ever written to you, but I need you to know. Nyomi, I love you so dearly, and I hope you won’t hate me after this, but there’s something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you...

The letter ended. What was it? What did he need to tell her? Did it have to do with his passing? Was there something more to it? Nyomi was confused and hurt. If this had something to do with his passing, why didn’t he just come clean. Instead, he chose to be a coward and hide behind a letter he never planned to give her. She needed to know. She *deserved* to know.

She got her phone from the kitchen counter and called Ethan, Elias’s best friend. If anyone knew something that she, his girlfriend, didn’t, it had to be him.

“Come on, E, pick up the damn phone,” Nyomi pleaded, and right before the phone went to voicemail, a smooth, deep voice sounded in her ears.

“Hey, Nyomi,” Ethan greeted her. “Is everything okay?”

“Hey, E. Yeah, everything is okay,” she lied before deciding to just rip the band-aid off. “Actually, no, it’s not. Are you free to talk?”

“Cafe on the corner of Palm and 33rd in 15?”

“Yeah, of course. I’m on my way.”

Nyomi hung up the phone, and quickly got herself together in a record time of ten minutes before heading out to meet Ethan at the cute cafe down the street from her apartment. She got there a few minutes before Ethan did and ordered herself an iced coffee and sweet treat. Once Ethan arrived and got himself something to eat, they sat at a little table in the corner, away from prying ears.

“You okay, Ny?” he asked once again.

Nyomi shook her head. “I finally went through Elias’s things.” Nyomi didn’t miss how Ethan flinched ever so slightly at the mention of his dead best friend’s name.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “I found letters addressed to me in the pocket of his favorite leather jacket. The last one wasn’t finished. He said there was

something he needed to tell me, but never stated what it was. Do you have any idea what he was referring to? It was dated exactly a month before his passing.”

A few moments settled between the two before Ethan sighed. “He was sick, Nyomi. He had an underlying heart condition, and it suddenly got worse. He wanted to tell you, but he was scared you were going to leave.”

Nyomi listened as Ethan explained the condition of her long-term boyfriend, almost-fiancé-to-be, and how he didn’t mean to keep it from her, how everything was under control—until it wasn’t. And by then, it was too late. His heart failed him, and he left her. When it came down to him almost proposing, he held back because he didn’t want to marry the love of his life if he couldn’t live with her forever. He didn’t want to put Nyomi through that pain. Nyomi kept her face neutral, her emotions and physical reactions hidden, but inside she was spiraling. She wanted to hate him. She wanted to hate him for keeping something as big as a chronic heart condition from her. For being so selfish that he didn’t propose because he was scared. She would have stayed. She would have stayed with him through anything. For better, for worse. In sickness and health. She would’ve stayed. And now he’s gone.

He left her.

And she didn’t hate him.

She still loved him.

Once Ethan finished explaining, he hugged Nyomi goodbye, telling her to never hesitate to call him for anything because he’s her friend as well, and they went their separate ways. Nyomi was confused, overwhelmed. She had hoped the conversation would have given her clarity, closure; however, it did anything but. She ran her thumb along her ring finger the entire walk back to her apartment, and the second she walked into her bedroom, with Elias’s things scattered about the floor, she broke.

She cried for her boyfriend, the man she was supposed to marry, her best friend, and for the life they were supposed to have together, and for herself. She cried until she couldn’t cry any longer. She cried until she was nothing but swollen eyes, a snotty nose, dried tears on her face, and sniffles.

Minutes turned into hours. Hours turned into days. Days turned into weeks, and Nyomi was no better than that day she had cried after Ethan exposed the truth to her. The past few weeks, Nyomi had kept herself holed up in her apart-

ment, only coming out to retrieve the takeout that she ordered almost daily, as she was too emotionally drained to cook anything for herself. Nyomi managed to get everything that belonged to Elias together, making two piles for what she wanted to keep for herself, and what she would allow his family and Ethan to go through before donating the rest.

She'd been avoiding her art room, however. The creative block had turned her art room into her worst nightmare. But today she would go in. She would sit at her easel, paintbrush in hand, until something, anything, came to her. She sat there for hours, until her brush finally touched the canvas.

Nyomi looked at the many different-colored brush strokes on the canvas. It was unlike anything she had ever made. It wasn't her usual style, but she poured all her emotions into it. It represented everything she felt about Elias, from the day they met, to the present day without him. It was perfect. She picked up a second canvas, and spent hours—days—creating the biggest portrait she'd ever made. It was Elias. And he had his breathtaking smile, and nothing but love in his eyes.

This was her closure. She had made something, and it was beautiful. And if no one else could understand it, she did, and that was all that mattered.

A week later, she held an art exhibition with the pieces she created in honor of Elias Martin, five of her newest pieces on display in the small gallery she rented. This collection was her favorite of them all—a tribute to love, loss, and healing. She found her closure in creating these, and she found her creative spark. Among the few dozen people who showed up, Ethan was one of them. Elias's best friend. Her own friend.

"This is amazing, Ny," he complimented her, giving her a big hug. "Elias would have loved to see this. What you have done—it's amazing, and you two truly deserved one another."

"Thanks, E," Nyomi smiled. She was proud of herself, as she should have been. She was moving on in Elias's name, and she felt lighter than she had in months. It felt good to feel like her old self again.

Ethan dug into his bag and pulled out another envelope. It was the same cream-colored envelope that contained the previous letters. "I think this belongs to you."

Nyomi took the letter from his hands and opened it.

September 29, 2024

Nyomi, whenever you're reading this, I'm assuming you know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was afraid you would have stopped loving me. Afraid you would have turned your back on me and walked away. But you never did. Even when you didn't know the truth. I'm sorry, and I hope you will still marry me, even in death.

xx, Elias

Reaching back into the envelope, Nyomi pulled out the item inside, nearly dropping it when she saw the most beautiful art deco ring. Details aside, it had the most gorgeous gold band with a stunning jewel resting on top. She slid it on her left ring finger, a single tear falling from her eyes to the floor. Her hand shook as she lifted it up to the light, the gem glistening in the sunlight.

“Even in death, I’ll always love you, Elias Martin. I would’ve been honored to be your wife.”

xx, Nyomi

A LION'S BRUTAL LOVE

i'm sure i'm setting myself up to be mauled by lions
i'm practically luring them to tear up my heart and the thing is, i would not mind
in fact, i invite them wholeheartedly, for the experience of my blood
painting the ground and the pain of feeling my skin being ripped apart
is the least of my worries, for i believe i've felt a pain much greater than death itself
and that pain is the love i cannot hold

the lions would only scratch the surface, their claws leaving marks that heal with time,
but this ache i carry in my chest—it refuses to fade, refuses to mend

i'd gladly face their fangs,
for each bite is sharper than the silence of unspoken words,
than the absence of love i once held so close
only to watch it slip away like sand through my fingers

i crave the brutality of a wound i can see,
rather than this invisible one that sinks deeper with every thought of you
for the love i can never touch is a wound
that no teeth could tear and no roar could end
it is a silence louder than any scream
and i would take the lions, every time,
if it meant i could escape the weight of longing that refuses to let me breathe

UNREQUITED LOVE

My love life is not my own,
My past and my parents control it.

Mentally,
Which makes it even more diabolical,
“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”
That apple is me.

But at least “I’m obedient”
I listen to the bible and I follow the commandment,
“Children obey your parents”

I attract Emotionally Unavailable men,
Fill me with empty promises and gifts.
Meanwhile their action showcase
No accountability and Unreliability
They remind me of my dad

Frustrating,
And just like I do him,
I forgive and let them back in.
Them not wanting to leave please me.
Blame Abandonment Anxiety,
She has been taunting me since I was 3.

Scared of commitment,
So I get entangled with the Zin to someone Zen
Because they cannot commit to me when they’re already taken.

Just like my mom, when I was created.

“Born from betrayal” The reminder brand on my skin.
Growing up feeling like a mistake, proof of my father’s sin.
I tried to move past it but instead I became it,
Twisted, isn’t it?

I don't trust easily, matter of fact, I don't do it at all,
One mistake and I make my walls so tall.
And the more you chase, the more I push you away.

Just don't feel safe,
For every time I have been wronged
It was by someone who wanted me first.
And I never understood how that work.

The hate I have for the word "No"
Stems from feeling entitled to the word "Yes."
A lesson she taught me best.
I'm a brat, but I promise I don't think it's a flex.

Hide but she always find me,
Every time I look in the mirror,
She's looking back at me.
Mommy Issues, inevitably trying to heal, but her claws are in me profoundly.

Daddy Issues with they Sue Storm strings tangle me still.

I use to have hope,
Believed in love and girl code.
Naive the world made me seem.
Now I walk on the thin line between love and hate.
My detachment game is so clean,
Like my wedding dress in my dreams.

These are chronic wounds,
Healing is not feasible
PTSD distracts me,
Snap me back to my reality.

I know with all I've said,
It doesn't put my character in the best light.
I promise that's not the case...
I have a heart of gold with a broken soul,
Or so I was told.

UNWANTED ITEMS

“**W**atch your step out there, you know that walkway is unstable,” Mama Claira would say to me every time I came over, peering at me through her old glasses, the kind that were connected by a thick string that laid across her upper chest. She was a lean, elderly woman with wrinkles that shaped her face and neck. I was never afraid of her but she was the type of woman that you just felt like you needed to respect.

I would go to her house every day after school so she could help me with my homework. I think the real reason was because nobody was ever home when I got out, but it was a plus that her house was only walking distance from Leadership Middle.

“I just wanted to look at the pretty pictures,” I’d say, so I could trick her into telling me another story about her early days and forget about my homework. Whenever I came in, she would be humming one of her old tunes or fixing up an already clean section in her home. Miss Claira lived alone. Sometimes, I felt like I was the only one keeping her active and busy because she would make sure there was a meal ready for me when I arrived, and that the space I stayed in until my mother came to get me was neat and smelled nice. My favorite was her homemade porridge. She had this secret ingredient that she put in it, but she said I was too young to know what it was.

I liked Miss Claira. She taught me how to love numbers. “Numbers are elements found in the difficulties of life” she would always say. There’s this thing she does whenever she’s doing something where she counts in sets of eight. I started to mimic her and try to follow the tunes she would sing. Miss Claira had the best voice I heard aside from my mother’s. She was always singing about the Lord, thanking Him for setting her free from something. I never really understood her, but I just knew I loved her.

“Why don’t we start working on your assignments and I’ll tell you about Mama Claira’s old life while we work. How does that sound, Melody?”

My mother told me that she’s the one who named me. She used to teach my mother voice lessons, practically raising her in the absence of her own parents. Now she sings at the church where my father pastors, about twenty minutes from the house. Miss Claira took me every Sunday for service because my parents would leave so early in the morning that I wouldn’t even see them by the

time I woke up to get dressed. Even at the church, I didn't recognize them as my parents because I never saw them much outside of that. The last Mother's Day at our church, I bought my mother a gift, but I ended up having to give it to Miss Clairra because there were just so many people insisting on seeing my mother after the service that I found it physically impossible to spot her. I remember her being so tired that night that I never even got to wish her a Happy Mother's Day. I think sometimes she forgets that she has a daughter. Or maybe she just spends too much time at the church to have any remaining space for me in the makeup of her mind.

"Do you wanna come over after school again tonight?"

I was texting my boyfriend—as if we weren't walking hand-in-hand down the broad hallway of East Valley High. I had met Denver on the first day of sophomore year during our first choir rehearsal. His silky dark skin and soft brown eyes are what drew me to him after the luscious head full of natural brown locs. His broad shoulders hung just right on his 6-foot body, and his arms were heavy enough to weigh me down, strong enough to carry me up, and comfortable enough to just hold me. When he sang, his baritone sounded like it came from the same breath that had been blow into the dust to make the first man. Every time I heard it, I got a shiver down my spine that I just knew Mama Clairra would call *unholy*, but I didn't care. I wanted all of him.

"That boy is no good for you, Melody, and you know it."

I still went down to Miss Clairra's place to check on her a few times each week after school, but now she was "too old to do anything other than thank the Lord," as she liked to say. I brought Denvy to her place a couple times, and she said he was too mature for me.

"Does that boy know the Lord?" she asked. I knew Miss Clairra had my best interest at heart, but sometimes I felt like she didn't want me to have fun or even live a little.

"Well, Mama C, he's nice to me, and he cares about me. I don't understand why you don't like him." I genuinely didn't know what she disapproved of about Denver. In my eyes, we were the perfect match and no one could take him from me.

"Baby, I just want you to be careful. You never know what any of these boys really want. They can front and pretend all they want, dragging you along, just until they get you right where they want you, and at the end of it all, you're the one hurt and left to deal with it." She spoke so passionately that it almost sounded like it hurt her to see me with him.

“He’s not going to hurt me. I wouldn’t even let him do that. Can you stop babying me for once? I am 16. I know what I’m doing.”

“I trust you, Melody. But please at least ask him to come to church with us one of these Sundays. Let him at least meet your parents. They don’t even know what’s going on in your life. How can you expect God to be okay with him if your own parents don’t know about him?”

I stopped going to church throughout the week because I saw how it had worn out my parents and spit them out on the side of the road like unwanted items that would eventually find their way back to the same spot the next day. Watching the way they lived made me think that God was this Master you had to work for with all your might or else He would kill you or something. I didn’t ask any questions. I just saw them keep at it like it was their life’s purpose. They didn’t really speak much about it. Well, they didn’t really speak much. To me at least.

“Psst. Do you wanna go to my place tonight instead?” Denver whispered to me as we sat down for our Calculus class.

“Now, babe, you know Mama Clairra would never let me do that.”

“Yeah, but who says we have to tell her,” he smirked.

Although I trusted him a lot, he scared me whenever he spontaneously did things like this. We had never had a sleepover, but sometimes, when we were alone together, there was this tension that I couldn’t quite understand.

I never really had a boyfriend before high school, just a lot of crushes that I eventually got over, so Denver was my first everything when it came to being with a boy. He took me on my first-ever date to this fancy restaurant and had us color coordinate and everything: it was so cute. But afterwards the tension came up and it wasn’t like the first time I saw him. This reminded me that his heaviness could weigh me down just as much as it could carry and cuddle me. I decided not to tell Mama C any of this because I didn’t want her to think I was soft and didn’t know how to handle myself.

“Come on, Melon, just this one time. My parents are going away for a couple days and you know they won’t mind you coming over.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll just tell her we’re not stopping by after school then.”

Sometimes I felt like I could see straight through him. Sometimes he looked at me like he wanted to take the piece of me that he couldn’t have because I didn’t want to give it to him. Sometimes I kind of felt like he saw me as a

trophy he could show off and then put right back on top of the shelf when it no longer satisfied him.

I should have listened to Mama Clairra that afternoon when she told me not to go. I should have listened when she told me before I could even mention it to her. Told me something was bothering her and that she was praying about it when I called her. I should have listened to my gut feeling while I was on that phone or while I was sitting in that Calculus class when he first asked me.

I should have listened. I should have. I should. I...

hated myself.

hated everything.

hated the fact that my parents were always at that church.

hated that I went.

hated that I let *him* do it.

hated that I was *his* trophy.

hated *him*.

I spent the next couple of weeks at home, taunted by the memories of what I didn't do. How I could have moved his hand the first time. How I could have said "No" instead of giggling out of uncertain pleasure disguised as "*I. DON'T. LIKE. THIS.*" How I could have put him in check when he said he had been drinking before. How I could have *really* questioned why I liked him when Mama Clairra questioned why I liked him. How I could have just gone to Mama Clairra's place like I always do.

How if I did that, I would still have the piece of me that he took forcefully. How if I did that I wouldn't be sitting in a case like his trophy. How if I did that I would still be here in totality. How if I did that I probably still wouldn't be okay because I was already hurting. Hurting before the actual pain of *him* forcing himself into my *woman*. Hurting before I was even born because my parents didn't care enough to plan for me, instead caring for the church like those people were their children. Hurting when they unofficially gave me up for adoption and practically forced me to find another home to tend to my needs and watch over me, as if I was an unwanted item they'd left in their kitchen.

VOICELESS TEARS

*In Loving Memory of My Sweet, Funny, Beautiful,
Loving Grandmother, Yamina Gouissem*

Mima, you'll be glad to know,
I got married, three radiant kids, and a wonderful husband,
A beautiful life.
That's a lie...
But it's always good to see you smile.

I hope you're not too cold,
I know how much you despise the cold.

Last night, childhood visited me in a dream.
She traced the wrinkles on my forehead,
Then sighed: "You've grown older," she said.
Do you believe her, Mima?
I honestly thought she died,
Yet there she stood, strikingly vivid.

The house still stands. Don't worry.
He sends his regards. The scents long for you.
The oven always murmurs:
"They don't smell like her anymore."
"They reek now," he whispers.

The teapot sits hollow,
Like my heart since you've been gone.
The mint leaves fell off.
They stood for ages, waiting for you.
They thought you'd be back.
Little did they know.

There is an echo in the walls—
A void where your voice once lived.
I called your name last night.
No one replied. Only silence did.
I swear, Mima, it was so loud.

That night told me to remember you,
I wept so loudly. My tears drowned the silence,
Then she said: “I heard you laugh.”
Your hand told me a joke when I held it, Mima.
The hand then whispered:
Humor shall live,
At least he did.

I now smile when I recall your jokes.
I remember them well, Mima.
I remember that night, too.
Yet, laughter is the only thing I want to remember.

WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Told how I'm supposed to act
Approached for my looks
Preyed on for my body
What about my personality?
What about my career?
What about my goals?
I am smart, creative, determined
Strong, hard-working, brave
I have value, I have worth
Told how my body should look
Eat more, work out, don't eat this
I'm a Barbie doll trapped in a false dream
Forced to move to their will
Forced to marry a Ken
Stringing me along, I can't escape
Cut my strings, I want to walk on my own
I'm Woody when Andy leaves
Waiting for Andy's return but Sid comes instead
Unable to fight back, I lose
Escape on my mind, I'm determined
Time to wage war for freedom
I feel stronger than ever
Hear my voice, it's beautiful
A bird singing to her children
Leading horses to water,
Oasis feeling like home
Powered up to fight my enemies
Supergirl without his Kryptonite
I am an unstoppable force
Trained my army of voices to shout
Beacon of hope for all, we'll strive.

BROKEN TOYS

When I pick you up
The melody feels open
In my toy car I slam the door
It closes with that satisfying thud
Let's Ah Go on this joyride deluxe
The games begin
"Oh, play with me, play with me!"
Like the lights sprinkled on the inside roof, our stars align
She is your Barbie dreamhouse
You're ready to move in
You are her dancing King
Boom!
Did you see that?
Bam!
My moves are like Mick Jagger
"Alright, Grandpa," we laugh
Her jokes are like hopes that rip through my soul
As the games we play root joy in my chest
These games are the best
We're better than Monopoly or Scrabble
Never too much for each other
Y'know that kind of, enough said that leaves comfortable silence
More and more we hop on that same game
To laugh at jokes and drive around
The main mission becomes a side quest
I stop checking my phone for Lamar
Or my side chick's texts
Slowly but surely, Barbie steals my time
Like Grand Theft I can't drive by
I can't drive I...
I start looking in her eyes
It's funny how hard you try to hide
On these rides, I know it would be fun if I had a Lamborghini

But we crusin' in my tricked-out Little Tike
Like a game of Sorry, I instantly regret the words,
"Are you enjoying the ride?"
She snickers
She crafts up a story about how this journey has been life-changing
We together are the lights changing
From pink to gold, she puts me at ease
Dare I say our love is a breeze
From Gold
Breathe
From Gold to green she reminds me that coding isn't that easy
"Get to the point!" she begs
I sing, I dance, I scream, I bother
"But I'm sitting right here, don't you still want to play with me?"
I set my mind back on the road and reset that dreaming
Only broken toys know that feeling
The last time you get to play together
She picks you up like you're another
She rips your stuffing as if the fluff doesn't matter
My teddy bear love, turned to a snake the morning after.

WHAT ABOUT ME?

From the day I was born, preparations for my funeral began. It wasn't just my parents doing the planning; it was the whole village. From the color I would wear, to the procession of events, even to the food that would be served—nobody could stop talking about it. The star of the show, of course, would be the king, dead for exactly 10 days. I pictured him in his gleaming white clothes—eyes closed, face neutral, carried by a procession of six able-bodied men. There would be dead silence as they lowered him into the grave, and only after he was covered with the burial mat would I step in. I could almost hear the cheering and whistles from everyone. I would emerge in my equally white clothes, beaming with delight. I would show no fear as I went through my dance routine, a series of steps that I had spent the greater part of my life perfecting. The smile would not falter as I walked into the grave and stood next to the king. Then they would bury me with him...alive.

My parents practically ignored me. What use was it wasting emotions and sentiments on a child that wasn't supposed to live past the age of 16? I watched as they doubled down all their love on my twin sister, Ivie. She was their golden child; only the best was good enough for her. Her life consisted of beautiful fabrics, expensive jewelry, and what had now become daily marriage proposals from far and wide. The men couldn't get enough of her luscious copper skin and beady eyes—proof that she had only known a life of luxury. Her skin didn't know what it felt like to toil in the scorching sun; her eyes didn't know what it was to dread sleep, for fear of never-ending nightmares. She didn't know what it felt like to be invincible, to wake up every morning wishing that your family would show a little love, just enough to make you feel human.

The upside to having certain death looming over you is that you get to appreciate every moment. You get to live life earnestly and properly, grateful for every experience that you are blessed to witness. That was my mindset, until, of course, I was standing face-to-face with a palace guard who had just come to inform me of the king's death.

Ten Days. That is exactly how much time I had left before I was to be buried with the king.

The mere thought of it sent me hurling out every content of my stomach. I couldn't understand the sudden fear that I was experiencing. This had been common knowledge since I was old enough to remember. I knew that I was never going to experience a proper childhood. I had been groomed all my life to serve the king in the "afterlife." I had to learn how to prepare his favorite meals, how to lay his bed (or lay in it, depending on what he wanted), how to perform basic rituals that would ensure his purity in the land beyond, how to serve him and make sure that he never lacked. Now that his death had been confirmed and everything was becoming a reality, why did I feel a sense of dread settle around my heart?

I stood in front of the village consultant two days later, my heart in my mouth. I tried to steady my nervousness with long, deep breaths. My eyes slowly scanned the crowd of people before me. Father stood front-and-center, face cold, eyes bearing no emotion. I felt a pang in my chest as I tried to fight the realization that he bore no trace of sadness. If I had looked a bit closer, past the slight frown and stone-cold stare, I would have perhaps seen the faintest bit of regret. I spaced out for the next five minutes; the consultant's voice jolted me back to reality.

"The gods have accepted her," he shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear. "She is clean"

There was an immediate eruption of applause, and the crowd rushed to congratulate my father. I watched his face break into a smile as a handful of people patted him on the back. I had to try hard to fight the bile in my throat. If I was the one about to die, why was he getting congratulated? The worst part was that not once did he glance my way. My peripheral vision caught the consultant approaching me from the now dispersing crowd of people.

"You are scared. That's not good," he whispered, barely inches from my ear.

My heartbeat quickened; I didn't even know that was physically possible. The consultant walked towards Father. I wanted to call him back, let him know that I wasn't scared, but for some odd reason, I couldn't find my voice. I felt a knot form in my stomach as he whispered into Father's ear. The knot grew even tighter as Father's eyes settled on mine. The frown was unmistakable.

The walk back home was very quiet. I purposely slowed down my pace so that I would fall naturally behind. Father had gone back to ignoring me and I felt surprised by the relief that washed through my veins. I sighted our large compound not too far off and my body yearned for the comfort of my bed. There were some men gathered in front of our house. More people to congratu-

late the family on passing my purity test? I swallowed a lump and braced myself for the disgust that I was certain would follow.

Because I had lagged behind, Father reached the men before I did. I expected a conversation to start between them so that I could slip into the house without them noticing, but their interaction was rather odd. Father nodded at them, and they began to approach me. My almost nonexistent survival instincts failed to warn me, and when I realized what was going on, it was already too late. The men grabbed me and started dragging me towards the back of the house. I kicked and screamed as hard as I could, but I knew I had no chance against five hefty men.

I was thrown inside a dark room, and the door was shut abruptly. I heard chains wrapping around the outside handle. At first, I thought that they were only going to keep me in there for a few hours to teach me a lesson, but the hours turned into days, and the realization dawned on me: Father was keeping me there till the burial.

I cried myself to sleep those nights. I was a total disappointment to my family. I was supposed to be glad that the gods had chosen me to accompany the king to the afterlife. Because of this great honor, my family and I enjoyed wealth in its purest form. Father had been a dirt-poor fisherman, barely able to afford food. I was the only reason he had risen to societal relevance, and now I was threatening to take that away from him. I needed to be grateful and at peace with the gods' decision! Maybe if I said it over and over again, I would get rid of the strange feeling I had about the whole situation, a feeling I had been struggling to identify. At first, I thought it was just nervousness. Next, I thought it was fear, the kind of fear that meant I was going to have to do it scared. However, as I had time to sit with my thoughts, I finally realized what it was.

I wanted to live!

Adrenaline flooded my veins. All my life, everyone else had made decisions for me. It was as if I was being reared as a farm animal, waiting to be slaughtered. I was done being a pushover. I had been told that I was going to die young and the people around me had framed my mentality in such a way that not accepting this decision was termed treason. I remembered one of their favorite stories to tell, the story of Edouwaye. Twenty years ago, she was to be offered as a sacrifice to appease the gods and she had had the same will to live. The night before her appointed death, she ran away to dwell with the outsiders, and her

family is still being heavily punished for her atrocity. Not only did she refuse to give up her life, but she also sought solace in those outsiders with the forbidden religion. A serious slap on the face of the gods. My heart quickened in resolution. I had to find a way to get out of the room, out of the village, to the forbidden settlement outside our village borders. I needed a plan.

It was at night, three days before my burial, when I heard the chains unravel from the door handles. I almost cried for joy as the door opened, but my heart dropped as I saw who was standing in front of me, a cloth bundle pressed to her chest. It was Ivie.

“Come on!” she softly whispered.

I scrambled to my feet and walked towards her. Ivie’s eyes welled up with tears, and her voice quivered as she spoke.

“Mother said they would leave us alone if we failed to provide you for burial. I love the life we have, but not at the expense of your life.” She had started crying mid-sentence.

“Ivie,” I barely croaked as she shoved the cloth bundle into my hands.

“Warm clothing and expensive jewelry. The outsiders will love you,” she said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

My emotions were getting the better of me and I was going to start crying, but her expression changed in almost an instant. It was back to the stone-cold look she had given me almost every day for the past fifteen years.

“Run!” It was an order.

I immediately darted into the forest next to us, my hands desperately grabbing the bundle to my chest. The chilly night air forced itself down my lungs as I pressed on. I was relentless, not stopping even for a quick breath. With each passing minute, my bare feet throbbed from the sharp sticks and stones I encountered in my path. Nonetheless, I wasn’t stopping until I was at the border. My mind replayed the events surrounding my escape repeatedly until tears clouded my vision. I could barely see as I continued onward, feet bleeding, tears streaming down my face.

When I reached the border, I didn’t stop. I kept on running until I saw some people. I could barely make out their faces before I collapsed onto the ground in front of them. As I drifted off into unconsciousness, I faintly heard the commotion I had caused unraveling among them. I was finally safe.

Months passed, and the runaway girl found safety in the community of outsiders. She finally had a new chance at life, a fair shot just like everyone else. She did her fair share helping her new community. When she wasn't working, she listened to the birds. They brought stories from her past life, updates on what had happened since she left.

The birds sang the story of a father who tried to save face in his community. He refused to be humiliated after one of his twin daughters ran away to save herself instead of agreeing to be buried alive. They sang about a substitute who the father had provided, to take the place of his runaway daughter. It was her twin sister, Ivie. The substitute had fought tooth and nail for her life and had refused to perform the ceremonial dance; she was beheaded and buried beside the king. The birds told the story of grief and guilt that would forever plague the heart of a mourning sister. They sang about the greed in the heart of men. A type of greed so bad that a father had no problem rendering himself childless if it meant he could keep all the worldly possessions he had managed to acquire.

The runaway girl cried for hours on end. She regretted not taking her twin sister with her. She blamed herself for everything that happened, and her guilt stayed with her for the rest of her life. People often wonder: Was there karma for the father? Did he at least see the consequences of his actions? Well, it seemed karma had failed to act this one time. All that was left of this story was a girl and a relentless, soul-crushing remorse rooted deep in her conscience, shaping her thoughts and actions with the unbearable weight of what can never be undone.

BEAUTY

Beauty.

B-E-A-U-T-Y.

What is *beauty*?

Well, it's a noun. A person, place, or thing that is pleasing.

Some may even say the quality of attraction.

Beauty has been mistaken for charm, the ability to arouse admiration.

I can look at you and say that you're beautiful because of what I can see.

Beauty has been mistaken for appearance,

the way that someone or something looks.

Well, in my opinion, *beauty* is difficult...

Why? Because she keeps changing.

Not necessarily by herself, but by the people who think
they are in charge of telling her who she is.

These people have set standards for her since she was born,
revising her based on how they feel, or what they think she should be.

Beauty has never gotten to define herself,

or set her own standards.

Altered, modified, distorted, misrepresented,

mistrusted, different, overlooked, distinct, unique, set apart.

Beauty begins to sound familiar.

How come it is that whenever there is an outcast among us—

one who doesn't look like us, doesn't behave like us, is new to us—

we take it upon ourselves to make them feel like an outcast?

to make them *feel* like they are less than...

to make them *feel* like they could never be "us"...

to make them *feel*...

I think I need to apologize to *beauty*,
for calling her difficult.
Because it's not necessarily her that I oppose,
but all the people who have taken it upon themselves
to change who she is because of how they *feel*.

But the truth of the matter
is that hurt people hurt people.
Now does that justify how they treated her?
No!
They mocked her. They spit in her face. They called her names.
They tripped her on the playground. They tore up her math homework.
They played hot potato with her dignity. They cut her hair. They cursed her out.
They took advantage of her. They stripped her naked and molested her.

Beauty begins to sound familiar.

Why?
Because *beauty* is writing this right now.
And she's reading it.
And she's listening to it.
And she's imagining it.

Now, I hope you didn't mistake *beauty* for a person.
You see, the thing is, there needs to be a standard set for beauty.
And I'm not talking about by the ones who've changed her,
I'm talking about by the *One* who IS *beauty*.

PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS

I dribble, I pass, I shoot
Just an athlete is what they make me out to be
But what do you see?
Are you an enemy or a lover?
Who are you to put me in a box?
Who are we to define one another?
Days pass
Reality fades
Perception is in the eye of you
Maybe you care too much what they say
They Listen yet still judge
They support but still criticize
And as the days go by...

I dribble, I pass, I shoot
Problems answered by faith get overshadowed by worldly views
Are we what they make us out to be
Or what the man above
Who unconditionally loves
He who set the uneasy free?
Whether I dribble, whether I pass, whether I shoot
In any and every room I am unapologetically me
A thug, a thief, a hoodlum
Preconceived notions that I'm not supposed to be anything more
Yet their ceilings are my floors
Visionaries who dreamed without limitations
Who dreamed without worry of criticism from the status quo
Who dreamed with an end goal to open doors
We are a community meant for more
Yet a community who settles for less
Our journeys intertwined
To create peace of my mind
We are forever and eternally blessed.

90 MINUTES EVERY WEEKEND: A SELF-REFLECTION

“**Y**ou have to be crazy to be a goalkeeper.”

I was in Valley Stream State Park, dressed in all-black Storelli shorts, a black jersey, and pink socks with shin guards to match, along with gloves that smelt like a dirty old pair of running shoes and always left my hands slightly sticky. The sun was beaming down on my two high pigtails, making my dark brown hair hot, and my scalp burn, yet the faint autumn breeze and my crispy breaths reminded me that summer was over.

The phrase echoed in my head, floating from ear to ear like a reminder of the mentality that comes with the position. I was scared; I didn't belong in goal. I was too small, too scared; not good enough, not strong enough. All my sweat, blood, and tears at the practices before meant nothing because it wasn't real. It couldn't be real. I was not ready. Everyone was looking at me. Nobody could really depend on *me* to play well and not make mistakes. My heart pumped like it was going to jump straight out of my chest and run a marathon.

The first coach I ever had told me that: “You have to be crazy to be a goalkeeper.” And I have thought about it every time I've stepped on the field since I was eight-years-old. The game captivated me. Embraced and held me. Brushed my hair back out of my face and snuck it behind my ear, tucked me in at night and was my bedtime story, too. My mother always told me she admired my dedication to the game and that she could always tell I was passionate and enthusiastic about it.

Lacing up my cleats and sliding on my putrid gloves has been transformative. The stress and darkness that have always been trapped inside my head seep through my cleats into the turf. For 90 minutes every weekend, I am in control. I am completely self-aware and constantly thinking about the next move. Anxiety comes over me in waves; however, unlike my usual stomach-churning, thought-racing anxiety, it elevates me above everything happening outside the game. I am levitating. I am holding the strings of my everyday life and enacting something out of pure passion. At *that* moment, nothing else matters.

In seventh grade, I read Tim Howard's book, *The Keeper: The Unguarded Story of Tim Howard*. I was captivated by Tim Howard, and still am. At the

time, Tim Howard, who has Tourette's syndrome, was the goalkeeper for the US Men's National Soccer team. Another goalkeeper's view on controlling anxiety through soccer made me feel like there was a community waiting to embrace me.

Upon finishing the book, I researched Howard's best saves. He inspired me to strive to become a professional athlete and still does. That was my first dream and it's still what I want to do today.

I studied him. I did this after school, ritualistically, for a month. I studied the way Howard's body moved and the reaction and sound of the crowd cheering. It was both loud and completely quiet, like white noise. I longed for it. I thought the only way I was going to feel the love and support from the cheering crowd was by fully becoming and embodying Tim Howard.

One random winter afternoon, I blurted to my mom, "I wish I was a boy, and I wish I had Tourette's."

My mother's face became tainted with dismay and confusion. She let out an aggravated, "Ariel, no you don't. You are a beautiful girl and shouldn't wish anything like that on yourself."

At the time, I could not understand why she did not want me to be just like Tim Howard. My mother always wanted the best of me, the best *for* me. At the time, I couldn't imagine why she didn't want me to be just like one of the greatest goalkeepers ever.

Later, I was diagnosed with Essential Tremors. When I was 11, I first noticed that my legs would twitch, or my hands would shake a little. I didn't think it was bad until one afternoon when I was using a rotary cutter to make masks. My hand had a tremor, and my finger started gushing blood. As I was washing off my hand, I noticed that I had almost cut off the tip of my middle finger. My hand was cold. I was scared. Not only did I nearly lessen the length of one of my digits, but we were also in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had only one solution: hide it. I covered it up, wrapping it tightly to keep the finger together and to stop the blood from rushing out like a faucet.

Around four hours later, my father saw my finger and asked me to show him. Upon unraveling the dense bandaging and tape, I tried my best not to scream from both pain and terror. The finger looked like a raw breakfast sausage that had been finely cut with a straight razor down to the bone. It felt like I dipped it in boiling oil. Horrified by the discolored finger and the constant flow of blood, my mother rushed me to the emergency room, where the doctors scrambled to glue the finger back together.

Consequently, but with good reason, I was out of soccer for about a month and a half, until the nerves in my finger fully healed and became less tender. The days started getting longer, and watching my teammates and other goalies train was painful. It felt like a prison sentence.

I was known for making the biggest and best saves. However, during my first game back, we lost because I missed a shot. To worsen the blow, I was being evaluated in that game to test my readiness after returning from an injury. The cheering that I loved so much suddenly turned to bitter silence, and the air grew heavy. The white noise that I loved so dearly grew dark and silent. The silence pierced my ears. I felt like I was sinking. “Would I miss the next one?” It was as if my ability and capability were being measured by one goal.

After the game, I was silent. I didn’t want to talk, I was embarrassed. I felt as though I had let everyone down. I wasn’t receiving my usual high praise after the game. All because of one game, one goal, one mistake—my mistake.

I expressed my sentiments to my mother, and with a contented expression she looked me in the eyes and said, “Ariel, for some, you’re only as good as your last save.”

It was as if that one sentence put everything in perspective for me. My relationship with soccer, fans, practice, and self-care—it all fell into place in my head. I was happy and once again the game warmed me, comforted me, embraced and held me. Brushed my hair back out of my face and snuck it behind my ear, tucked me in at night and was my bedtime story, too.

Spectators will cheer for you in your winning moments; however, when you lose, they do not care about your previous saves. Your hard work becomes disregarded. “Do better. Work harder. You’re falling off. Do you even want to play?” You become disregarded. I soon came to the understanding that my value as a player is not measured by the white noise. I do not play for them; neither did eight-year-old me. As an athlete, I should not be playing a game to please other people. I should be playing a game because I am passionate about it. Because when I was anxious or felt alone, it was there for me. Because it connects me to some of the most influential, kind, and important people I know today. Because eight-year-old me found a purpose in the game that existed nowhere else but inside her head.

I do not play for spectators, for noise, or sly comments regarding my ability, and the fact that I played as if I did was shameful to me. If I wanted that, I would get up in the morning, inhale an extremely hot, unenjoyable cup of cof-

fee, eat a bagel, and go to work behind a desk for eight hours doing something I only semi-enjoy.

Society makes you feel as though you need to keep up with standards and appeal to *everyone's* norms and expectations but *not your own*. I am most proud of myself for this realization because it has allowed me to play for more purposeful reasons, and it has helped me come into myself and be unapologetically me. I play for my coach, team, and family; but, most importantly, I play for myself. For 90 minutes every weekend, *I* am in control.

GLASSES

I have a favorite pair of glasses.
They're rimmed black, lenses tinted, and fit my face like a glove.
Unfortunately, they cloud my vision, since they're not prescription.
See, when I put these glasses on and I see the world,
I see it as empty as a Solo cup after a frat party.

Faces are blurred and voices are muted,
Colors are melted and touches are barely there.

See, I have a favorite pair of glasses.
Whenever I put them on, I seem to hear a song.
It speaks of a woman who has lost her way,
Trying to find herself again after changing for love.

My favorite pair of glasses sometimes hurt to put on.
They stab at my eyes, forcing them to perceive my friends as people
Who wish me harm, my body as a ruined temple God wouldn't visit,
And my mind as a desert wasteland.

I can't see my eyes.

Whenever I wear my glasses, they blur my vision
To the point I can't see myself.
I look in the mirror and it seems as though
I can't see my soul. Who am I?

My favorite pair of glasses always takes something from me.
They first took away my self-worth:
I couldn't feel pretty without wearing them outside,
Like attractiveness was something I could no longer find.

Then, they took my sense of vision, and I was
No longer able to see the good in me and others,

Always suspecting that one wants something from me.
Transactions, translations, cha-ching, no patience.

Lastly, they took my sense of identity.
Who am I without these feelings?
I've let them fester in me so long that it feels like home,
But a toxic sludge inches its way all over the house.
And now I'm so lonely.

But hey. At least I have my favorite pair of glasses.

FROM ME TO YOU

I've never wished death on a person,
Other than the one I stare at in the mirror each day.
Because I can't help but scratch and push against her,
Wondering why she would ever try to break herself
And mold for someone else?

And I chastise her, because she's what I never can be.
A free lover, one who continues to cry unsung tears,
Tears for people who never would bleed for her.

And the hardest part about looking at her,
With her bloodshot eyes and snotty nose,
Is that I blame her.

I blame her for convincing us that we were in love,
When all we wanted to do was prove to others that
We were worthy of it.

Worthy of the sacrifices we gave to others,
Worthy of the bruises that stained our skin,
Of the puffy eyes and dried nose curled up on our tired faces.

Worthy of the pain that brings us to a dilapidated temple of delusions and
imagination.

I lash out at her because we deserve to be happy,
To not feel that love is hard or something akin to a desert.
And we, parched and aching, search for an oasis.

Why can't she see me on the other side?
Why can't she see the reality instead of the blindside?

We are not worthy of such pain.
We are worth more.
We deserve more.

—*Kaliyah Greene*

TRIPLE M

She thought she heard something. She hesitated, then listened intently. The warm water cascaded over her, soothing her tense muscles. She debated returning to her routine, pondering what could be more perilous than the man who had invaded her bedroom just forty minutes earlier. As the phone rang on that chilly evening, Cynthia stood in the bathroom, washing away the traces of her infidelity. It wasn't the first time such a thing had occurred—not that month, not that week, not even that day. It had become a recurring cycle. She oscillated between moments of unfaithfulness and then loyalty and unfaithfulness again.

Why did people use such a weighty term for this extracurricular activity—infidelity? Wasn't it just sex? Could one man truly satisfy a woman? She believed a woman's desires were like an expansive forest, needing more than one man's efforts to be fully explored. But a man's desires? Merely a small thicket that a single woman could turn upside down.

After all, that was a role she played so well for her husband. Had he been unlucky to end up with her? She didn't think so. She had been a good wife—not just a wife, but also a mistress. Though she wasn't the submissive partner her husband had always yearned for, she had turned their bedroom into a haven. She had always given her best. Well, not her best, but her husband's version of the best. Her true best? That was reserved for a few wayward men out there. Like the one who had left her bedroom less than an hour ago after sixteen unforgettable minutes—an experience he would never have again. She wished she would never have to meet Myles again. His name was the definition of the distance she wished he kept from her.

This time, she heard it clearly—the phone ringing, slicing through the tense evening air. Something was unsettling about it, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. But she decided it could wait. Right now, she needed the longest shower of her life. As the water streamed over her, she thought of Martin Munene, one of her many lovers—the one who had been there since their university days.

She remembered how she had met him. It was her first week at the University of Nairobi. The moment the elevator doors glided open, their eyes locked. She hesitated to step inside. He was the only occupant, and he smiled as though he

could sense her hesitation. She smiled back, a bit sheepishly, and stepped in.

“Are you scared?” he blurted out.

She thought it was the dumbest thing a man had ever said to her, yet he stammered while answering his own awkward question. “Obviously, a handsome dude like me can’t scare you.” There it was.

Not only was he dumb, but he was also egotistical enough to miss how stupid he sounded. She wasn’t sure if she had told him that or just thought it, but if she did, he clearly hadn’t heard her. He had followed her to her Civil Procedure class and “coincidentally” sat right next to her. She only found out later that he had skipped his first Political Science class just to follow a stranger into a law class he had no business being in.

Stupidity and persistence often went hand-in-hand, she figured. And persistent he was. Eventually, Cynthia yielded. She had given him everything—her head, her heart, her legs, and everything in between. Their love knew no bounds. They didn’t need marriage to justify their intimacy, as her mother would have called it. They only needed each other.

They held hands and giggled across the university park, their laughter echoing through the afternoon air. They kissed under the moonlight and locked hands under cafeteria tables. Everything felt perfect—the promise of a shared future, the assurance of an unbreakable bond, the evidence of undying love.

Until he introduced her to his best friend.

Cynthia could never understand why, after all these years, Martin had chosen to take revenge. She had betrayed him, yes, but did people really take fifteen years to avenge a betrayal? He had tried to patch things up during the first few months after their breakup, but he hadn’t been as persistent as she expected. Or maybe she had been too consumed by the thrill of her newfound lover to notice.

The man who had left her bedroom nearly an hour ago had been sent to shoot her. And shoot her he did—but not in Martin’s intended style. He had walked into her bedroom unannounced and caught Cynthia in the middle of her private ritual, indulging herself as she often did when no man was around to do the job. Holding a pistol in his hand, he had scared the life out of her.

Cynthia knew she had a choice: freeze and face death, or use her most reliable tool of survival. She couldn’t believe it had worked this time. It all happened so fast. The man hadn’t hesitated for a second when she made her move. Between pants and beads of sweat, he explained his mission.

For sixteen minutes, he suspended his mission and became an artist, carving his way through her with a mix of desperation and fervor. Cynthia didn't utter a word—not a single one, at least not aloud. When it was over, he looked at her, worn and crumbled, and said, "You better be out of this place in the next three days because if I don't kill you, he will."

As he closed the door behind him, he said, "Ain't you good at this girl!"

Of course, she was always good. But now, she was as good as dead. Her chickens had come home to roost, and her demons were catching up with her.

Before she could pick up her towel to dry herself, the phone rang again.

Cynthia walked into the living room, the crisp air brushing against her bare, lithe body like an uninvited guest. Through the expansive windows, she saw the almost tangible darkness that now cloaked the house like a blanket. A handful of mischievous stars dared to twinkle in the vast Friday night sky. Outside, the sonorous chorus of crickets reigned supreme. The curtains fluttered like restless spirits, stirred by the night's ominous wind.

She moved swiftly toward the persistently ringing phone, hoping this call held the power to change the course of her chaotic night.

"Hello, this is MP Shah Hospital. Am I speaking to Mrs. Cynthia Taylor?" a man's voice said from the other end, trembling slightly with an undertone of urgency.

Cynthia stayed silent, and the caller must have thought she hadn't heard him, so he repeated the question.

"Of course, it is," she answered dismissively.

"You're required here urgently, ma'am. Your husband is in critical condition," the voice insisted.

For a moment, Cynthia was dumbfounded. She had cheated on him twice that day, but now, with her husband's life hanging by a thread, all games were off. She hurriedly threw on her clothes and rushed out, her heart pounding with worry.

Minutes later, she arrived at the hospital, panting like an athlete at the finish line. The building loomed before her, its corridors a flurry of activity. The ceaseless hum of footsteps, hushed conversations, and the relentless beeping of medical equipment filled the air. It felt as though death itself prowled these sterile halls.

Cynthia flooded the first nurse she saw with questions about her husband. She learned he had been involved in a grisly accident earlier that evening on his way home from work.

Confusion hit her like a ton of bricks. Hadn't her husband left for Brazil that morning for a conference? What was he still doing here, nearly nine hours later?

Michael couldn't answer her questions. He was in surgery, fighting for his life. As Cynthia's mind raced with worry and unanswered questions, her phone beeped. She pulled it out and froze when she saw the message:

"He knows you are still ALIVE. I don't know HOW."

She didn't need to ask who the sender was. The message made it painfully clear—time had slipped through her fingers faster than she thought. Three days had dwindled to mere hours. Maybe even minutes. She knew what she had to do.

She left. She left the hospital. She left her husband, fighting for his life.

Perhaps it was time for that long-overdue visit to her ailing father in Namibia. If she stayed and played the dutiful wife, her father might only see her in a casket. No, she had to leave to live.

But there was one thing left undone. She needed to say something, to leave behind just a sliver of the bitter truth. Michael deserved to know, even if only a piece of it. And there was a story to be told, though she wasn't sure how to begin.

Her solution was simple. She formed a WhatsApp group. She named it **Triple M**—Martin! Michael! Myles! Then she wrote it. Wrote it in the fewest words. Then, she left the group. And she left for good.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF TELLING THE TRUTH

“Any thoughts of hurting yourself?” she asks at the end of every session.
“No,” I say, without thinking.
I find it odd how I’ve learned to tell that lie without blinking.
But every time I do I feel my heart sinking, begging to say, “YES.”
I promise it’s not for attention. I’m trying my best.
I know I’ve made improvements over the years,
But nothing stops the constant flow of tears
Running down my face the same way
Those thin lines used to run down my hands.
“I don’t want to harm myself,” I think.
“But I do believe the world would be a better place without me.
If you forgot me, if I never was to be.”
I feel as though life would be easier if my mom didn’t have a daughter who—
If my aunt didn’t have a niece who—
If my friends didn’t have a friend who—
My family didn’t have a member who was like...me.
Don’t you see?
But you’re the professional, so you tell me:
“Do I have any thoughts of harming myself?”
Because if I say yes, I’m afraid of what the consequences may be.

THE TYLERS

Dinner at the Tyler house was usually loud, filled with the sound of clashing voices and rising tempers. My dad was very big with broad shoulders, while my mom was very thin. Maybe some would even say “sickly thing.” It was not unusual for Hannah to sit quietly, squirming in her seat as everyone argued over trivial things. But tonight was different. Dad spoke to Mom, his voice carrying a strange edge. “Did you see my text?” he asked.

Mom did not respond right away. The silence stretched before she finally said, “Yes, but let’s just eat first, please.” Her tone was odd: it was like she was holding something back. I noticed the tension, but I simply brushed it off. It was not until later that those things started to feel very wrong.

As we cleaned up the dishes, Mom looked at me with a softness I had not seen in a long time.

“Honey,” she started, her voice shaky, “I’m sorry you’ve had to see all the arguments between your dad and me. I promise I will try to make this work, but your dad is too much for me, I can’t take it anymore.”

Her words hit me like a weight, but before I could process them, Dad’s voice echoed from the other room. “Family meeting. Now.”

Me and my sister rushed downstairs, the sense of urgency making my stomach churn. The sight that greeted us sent a chill down my spine. Mom sat on one side of the couch, her face wet with tears. Dad was on the other side, emotionless.

“I just wanted to tell you,” he began, his voice cracked and hollow, “your mom and I are separating. I’m leaving; however, you guys will be moving in with me and you’ll visit your mom on the weekends.”

It did not seem real. My skin prickled with goosebumps, and I could hear my sister choking back tears, asking, “Why?”

The question hung in the air, unanswered, as my mother’s face began to get more pale. My mother looked around with defeat and walked upstairs. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind. Sure, they argued sometimes, but I never imagined it was bad enough for them to split up. I felt my chest tighten, and anger rose inside me like a fire I could not control.

How could they do this to us?

Without saying a word, I stormed upstairs, slamming the door behind me. The darkness swallowed me as I turned the lights off. I did not want to cry. I did not want to scream. I just wanted to disappear into the silence, where none of this was real.

The weekend came and we were all packed up. Still, I had not said a word to my mom or dad. I felt betrayed by my parents. They gave up on their relationship and would not even tell us why. I was a child of a broken family, and it hurt worse that it was only me and sissy who were the broken ones. It was as if mom was immune to it all and dad could care less.

We moved into Dad's new house, about an hour from Mom's. The silence was thick those first few weeks. No one really spoke unless we had to, and even then, it was short and blunt. School had not started yet, so we were stuck at home, each of us in our own bubble. Dad, always at his accounting firm, worked long hours, leaving the house feeling even emptier. I began to wonder if maybe Mom got tired of him being gone all the time. Maybe that is why she fell out of love with him.

During those quiet weeks, I kept asking myself why? Why did this happen? Why did Mom let it happen? She had given up everything to be a stay-at-home mom, something most people thought was a dream. And now she had to work because she never really had a job before. She finally got a job at an Urgent Care as a nurse, which she had been wanting for months. So, I wondered what could have made her throw it all away and leave us broken?

Then, one evening, Dad came home, looking more tired than usual, and called for another family meeting. My heart raced, hoping he would say this whole thing was a mistake and we were moving back with Mom. But when he spoke, his words were colder than I expected.

"Kids, I know this has been hard on you. It is hard on me, too. But I need to tell you something." He paused, looking at the floor like he did not want to say what was coming next. "You can't see your mom for the next 7 to 12 weeks. I'm not sure exactly how long, but for now, that's the time frame."

My stomach dropped. "Why?" I asked, my voice shaky.

He looked me right in the eyes, his voice low. "Baby, just go to sleep. She'll explain when she comes home."

When she comes home? The words spun in my head, but they did not make sense. What did he mean? I wanted to scream for more answers, but Dad never gave us those. He would tell us things but leave the important parts out, leaving us to piece together the rest on our own.

I glanced at my sister, who had not said a word through all of this. She looked hollow, like she was just going through the motions of existing. She was always closer to Mom, so this hit her harder. Without a word, she turned and walked upstairs, retreating into her sadness. I wanted to follow her, to say something comforting, but I could not. I was too confused, too angry, and too lost in my own storm of questions.

As I lay in bed that night, the quiet seemed louder than ever, and for the first time in a while, I felt completely alone.

One night, Dad came home drunk, stumbling over his feet. It was not anything new. I had seen my dad drunk before, but mom would always send us to our rooms as if it were a sin to see him that way. However, there was no mom today, but I really wished there were.

Like always, I went to greet him. "Hey, Dad, how are you?" I asked, but the moment he looked at me, something felt off. There was sadness in his eyes, a kind of heaviness I had not noticed before. His face was red and had so much anger.

"Hannah, can you back off?" he yelled. "Obviously, I do not want to talk right now!"

I froze. He had yelled before, but not like this.

"What's for dinner?" His voice was loud but also slurring.

"We didn't cook anything. Can you order pizza?" I replied, trying to keep my voice steady, but I was hesitant, fearful.

He suddenly was in my face, shouting louder. "Hannah, you don't do anything in this house! You are 18-years-old; you should know how to cook! Your mother taught you nothing. You and your sister are useless!"

Before I could respond, he shoved me aside, and I fell backwards. I felt my heart race as I watched him disappear into his room, the sound of objects crashing to the floor echoing through the house. Why was he so angry tonight? Just yesterday, he was the same cold, emotionless Dad.

He left for a while, then eventually came back with a pizza in one hand and

a six-pack in the other. I sighed, because me and my sister knew how it usually ended when he came back with beer. “Hannah! Maya! Get your butts down here and eat!” he shouted.

I did not even want to eat; my stomach was sick from all the shouting, but I came down anyway, afraid of what would happen if I didn’t. Maya, silent for weeks, followed me hesitantly.

We sat down, and Dad began eating like nothing had happened. Then, for the first time in what felt like forever, Maya spoke up. “Is this how you were with Mom? Is this why she left you?”

I looked at her, shocked. My heart sank as I saw Dad’s face darken with rage. He grabbed his plate and threw it. It grazed her ear, and suddenly there was blood.

Maya’s hands flew to her ear, and she started crying, and screaming so loud. In that moment, Dad seemed to snap out of whatever anger he was in. He rushed to her, his hands shaking.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I am so sorry,” he whispered over and over, as if saying it enough would erase what he had just done.

I watched him, but I did not see my father anymore. I saw the man that my mother left.

As he kept apologizing, I stood frozen, staring at him. And at that moment, I understood. I understood why Mom had left, why she could not stay. And for the first time, I whispered in my mind, *I am sorry, too. I understand mom. I understand the pain that she went through behind the doors she closed.*

The next morning, Dad acted like nothing had happened. He left for work at 7 a.m. as usual, without a word about the chaos of the night before. I felt heavy with the weight of what had happened, the things he said, the way Maya had been hurt. I went to her room, not really knowing what to say, and just hugged her. We did not need to talk; we could feel each other’s grief. It was like we were both mourning Mom, even though she was not dead.

Then, Maya spoke, breaking the silence. “I’m going to call Mom to pick me up.”

I stared at her, confused. “But I thought Mom went away?”

“She did... but she texted me this morning.”

My stomach flipped. *Mom had texted.* But I was as confused as ever, because, once again...why? Why would she leave us with Dad, knowing how he could be? Why hadn't she tried to see us sooner? The questions piled up in my head, but at that moment I knew one thing for sure: we needed to leave.

Maya called Mom, and she promised to explain everything when we got to her place. She sent the address, and we quickly packed a few bags with the essentials. We ordered an Uber and left, hearts pounding the whole way there.

When we arrived, we knocked on the door, and within seconds Mom answered. Her face was pale, and her eyes were swollen with unshed tears. She pulled us into a tight hug, whispering, "I'm so sorry."

It felt like everyone was always apologizing lately, but no one was fixing anything. I did not know how to feel anymore, so I just stared at her, numb, and stepped inside. The house was cold, empty. The fridge was not stocked, and it felt like no one had really been living there. Maya and I looked at each other, concerned and confused.

Mom mumbled something about taking a nap before dinner and disappeared into her room. I sat down in front of the TV, but curiosity got the best of me. I opened the fridge and saw only alcohol and water. A sinking feeling settled in my stomach. I checked the cabinets, and there were pill bottles, some of them opened.

I had my suspicions, but I pushed them away, in hopes of peace. When Mom woke up later, she mentioned that she ordered pizza for dinner. I frowned. "I thought we were going out?"

She hesitated, her hands shaking. "I'd rather stay inside tonight and explain everything." Her eyes looked hollow, and the bags under them were getting deeper and darker. Something was not right.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked.

She sat us down, her face full of regret. "Your dad wasn't lying when he said I was gone. I was getting treated."

"Treated for what?" I asked, dreading the answer.

She sighed, her voice trembling. "I take pills... pills I'm not supposed to. When I don't, I...I get crazy. I had to go to the doctor and stay there for a while. But I'm better now."

I did not believe her. She spoke to us like we were little kids, as if we could not see the truth. What she was really saying was that she was addicted to drugs,

and she had been in rehab. But the way her hands continuously shook, and the way she avoided eye contact, I knew she was not okay.

After a few moments, she stood up, sadness weighing her down with every step. "I'm so sorry I let you both down. Just know I tried... for years. He was like that with me, too," she whispered, as she walked up the stairs.

Hours passed, and she did not come back down. I decided to check on her. I opened the door to her room and froze. "Mom!" I screamed.

She was lying on the floor, foam at the corners of her mouth, completely still. I did not know what to do. I called the police, my voice trembling, trying to explain. Maya rushed up the stairs, banging on the door. I locked it, not wanting her to see her mother like this.

"Maya, no! Stay out!" I cried as I called for help. The paramedics arrived quickly. They worked on her for what felt like forever, trying to bring her back with CPR. I held Maya, covering her eyes with my hands.

Then, I heard it. "Time of death: 9:58 p.m."

At that moment, life seemed to freeze. Just weeks ago, I had a family of four: Mom, Dad, Maya, and me. Then that family was broken into two. But in what felt like the blink of an eye, that family was now just me and Maya.

The paramedics talked quietly among themselves, but their words rang loud in my head. "Cause of death... overdose. Not sure if it was intentional."

I did not know either. I did not know if Mom had taken those pills on purpose or if the pills were laced, or if maybe her body simply could not handle one more pill. But deep down, I did not blame her. I could not. The paramedics might have been right about the overdose, but they were wrong about the cause of death. It was not the pills that killed her...it was my father. He had broken her down piece by piece over the years until she was too tired, too sad, and too tired to fight or live anymore.

I hated my father with everything in me. I made a silent vow that I would never speak to him again. He is a murderer, and one day, I will expose him for what he did. I will make sure the world knows that the real cause of my mother's death was not just the pills...it was him.

But for now, all that is left is me and Maya. My mother let Maya down by not fighting till the end, but I will finish the fight off for mom. I will fight for me and Maya. We are all we have. And somehow, I will protect her from dad.

We know why now. It is just me and Maya.

THE AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING

To declare illusions of perfect tragedies felt anything unlike,
Yet in full rhythm and beauty phrase words that praise those parts of you

The ones cracked open, left exposed.
The ones carved hollow by hands unseen.

Is it love or cruelty to turn suffering into song?
To trace words like poetry, to call aching art?
To wrap grief in silk and lace, frame despair in a golden light?

But beauty does not soften the sting or stitch the fracture closed.
And still we paint pain in colors that soothe,
Write tragedies in perfect meter,
Let sorrow slip from our tongues in prayer.

Is it comfort or curse to find elegance in ache,
To dress wounds in metaphor,
When all they ever wanted was to heal?

So we cradle it in delicate hands,
We whisper to them as if they can listen,
Weaving it into something palatable,
Because to name the pain outright
Would be too much to bear.

THAT ONE MOMENT BETWEEN THOUGHTS

I think I love her too harshly
or love her too much
so much that the person I am
becomes the person she is
becomes the faux meaning of love and person itself.

I follow perfection,
I attract distinction.
I long to be in the mold
but also out of the mold
but also in again but in a different way.

I spend so many moments dwelling on the ins & outs
and which ways and who's & I's & am's
AND I CAN NOT WORK!

I live to create, though my creations yell that they are disastrously subpar
—I answer, “I’ll fix you! I’ll fix you!”
yet the screwdriver never screws,
instead shattering the moment two metals clink together.

I feel like I am running out of time
I’m running out of time

Time is by definition
the me
the you
the him (ugh)
the *her*
the them

and the very tip of your nail beds
—the ones you don’t think about till you take a bite.

And again, that point right there;
that comma and semi-colon placing,
it's all the wrong way—

I should be doing more.
More like a greedy king:
I yell at the wheels in my head to go go go
until my heart gives out and I sleep

Sleep is solace; it reminds me that I can dream and I am allowed to dream.

Do you remember
when the world had hues of pinks and blues?

Do you remember
how stars shaped in diamonds would beckon us?

Do you remember
when portraits spoke to us and not us to them?

How simple walking was—
It was just *that*.
How the wind tickled you
And love was the answer, never the problem
There were no reminders of the anxieties lying underneath every floorboard

Straight
Forward
Breathing

How the grass would be a reminder of how everything lived
and not the decaying soul of this Earth,
the decaying soul of him
the decaying soul of humanity himself?

But once again, when I stop to think about it,
I remember *time*: it's
3:00 am
4:00 am
5:00 am
6:00 am
What have I done?! What have I done?!

I fixate on her once more,
trying to scrub *her* out of my mind
because I have to *work*

And I don't think about
And I don't think about
And I don't think about

because that's the past and we are now, we are *now*.

Now I lay here in bed,
in grass,
in my friend's room,
on my parents' bed,
crying smiling laughing experiencing hating but loving it all

Brain stuck wanting more and more,
King needs more than a feast.

"To have it all..." I lament,
as I lay with the world in my hand though
my anxiety decides to gift it to her
She thanks me for her gift,
kindly again & again insisting she knows me
when I do not know me
which makes me want to know her
to know me

Which could quite possibly be me being her
in this fauxness I call self.

Again, distracted from the topic at hand,
I look at the time: it's only 5:00 p.m.

THE LAST MISSIVE

Dear Elijah:

I know it's been some time since you last heard from me, but I've decided to send you this letter hoping it will serve as a warning. The last time I wrote to you, I told you about the encounter I had with that strange woman, whose skin was as white as snow. That was almost two months ago. My purpose now is to tell you in detail what has happened since then, and let me assure you, life had quite a lot in store for me in such a short time. So, I beg you: make yourself comfortable and read calmly, for this will be the last time you hear from me.

I would like to pick up the story right where I left it last time, when I saw that woman vanish under the moonlight on the last Monday of January. I still remember the shiver that ran down my spine when I saw her for the first time, but even more precisely, I recall how she turned towards me and fixed her dark eyes on mine, making every hair on my body stand on end.

The first time I wrote to you, I didn't think it was necessary to share what I am about to tell you, as I considered these details insignificant. When I arrived home that night, Cecilia was already in her room, resting. She had left the house spotless. In the living room, I could still hear the crackling of the fire burning in the fireplace. I noticed something odd, as if someone were watching me from the gloom of the room, but I decided not to worry about it and went to bed. Before lying down, though, I wrote your letter and left it for Cecilia to send to you the next day. Why fret in my own house? I thought again; after all, everything looks clearer in the daylight, when you can feel the sun through the windows, and not when the shadows lurk in the corners.

The next day dawned with apparent normality, until shortly before lunchtime, when Cecilia handed me a letter that must have arrived that same morning. I didn't sense anything good when I saw the envelope. It had no return address, or any sign of where it had come from. Inside, there was a piece of paper, yellowish and old, on which a sentence had been written with faded ink: "I know you killed your father." I panicked, Elijah. I panicked! Seven years has passed and nobody remembers our father. Who could have sent this letter? I was so scared that my nerves prevented me from thinking, and my face turned so pale that even Cecilia asked me if I was feeling well, saying that I looked sick. I told her I wasn't feeling well, and asked her to bring the day's meals to my room.

The next few days, I felt unable to control my thoughts. I could not sleep at night and my body barely allowed me to swallow a piece of bread from time to time. When I tried to close my eyes, unable to bear the exhaustion any longer, that letter would pop into my mind and my stomach would turn, making me feel horribly nauseous.

I spent one more day in that terrible condition, until I decided that I wasn't going to let anyone scare me so easily. I wasn't going to let anyone make my life miserable. Since when did I, Delilah Brown, allow myself to be frightened? I burned the letter, and from that night on I managed to get a few hours of sleep. A couple of weeks later, the matter of the letter had sunk deep into my mind. I thought I had returned to normal, until I met that woman again.

It happened last week, in the same place where we had our first encounter. I did not plan to go back to that street ever again, but I decided that if I really wanted to prove to myself that nothing could scare me, I would have to go back to the fateful place. And how wrong I was, Elijah, how wrong I was to go back.

It was seven o'clock in the evening, and the alley was dark. As soon as I stepped onto the cobblestone, I could make out the silhouette of a woman; she was wearing a thin white dress and was sitting on a stone bench. I crept closer, afraid to hear my own footsteps, and when I was less than ten steps away, she turned her head without a sound and looked at me. A shiver ran through my body, much like the first time I saw her, and I knew that nothing good could come of it

She kept staring at me, and when I passed by the bench, she motioned with her hand for me to sit next to her. I thought about running away and leaving that strange woman behind, but I could not. As the memory of our father's death spiraled uncontrollably in my mind, something made me approach that seat, as if I wasn't in control of my own movements. I looked at her face and sat down next to her, realizing how extremely thin she was.

That strange being, which had taken the deceptive form of a vulnerable lady, turned out to be a phantom born of my own imagination. Inexplicably, the feeling of guilt over the murder of our father had been incarnated in that mysterious being, who reminded me relentlessly that both you and I had to pay with our own lives for the crime we committed.

After issuing her harsh words, the woman vanished under the light of a moonbeam, and a spectral silence enveloped me. I stood motionless on that flat stone, consumed by panic, convinced that I was going mad.

Three days have passed since that encounter, and I have seen her again. She appears to me among the market stalls, sitting at the edge of the path that leads to the church; I have also seen her, on occasion, kneeling in the temple.

I find myself weaker and weaker, I can feel the remorse gnawing at my insides. I have tried to find a rational explanation for these events, but the despair from the useless search for a remedy overwhelms me and sinks me into profound confusion and loneliness. I can't take it anymore, Elijah.

You know I'm acquainted with the sacristan of the village and that he trusts me. After Mass, I asked him for the key to the bell tower. I'm sure he must have been annoyed when I locked the church doors this afternoon without giving it back to him; however, tomorrow he will get it back when he finds it stuck in the door of the tower.

Yours lovingly,

Your sister, Delilah

ALL THE REASONS TO LOVE

I woke up with a hunger
To devour
The emptiness of my heart
Without God's pureness
Pulling into it
I am in desperation
Consumed with weariness
Pride,
But in my distress,
I rediscover again and again that I have no one
More dependable to keep glimpsing me naked
Seeing me getting dirty;
I don't see anyone to wonderfully counsel me,
Spare me grace,
But I am banished
Sank beneath the earth
With rocks in my pockets; pushed to drown
The current's wrath sweeps over me
I plea! Rescue me!
Hurl me!
Toss me!
Lob me!
But keep glancing at me even in the depths of my being
I am stuck,
Yet, I am at fault
But I can't afford the cornerstone on which I was built
To leave me to collapse too

I am bruised
Bruised by wanting butterflies in my stomach
Awaiting fireflies to set it on fire
Bruised by patience, since I always want to do the right thing,
Wait for the right one
And wish for the shiniest star to cross my path

I am tired
Tired of diving into the sea
Tired from teaching myself how to swim in an ocean of deep sadness
In the depths of menace,
In the wholeness of loneliness without drowning in grief,
Because I panic and get carried by its current,
Since I have to hold my breath steady to float,
Crawl and tread water before diving.

Oh God!
Help me!

When will my time come to be looked at?
What then becomes of mine?
With whom can I wander around the world,
Crossing oceans and valleys for?
Who wouldn't turn cold,
Grow distant,
And betray after seeing my banished naked bruises tired,
Worn out from the sacrifices of being drowned?
Who then will remember the sweetness from the beginning?
When their morning and night thoughts start with me,
How easy it will be for them to be content with the thought of loving me,
How easy it will be for them to fall into the illusion of being mine forever,
That the paradise they sought out will not become a cage
And the warmth in their stomach will not burn out so easily
So even when it rains on the ground beneath my feet,
We can still have a reason to breathe.

But,
To conquer
And devour
This hunger

With desperation,
I must be planted
Like a seed in fertile soil
To grow with devotion and sacrifice
Just for love

But I must also endure the emptiness
To embrace the happiness and its counterparts
The pain of swimming
The grief from loneliness,
And the patience to wait
Because to fall in love is easy,
But the desire to stay together is a wrath that weighs you down
Like rocks placed in your pocket to drown
But before the time comes,
I will already be prepared to dive down.

Thus, I must fight,
And if God keeps on glancing at me,
I won't collapse,
For he will bring me to face the risk
No matter what comes my way

But I have the right to be desperate,
Consumed with weariness
Because I want something in return
To fill the soul of my distress
Yet, I must be brave,
To swim through the ocean for the right one
Have humanity,
To admit that I am naked, bruised, and tired
And focus on love rather than being stuck on faults

If not, I must learn to let go
Even if what becomes mine was never mine forever
And even if the paradise I sought out becomes a cage
Because love should have wings to fly blissfully,
I think that I am allowed to let destiny
Fall into the hands of God for him to handle it,
But again, I will have to wait patiently
Because even if it was for one last time, I want to love still
And even if what becomes mine forever doesn't come so easily,
I will be willing to take a chance
Believing in the risk,
Regardless whether it requires giving up,
Diving into the ocean, and drowning in its grief,
I have no reason to stop myself from finding love
Because to me, that's all the reasons to love.

CHOOSING ME

I've been through nights so cold, so long,
Where I questioned if I could stay strong.
Darkness whispered, "You'll never be free,"
But even then, I chose to love me.

The weight of the world pressed on my chest,
My heart and my mind put to the test.
Depression crawled, tried pulling me down,
But I refused to let myself drown.

I spoke to myself, soft and low,
"You're worth the love you need to grow."
My heart was bruised, my mind unsure,
Yet still, I fought to find the cure.

Through every storm, I chose to fight,
To hold my ground and claim my light.
Each tear I shed became a seed,
Growing the strength I knew I'd need.

The scars I wear tell stories of pain,
But also of hope that still remains.
My heart beats strong, my mind believes,
In all the beauty my soul achieves.

I'm more than the shadows that tried to stay,
I've built my own light to guide my way.
Through darkest times, I've come to see—
There's no one stronger than the me I can be.

So here I stand, proud and free,
A fighter, a dreamer, just choosing me.
No matter what life throws my way,
I'll keep on loving myself each day.

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