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Department of Languages and Literature

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WINNERS

2026 Poet Laureate Contest

<i>First Place</i> ++ Ky'iere Rassin, "Boyz to Men"
<i>Second Place</i> ++ Amani Adams, "I've Never Known Loneliness"
<i>Third Place</i> ++ Carlos Jones, "Smile Not Why"

11th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

<i>First Place</i> == Morgan Golden, "The In-Between"
<i>Second Place</i> == Brandon Beh Goh Beh, "The Self-Justified Unscripted Man"
<i>Third Place</i> == Aamani Anthony, "Fluphenazine"

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Ah'mya Gordon and Noah Norment

AMERICAN HEARTBREAK, BLACK POWER

after Langston Hughes

They break us down,
They don't understand our culture...
America is full of hope and promises
Stripped from history we created.
The American Dream is more like American Heartbreak.

They praise our rhythm
But silence our pain.
They love our music
But ignore our names.

We built the roads they walk on
With hands that once wore chains,
Our stories buried in textbooks,
Our struggles turned to shame.

They see our strength
But not the scars.
They fear our voices
Yet steal our stars.

We march for justice
With tears in our eyes,
Holding hope in one hand
And generations of cries.

America speaks of freedom
But freedom feels delayed,
Promises written in ink
That slowly start to fade.

Still, we rise like morning light
Through every storm and ache,
Turning heartbreak into poetry
For our ancestors' sake.

American Heartbreak tried to hold us,
But it could not stop our climb,
Because dreaming in Black culture
Is power every time!

THE SIN OF EMPATHY

I'm worried that I'm living a life that's about to collapse
Every passing second, the world is caving in, leaving only indistinguishable paths
Down each trail, I spot others approving of the means to let death intensify
Americans gouge their eyes out, then proceed to say that everything looks fine
That being said, I'll never see my death coming if I choose to go blind
I'd lose my life because no one hears me when I say we're in pain
I'd lose my life because you value a gun more than a human being
I'd die because we're consumed by apathy
It's easy to lose my life when love is a violation of what you preach

I've been written off before when I struggled; I know it's something you intend to ignore
Each ounce of your apathy pushed my sanity to be gradually torn
If we bleed the same blood, then why is saving our lives treated like a horrible chore?
Now, every time I look around the corner, all I see is a rotting corpse
Left for you to feed on so you can make jokes and dehumanize us even more
I don't want to leave my family and community in a country
That thinks we should be disposed of if we can't conform

Those who don't conform always fight, and then they end up dead
Now, no one else wants to be a revolutionary, 'cause once we do it results in bloodshed
They only hear black voices when your body's lifeless and cold
My generation is caught between being heard and dying slow
I dread that history will repeat itself because our curriculum is full of lies
I dread that the blood running through our veins will muffle our cries
I dread that willful ignorance will make the truth hard to find
I dread that it's either empathy or apathy; there's no middle ground
When bodies are dropping like flies

I'm begging you to empathize with me and notice how our souls align
My concerns can be yours, and your fears can be mine
Maybe if we intertwine, it can help you find a grounded leverage
Because I'm worried you're living in a world that is about to collapse
And if it's not, then I believe it already has

PAIN

There is much that defines this ache,
But they tell us it's the price we take—
That lessons bloom where shadows fall,
And wisdom waits behind the wall.

But pain is the ankle, the mile, the seat,
Watching the race from the side of the street.
It is speaking your truth to a hollow room,
Where words are just dust in the gathering gloom;
Where you spill your soul to the deaf and blind,
And leave every shattered piece behind.

It is the itch that refuses to fade,
A jagged scar where the skin was flayed.
It is the heat that turns to the white of rage,
Trapped like a bird in a rusted cage.

“No pain, no gain,” the victors recite,
While hiding the scars from their own long night.
They haven't been burned; they haven't been slain,
So they trade in the currency of our pain.

And here I am, in the ash and the gray,
Wondering if the lesson drifted away.
Am I losing my mind? Am I burning to bone?
Is there meaning in being this utterly alone?

Pain—it screams without a sound,
Dragging its chains across the ground.
How do I explain that the hurt isn't grand?
It's just shifting weight in the sinking sand.

I keep reaching for the end of the line,
Tracing the curves of this design,
But the more I seek to untwist the thread,
The more it coils inside my head.

Maybe the lesson isn't to break the snare,
But to learn to live with the weight I bear—
To leave the knot exactly as it stays,
And find my way through the tangled maze.

Still, I wait for a dawn that feels like light,
But for now, I walk in the edge of the night.
Pain. Just pain.
And the silence that follows, again and again.

SMILE NOT WHY

I was born with a gap wide enough
To let whispers slip through.
They called it a flaw,
Like a wound that never closed.
Each laugh was a battlefield—
I covered my mouth
Like a soldier shields his heart
From flying words and stares.
My mirror became a war zone,
Every reflection a reminder
That I could not escape myself.
I prayed for peace,
For teeth to stand in straight lines,
Disciplined like troops
Marching in perfection's parade.
But my smile was rebellion,
Crooked and honest,
Refusing to hide forever.
One day, I stopped fighting God
And started disarming shame.
Now, when I smile,
It is not surrender;
It is victory.
It is my flag raised
After a long, quiet war.

A BEAUTIFUL NIGHT

Grace has always loved the dark.

She loved the cool air against her skin, the once-sickening summer heat watered down to a cool, rejuvenating night's breeze. The city once rowdy and harsh now lays desolate, shop lights turned off as the street lights turn on.

She remembers when she was a child, walking home from school in the dead of winter with her brother and sister. The sun fell too early, bringing on a harsh and silent winter. The wind would beat the children around, and it wasn't uncommon to lose a scarf or hat. But she would joyously dance around unbothered. Under normal circumstances, she had to be inside before the street lights came on, so she felt a giddy excitement run through her, almost like she was trespassing.

She remembers that even though she adored the night's secrets, her younger sister was completely terrified. Crying and flinching at every little sound, she used to beg for them to walk faster, while at the same time cowering back, trying to hide in between her siblings.

She remembers how her brother shared her own thoughts, and loved the freedom. So they would take turns, mocking the younger girl relentlessly. They would make monster noises and walk slowly, purposely dragging their feet as their sister wailed. The young girl didn't want to walk ahead alone, as she feared that the moment she was three feet away from her siblings, the shadows would come up and take her.

She remembers how her brother would tell her, *"You know they can taste your fear. They feel the beat of your heart. The way it speeds up when you're frightened. Those are the people they like the best."* Then they would both chant, *"Thump, Thump, Thump!"*

Of course she also remembers the beating the pair received when they arrived home. The youngest, ever so spoiled, ratted them out to their father, crying to him about how they tortured her, and walked too slow so the monsters would get them.

The glare of her reflection in a car window puts Grace's mind back in her body.

"Radiant," she says to herself, relishing in the way her dark skin glimmers in the midnight glow, like a diamond sparkles in the daylight. Her tight coils are a

piece of art, delicately crafted and placed on her head, stationary, not flowing like her long white skirt that sways with every step, but eye-catching like her square-cut blouse, alluring passing eyes to the fullness of her breast.

It feels almost taboo, a woman walking the city alone when the sun has been long put to bed; it brings in a lot of curious eyes. She sees the lingering looks of dog walkers, the head-turn of drivers. She even gets stopped by an elderly woman, smoking on her porch.

This woman—with graying locs pooling around her face, square glasses perched up on her nose, a green cardigan wrapped around herself, and a cigarette in one wrinkled hand—is art in her own way. Age lines appear like beauty marks across her face, the skin around her neck and face sags, carrying the weight of a lifetime. This woman tells Grace what was in the mind of everyone who crossed her, “I know that’s right, girl. You are beautiful, absolutely beautiful.”

Grace smiles, a smile that a lot of girls who look her age avoid, too caught up in their own self-consciousness. A wide, glowing, tooth-and-teeth smile, and the woman smiles back, yellow and silver invading certain areas, but all Grace sees is beauty.

“I could say the same thing to you, ma’am. You are stunning.”

The woman laughs, immediately rejecting Grace’s honesty. But Grace continues down the street, thinking about how gracefully that woman wore her age.

She feels it before she sees it, the prowling glances, the whispers, the moisture getting sucked from the air, as thirst consumes the men flocked around the gas station. They holler like dogs when they see a cat, their barks overlapping, tails swinging between their legs, ready to pounce. But they are like sheep herded by a shepherd, dumb and reckless, attention switching to whoever guides.

“Where you running off to, baby?” one of the sheep baa’s.

“If I were your man, I wouldn’t let you run around in that,” another one baa’s.

“Let me walk you home, baby, it’s not safe out here,” the first one baa’s again.

“How much do you cost?” a third one chimes.

She does not respond, merely glances at the intruders and continues on her way. But she can hear the commotion her glance has made, the twisted idea of consent marking into their brains as they laugh amongst each other. She takes note when one “conspicuously” breaks off from the rest and follows her down the next few blocks.

He makes no more crude comments, nor makes his presence known. He just slinks behind her like the monsters her sister once feared. She pretends she does not feel the monster approaching, closing in on her, as she turns into a dark alley between the beauty supply store and the pizza shop. The monster, ever so confi-

dent in being the predator to her prey, follows her down, sealing his kill.

“You in a rush, baby?” His voice is as smooth as a jagged knife to skin. His greedy hands snake around her waist and it’s as if he were stroking the hairs of a violin bow, ruining the music as he wishes to ruin her.

Again she does not respond, pathetically trying to maneuver herself out of his grip but to no avail. She feels his greed and selfishness take hold as he pushes her front against the cold brick wall of the alley, kissing his way down her neck.

“You’re so cold, baby. Let me warm you up,” he murmurs against her skin, and she tries not to gag at the invasion.

Because Grace has always loved the dark.

She feels the drumming of his heart against her back so vividly, his excitement pounding through him and drawing at her own thirst.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

She pushes back out of his grip, this time with far more strength, reclaiming her body as her own, not to be shared. The sheep stumbles back away from her, the taste of surprise coating the air, but still the strong beating of his heart:

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

She strolls over to him, like a king to his throne, and pushes him up against the wall, a twisted sort of déjà vu. “You’re so warm, baby,” she murmurs against his neck, her sharp teeth dragging along his throat. So close is his racing heart, his fear could be confused with her excitement.

She hears her sheep cry out in fear, calling her all types of names, even in his end:

Bitch. Whore. Slut.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

He attempts to push her away, and she decides to jest, dramatically falling to the ground, watching with hungry eyes as he tries to run away.

“Where you running off to, baby?” she mocks, the words falling like silk off her tongue.

She relishes in the fear permeating the air like freshly baked cookies. Her mouth salivates when she pushes him against the store glass window, deciding to stop playing with her food.

ThumpThumpThumpThumpThump.

With one manicured hand she presses his head against the window gently,

remembering his rough treatment of her against the wall as she stabs her teeth into his fleshy neck. The hunger begins to nip away as the copper-like air washes over her. The sheep still bellows beneath her, trying endlessly to push her away, the fear only adding to her pleasure as it would have done his.

Grace, the ever picky eater she is, has to bite a few times before she gets the jugular good, blood gushing out like water from a fountain. She tries to remember to take her time, but she feels a certain high rush through her, gaining more strength as he falters.

Thump.

thump

thu—

She does not stop until she feels the last beat of his heart, then she drops him, aggravated but nowhere near full.

The blood from a dead man is ever so sour and cold, such that she could never consume it, especially now that she's flourishing in the newly provided heat coursing through her.

She sees her reflection again in the window and she can't help but to smile, to laugh. Her skin is still glimmering in the night, her long skirt still flowing. But the most eye-catching thing about her is no longer her breast, but the dark red liquid that drips from her chin upon it, the way her swaying white skirt is now splattered in red splotches along the front. The hungry predator look in her dark brown eyes, the sharp teeth she sees, completing her tooth-and-teeth smile—all she can think is, "*Radiant.*"

The other men at the gas station don't seem to share her opinion anymore.

NATURAL HABITAT

Some obsess over a woman's natural state,
Obsess over "the real her" under the blush and lip gloss,
Or perhaps over the parts below her neckline,
Her hips and curves,
The constellation of stretch marks that connect to each other
Like family,
Each telling their own story.
Some obsess over a woman's natural state,
Not to admire,
But to criticize, to mock, to control.
Her waist isn't 26 inches and her arms
Jiggle when she raises them to hug you,
But what if I told you that while you laugh,
While you mock and ridicule,
You're indirectly mocking the Creator
Of all the hemispheres, continents, and seas?
Some obsess over a woman's natural state
To blame and behave cluelessly.
Perhaps Adam paved the way for such nonsense,
Or maybe God purposely orchestrated it to be that way.
Some obsess
Over a woman
To cherish and love and die for.
Perhaps the Creator paved the way for that;
Perhaps, not.
Indeed he paved the way
To obsess so much that He had to die
To save us and be with Him forever and ever.
Amen.

IN ANOTHER TIME

I am the sun born from the brightest star,
A light stamped into the concrete of the street
I was raised on:
5th Street, where my shine first learned its name.
My presence flips a switch
People wish never turned off.
My absence leaves a shadow,
A silence shaped like loss,
A kind of energy no one can explain
But everyone can feel.
Even on rainy days, I bring daylight.
Even when spirits fall, I raise them higher.
When I see the strain in people's faces,
I lift their gaze,
Drawing souls toward my warmth
Like bees gathering at a living hive.
Free will, no will.
Some days it feels like August chose me
Before I ever chose myself.
A lion born in summer's heat,
Placed in a room full of fire signs
Where even the wind fights to keep balance.
Moon and sun.
Yin and yang.
Wild and centered.
I am both the calm and the chaos,
Untamable by nature,
Unapologetic by design.
You may mistake me for just another guy,
But look long enough into my eyes
And you'll see your own reflection staring back.
You'll realize you are simply me
Living in a different time,

And in that different time,
The I's dissolve into U's,
The U's blend back into I's,
Until you finally understand
You and I
See the world
Through the same set of eyes.
And when those eyes meet,
Time folds in on itself,
Past versions of us step forward,
Future versions reach back,
And suddenly every lifetime feels connected
By a single thread of understanding.
You see that I am not just here;
I am everywhere you once stood,
Every place you're trying to reach,
Every lesson you haven't learned yet
But already carry inside you.
Because in another time,
You were my mirror
And I was your voice.
In another time,
We traded paths,
Shared victories,
Split burdens evenly
Like two halves of one long story.
So when you look at me,
You're not meeting a stranger;
You're meeting the version of yourself
You forgot you were becoming.
And maybe that's the truth
Hidden between you and I:
We are not separated by time,
Just waiting for the moment
We recognize ourselves
Inside each other again.

UNBREAKABLE US

When I first saw you, I had no idea
That this fleeting moment would shape my whole era.
You were just a face in a crowded space,
Yet something about you made my heart race.
I couldn't have known that one brief glance
Would spark a love so fierce, so immense—
A love that would mend what was broken in me,
That would plant seeds of hope where despair used to be.
Each moment with you shifted my core,
Awakening feelings I'd long ignored.
You weren't just someone; you became my peace,
My sanctuary where my fears could cease.
With every conversation, every shared laugh,
You lit up the darkest corners of my past.
You guided me to trust, to let my guard fall,
To believe in a love that could conquer it all.
Now I can't fathom a life without you:
You're my constant, my clarity, my truth.
Our hearts beat as one, no longer apart,
Two souls fused together, one steadfast heart.
You've witnessed my struggles, my battles, my pain,
Yet you stayed, unwavering, through every rain.
When the world collapses, and I'm lost in the fight,
You're my calm, my compass, my guiding light.
This love we share is no fleeting flame,
It's a fire that burns stronger, unrestrained.
Through every storm, every trial, every test,
I choose you always—you're my haven, my rest.
And if there's one truth I hold tight and clear,
It's that with you, there's nothing to fear.
No matter the trials, the scars, or the lows,
With you, my love, is where my soul goes.

NO BULLETS, JUST BATTLES

There's a war inside me—
no bullets, just thoughts that pierce.
Dreams march like soldiers in formation,
each one demanding victory.
But fear hides in the trenches,
whispering, what if you don't make it?

I wake up every day to a battlefield of ambition,
my heart pounding like war drums.
Hope raises its flag,
but doubt fires back with precision.
I try to wear courage like armor,
but sometimes it feels too heavy to carry.

Success calls to me like a distant commander,
promising glory if I just keep going,
yet failure lurks like landmines beneath my steps,
waiting for one wrong move.
I want to do everything—
win every battle, conquer every dream,
but I fear I'll spread myself thin
and end up losing the war.

The smoke of overthinking fills my lungs,
the taste of exhaustion burns on my tongue.
I build strategies, make plans,
then question every move like a soldier doubting orders.
Still, I fight,
because surrender would mean silence,
and I was born to make noise.

This is my war:
a war of will against worry,
of passion against paralysis.
And though I carry scars you can't see,
I'll keep marching through the chaos,
because even in fear,
there's fire in me that refuses to die.

—*Raniyah Lawrence-Ashford*

RAGE IS FIRE

Rage is contagious, spreading like wildfire
seeking who it can devour.
Squandering the youth and trampling their innocence
like delicate flowers.
The Bible said our words have power
so, let's speak life into our generation
before the Orange Man wipes out our entire nation.
Hold up, let's take a moment of silence
for all the innocent lives taken because of police violence...
Rage is revolutionary, let our passion be our war song.
Let these rage songs live on even when we're long gone.
Rage was assigned and designed to us because
only we have the shoulders to bear the weight.
Rage is passion disguised through our muddy grits:
It doesn't always manifest as hate.
Let this revolutionary rage manifest outside of this
fleshy edifice so we can control our fate.
Rage is fire...
Rage is fire...
Rage is fire...
OUR RAGE IS FIRE!

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT ON RAGE

Rage, for me, is not just anger. It is a memory. It is inheritance. Rage has never been a random emotion in my life; it has always had a source and a pattern. Black women's rage is not reckless, it is historical. It is the echo of generations who survived Jim Crow's chains and Jane Crow's silence. We have been placed at the bottom of the barrel, told to be strong but not loud, nurturing but not needy, resilient but never resentful. And still we rise, we teach, we heal, we build. My rage is not bitterness; it is the fire that remembers every law, every stereotype, every dismissal, and refuses to let them define us. For me, rage is not the opposite of love; it is born from it. I am angry because I care about Black life. I am angry because I see the beauty, brilliance, and potential in our communities and refuse to accept a world that treats us as disposable. My rage is motherly because it wants safety, dignity, and softness for my future. It wants rest for Black women. It wants little Black girls to grow up feeling protected instead of prepared for battle. My understanding of rage lives at the intersection of being Black, being a woman, and carrying the emotional and physical labor of communities that often do not protect us in return. It is what I call motherly rage, a protective, ancestral, and deeply political force.

—*Aaliyah Edwards*

Growing up, my mom made sure I knew the history of Black People, what she called, "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly." I remember watching the original and reboot of Alex Haley's miniseries *Roots* before the age of 14, and later, when I watched Ava DuVernay's series, *When They See Us*, I cried as a Black kid from New York City when the judge said the innocent boys in the Central Park Jogger case were guilty. I wanted to kill everyone who truly believed that those five Black KIDS were guilty. Accordingly, rage, as I see it, can be used as a tool...for good or evil. When I think of rage in the year 2026, the two words that come to mind are sadness and exhaustion. Think about this: Black people have been and continue to be mistreated by the government alone for 500+ years. That is generations of worrying about being hunted, generations of being a victim just by existing. Imagine how tired the Black community is, imagine the fear of just leaving your house, getting stopped by police, having to worry about who will hurt me when

leaving my home...imagine. RAGE IS FIRE! This is what rage means to me. Rage can be a tool, and rage can be a weapon. Rage is a double-edged sword. Rage can be used to help as well as hurt. RAGE IS FIRE! Remember that! Fire can be many things: it can be light, it can be of benefit, or it can burn you in ways that will ultimately not help you in the long run.

—*Damien Smith*

I've learned that rage isn't always loud. For Black women, it's often quiet. Folded into being "strong," and hidden behind a smile that says we're fine even when we're not. It sits under the surface like a memory that won't let go, passed down inside eyes, lullabies, and quiet warnings to be careful. We're taught to fear our rage. To swallow it, to soften it, so that we make it safe for everyone else. But I'm starting to see my rage differently, like something inherited, carried alongside stories, songs, and survival. It's not just pain, but proof that we're still here, still resisting, and still building. There's a rage that destroys, and a rage that protects. One comes from never being heard while the other comes from finally hearing ourselves. I carry the second: a careful fire, a steady fire, the kind that pulls Black women closer instead of pushing us apart. My rage shows up in everyday ways, in choosing to keep going when I'm exhausted. In speaking up in rooms that weren't made for me. In dreaming beyond what the world expects. It reminds me I come from Black women who held families, communities, and histories together even when nobody was holding them. We recognize, honor, and continue to carry forward the legacy of Black women such as Sabrina Fulton, Lesley McSpadden, Gwen Carr, Erica Garner, Sandra Bland, Geneva Reed-Veal, Korryn Gaines, and Sharon Salaam, mother of Dr. Yusef Salaam.

—*Kathryn M. Kromah*

Rage is a four-letter word, but it carries a powerful emotion. When I think about rage, I think about a younger version of myself. I used to go from 0 to 100, real quick. If someone talked about me, I would rage. If I couldn't figure out a problem in school and felt too embarrassed to ask for help, I would rage. If my basketball team was losing and I was playing badly, I would rage. At the time, it probably looked like I was just an angry kid who overreacted to everything. But looking back, it was never only about the moment. Most of the time I felt frustrated, embarrassed, or like I was losing control over how people saw me. When you're young, you don't always have the words to explain what you feel, so

your emotions speak for you. My anger spoke loudly. MY RAGE IS LOUD!!! As I've gotten older, maturity doesn't mean I stop feeling anger. It means I learned to understand it. Instead of reacting immediately, I started recognizing what was underneath it. Sometimes it is frustration because I care. Sometimes it is insecurity. Sometimes it is feeling disrespected. Once I could name the feeling, I didn't have to explode to express it. Looking back, my rage was never random. It was communication without language. Now I see that rage can either control you or teach you. For me, it became a lesson that showed me what I value—pride, respect, and dignity—and helped me grow into someone who can protect those things without fighting.

—*Shameek Flagg*

Rage is not random. It is not wild. It is not something that just appears out of nowhere. Rage—especially Black rage—is what happens when anger has been swallowed for too long. There are countless reasons for a Black American to be angry. We see it in the dignity that is chipped away daily by micro-aggressions. We see it in the viral videos of police brutality that populate our feeds. We see it in classrooms, workplaces, and news headlines that remind us that equality was promised but never fully delivered. We carry the weight of these last 500 years: centuries of slavery, violence, erasure, and discrimination. That kind of history does not disappear. It settles in the body. It sits in the chest. It waits. But I am not walking around screaming at the world every day. I am not exploding at every injustice. I am not cursing out at my white oppressors. Instead, I move through life controlled, composed, smiling when necessary. Like the Incredible Hulk says, “I’m always angry.” The difference is I don’t turn green; I turn quiet. I turn strategic. I turn patient, but that patience is not peace. Historically, in the segregated South, expressing rage to the wrong white person could cost a Black person their life. Our ancestors learned to choke it down. To swallow it. To smile through humiliation. To survive. We have inherited both the anger and the discipline to contain it. Rage is what builds when you are told racism is over but still experience it daily. Rage is what grows when your people build a country that constantly questions your belonging. Rage is what happens when you are given inches of progress and lose miles of security. It is not irrational. It is not excessive. It is earned. Rage is not chaos. It is concentrated emotion. It is controlled fire. And when it finally shows itself, it is not because we are incapable of restraint. It is because we have restrained ourselves for far too long.

—*Aidan Z. Anderson*

SIMON SAYS

Simon says raise your hand
If you ever had a gun pointed at you 'cause
The only crime you committed was being black.
Simon says raise your hand
If you ever heard someone say,
“Maybe that wouldn’t have happened if you dressed a different way.”
Simon says raise your hand
If suicide was the only way people will acknowledge your existence.
What’s wrong? You guys don’t like this game?
Simon says you can’t think
Simon says you must not blink
Simon says your opinion must be kept to yourself
Simon says there is no room to be mad or sad
Simon says women must be seen but not heard
Simon says that we are in need of change
But my color defines my future, isn’t that strange?
Simon says it isn’t funny that a childhood game
Is a blueprint of how we must live our everyday lives
That women are supposed to be held in the house
Where they cook, clean and be beautiful wives
Simon says
That I am pissed
I am mad as hell
We are the future
Yet it is expected for a young black child to leave that idea in their head
Our skin color has allowed us to be misread
We work 10x harder just to receive a back-handed compliment
Yet we consider this an accomplishment
I’m pissed
That I have a couple of minutes to say this poem
But a lifetime of anger built inside of me
I’m pissed
I am mad as hell at gentrification

That the world screams to “eat healthy”
Yet they use unrealistic prices tags that only suit the wealthy
I’m pissed
That the government allows million-dollar houses to be thrown up
With no care for the people that now have to live on the streets
I am mad, Simon
Simon says fall in line
Simon says anything you say and do will be used against you as a crime
Simon says shut up and sit back
Simon says if the next person can’t do it, you pick up the slack
Simon says be a lady
Keep your legs crossed and chin held high
Simon says do what you’re told until you die
What’s wrong? You guys don’t want to play anymore?

BETWEEN CLASSES

I walk across campus
like I'm carrying more than my backpack.
Books on my shoulders,
bills in my head,
dreams somewhere in between.

The wind moves past me
like it knows where it's going.
I wish I did.

Everybody looks busy.
Phones out. Head down.
Laughing too loud
or not at all.
Sometimes I wonder
if they're just as tired as me.

I sit in the library
staring at words
that don't always make sense,
thinking about my mom
and how she says,
"Just finish. That's all you gotta do."

So I keep going.

Some days feel heavy,
like the sky forgot how to be blue.
Other days feel possible,
Like maybe
this struggle means something.

Maybe all these late nights,
all these doubts,
all these almost-giving-ups
are building a story
I'll be proud of one day.

I don't know exactly
who I'm becoming.
But I know I'm not who I was.

And that has to count
for something.

THE IN-BETWEEN

The elevator in Wright Hall had a hesitation problem.

It wasn't broken—not exactly. It simply paused between the second and third floors like it was reconsidering its purpose. Students would groan. Professors would glance at their watches. Someone always pressed the “Door Open” button as if impatience could fix machinery.

Maya liked the pause.

It was the only place on campus where no one expected her to be excellent.

On the third floor, she was a peer mentor—composed, dependable, always prepared with a resource link and a reassuring smile. On the second, she worked in Student Support Services, guiding freshmen through homesickness and registration disasters. On the first floor, she was just another junior at Lincoln University trying to stretch refund checks and faith until graduation.

But between the second and third floors, she was suspended. Undefined. Breathing.

Homecoming week made the pressure louder. Vendors lined the walkways. Alumni draped in blue and orange moved across campus like royalty. The marching band rehearsed until sunset, brass and drumlines echoing against red brick buildings older than most of the students walking past them.

Legacy. That word followed Maya everywhere.

Her mother used it like a prayer.

“You know what it means to be third generation at Lincoln?” she would say. “Your grandmother scrubbed floors in the dining hall so I could graduate. I worked doubles so you could focus on school. You are the legacy.”

Legacy felt heavier than her backpack.

Maya wasn't pre-med like her mother had hoped. She wasn't law school bound like her cousin. She was a Human Services major with a quiet dream of building community programs and reforming broken systems—dreams that didn't sound impressive at Thanksgiving.

Lately, she was tired in a way sleep could not fix.

She hadn't told anyone she was behind on rent. That her work-study hours had been cut. That sometimes she skipped meals so her little brother could have what he needed back home.

“You always have it together,” her friends would say.

She didn't. She just never fell apart where anyone could see.

One Thursday afternoon, the elevator stalled again.

Three freshmen stood beside her, laughing nervously, tote bags swinging from their shoulders. The doors closed. The elevator climbed.

Paused.

And stayed there.

The lights flickered.

Then darkness.

A sharp inhale filled the small space. Someone whispered, "Are we stuck?"

Maya felt her chest tighten. Her phone buzzed in her pocket—another message from her mother about internships, about sacrifice, about not wasting opportunity.

The darkness felt familiar.

Like unopened tuition emails. Like expectations she wasn't sure she could carry. Like standing between who she was and who everyone else needed her to be.

One of the freshmen began breathing too quickly. Maya turned on her phone flashlight. Soft light filled the elevator.

"It's okay," she said gently in the same voice she used at work.

But her own heartbeat was loud in her ears.

She thought of something Mrs. Greene, a quiet custodian with silver braids and observant eyes, had once told her when the elevator paused like this before: "Maybe it's giving you time back."

Time back.

Maya slid down the wall and sat on the floor. "At Lincoln," she said softly, "everybody's trying to rise. Be exceptional. Make our families proud."

The girls nodded.

"But nobody talks about how heavy that feels sometimes." The words surprised her, but once they began, they did not stop. "My mom thinks I'm supposed to be extraordinary in a specific way. Doctor. Lawyer. Something easy to explain. But I just want to help people breathe easier. I want to fix systems so the next girl doesn't have to feel this tired."

Silence followed.

Not judgment.

Not dismissal.

Just understanding.

"That sounds extraordinary to me," one of the freshmen said quietly.

The elevator jolted. Lights returned. It resumed its climb as if nothing had happened.

When the doors opened, the noise of campus rushed back in—music from the yard, distant drums, laughter, life.

Maya stepped out different.

Later that evening, she saw Mrs. Greene polishing fingerprints from the student center windows.

“You were right,” Maya said.

Mrs. Greene smiled knowingly. “About the pause?”

Maya nodded. “For a long time,” she admitted, “I thought legacy meant never stopping.”

Mrs. Greene dipped her rag into the bucket. “Legacy ain’t about never stopping. It’s about knowing why you move.”

The marching band thundered in the distance, steady and sure.

Maya looked toward Wright Hall.

The elevator doors opened again.

Empty. Waiting.

She stepped inside.

Second floor.

Pause.

This time, she did not reach for her phone. She did not rush the moment away. She stood there in the stillness, not stuck, not failing, not falling behind.

Becoming.

When the elevator resumed its climb, Maya understood something she hadn’t before: she wasn’t trapped between expectations and identity. She was learning who she was in the space between them.

And sometimes, the in-between is exactly where you rise.

THE SHELL

They say it's a man's world
But it means nothing
Without a woman or a girl.

Those women and girls
Carry the burden of a shell
They dare not leave.
It shines, but it's heavy.

She wakes up every morning perfecting
Her hair, her skin, her clothing.
On the surface, it's self-care;
If she looks good, she does good.

But deep down lies a truth
She won't admit,
Not even to herself.
She is trapped.

Trapped by a standard
That leaves no room
For an off-day or a slip-up.
Be pretty, gentle, act like a lady.

The world may say it's okay
But home is a different story.

Before society even reaches her,
The mother and the grandmother
Will spot any crack in the shell.

They have mastered it,
Been consumed by it.
The shell got them this far.

And the cycle continues
As the women teach the girls
How to survive in the man's world,
The world that would be nothing
Without a woman or a girl.

BOYZ TO MEN

One thing your Father can't teach you is
the strength it takes
to go from a boy to a man.
For every little boy, it's a different story,
a different event ranging from
quiet battles,
earth-shattering heartbreaks,
held-back tears,
insecurities,
and dreams they're told to bury
so they can carry everyone else's.
No one can see the weight
of learning to stand tall
when your legs still shake,
or the courage it takes
to build a voice
in a world that teaches silence.
Some may feed into the noise:
they break down too easily,
fall in line and become
a product of their environment.
Yet there are a few exceptions
that stand tall and poke their chest out,
that build themselves
piece by trembling piece,
becoming something sturdier
than the fears that shaped the rest.
I was taught that a man
is not measured by the world's standards,
but by the tenderness they choose,
the honesty they keep,
and the strength it took
to grow at all.

HOW THE SLOTH BECAME SLOW

Before the age of man, all animals lived in harmony. Without the fear of being hunted, they were free to do whatever they pleased. But nothing brought the animals together more than a race. A race was a spectacle for all to see, a time for the animals to compete, prove their dominance, and use the abilities that the Creator had blessed them with. Above all else, a race was a chance for the animals to show off in front of the Creator.

And the Sloth loved to show off in front of the Creator.

In this time, the Sloth was nothing like the slow mammal he is today. He was nimble, confident, and coordinated. He believed that he could win a race against any animal of the land, sea, or sky.

One day, the Sloth challenged the Cheetah to a race across the savanna. So, as was tradition, the Creator brought the Sloth to the savanna and gathered all the animals to watch the race between the two competitors. As they lined up for the race, the Creator stated the rules.

“At the sound of the elephant’s trumpet, you are to race 400 meters to the baobab tree. The first to touch the tree will be named the fastest animal on the savanna.”

At the Creator’s command, the Elephant trumpeted to signal the start. The crowd roared with enthusiasm for the competitors. The Cheetah sprinted to full speed in a matter of seconds. He zipped over the savanna, but the Sloth stayed close behind. After 200 meters of high-speed running, the Cheetah slowed down from fatigue. The Sloth stayed persistent and overtook the Cheetah, stamping his three-toed claw on the baobab tree in victory. The animals of the savanna roared in surprise at the upset.

The Cheetah, still weary from his fast start, ran off into the sunset, crying in anguish. To this day, the Cheetah has permanent black tear lines running down its face.

After the race, the Creator congratulated the Sloth and gave him the title of fastest animal on the savanna. As a prize, the Creator gave him a shiny spineless cactus, a token of his stunning upset. The Sloth accepted the cactus from the creator and boasted, “This is nice and all, Creator, but I can’t wait for the flooding season to come so I can race the Sailfish in the water. Then I will prove that I am the fastest animal in the sea!”

The Creator retorted, “Sloth, why don’t you take a while to appreciate your victory? Enjoy your time on the savanna; there are so many spectacular things to see. Befriend the local animals that you don’t usually see in your forest home. Don’t you think it’s enough being the fastest animal on the savanna?”

“The win was nice and all, but this cactus is much too shiny, and flooding season is soon approaching. The savanna is junky and much too hot! I will wait for the flooding season to arrive.”

For the next few days, the sloth idled and complained, ignoring the beauty and splendor that surrounded him, waiting for the flooding season to come.

Once the flooding season came and the tides rose once again, the Creator brought the Sloth to the seaside to challenge the Sailfish. The Sailfish accepted, thinking that the Sloth, a forest creature, had poor swimming skills. So as tradition goes, the Creator set up a race between the two, gathering all the sea creatures to watch the spectacle.

“At the sound of the Sperm Whale’s bellow, you are to swim 400 meters to the coral reef. First to touch the reef will be named the fastest animal in the sea.”

The two lined up for the race, and on the Creator’s command, the Sperm Whale bellowed to signal the start. The crowd cheered on the competitors as the Sloth held his breath and dove into the water. The Sailfish and Sloth were even throughout the entire race, gliding through the sea to the joy of the Creator. With a few meters remaining, the Sailfish started to spiral out of control, barreling toward the reef. The Sloth stayed steady and gained the edge, touching the coral reef seconds before his opponent.

Moments later, the Sailfish crashed nose-first into the coral reef, getting stuck in between two barnacles. The Creator stepped in quickly, grabbing the fish by its tail to free it. As the Creator pulled, the Sailfish’s nose stretched and stretched and stretched until he was finally yanked free. To this day, the Sailfish still has a stretched-out pointy nose that awkwardly juts out in front of him.

After the race, the Creator congratulated the Sloth and gave him the title of fastest animal in the sea. For his victory, the Creator gave him a colorful coral from the reef, a proper symbol of his triumph.

The Sloth accepted the coral from the Creator and exclaimed, “This is nice and all, Creator, but I can’t wait for the Pronghorns to return from mating season so I can race them. Then I will prove that I am the fastest animal on the prairie!”

Dissatisfied with his response, the Creator said, “Sloth, why don’t you take a while to appreciate your second win? Enjoy your time in the sea. The coral reef is beautiful, and there are many incredible things that you’ll never see at home. Don’t you think it’s enough being the fastest animal in the sea?”

“Sure, the win was nice and all, but this coral you gave me is much too colorful. It hurts my eyes to look at it! This sea is salty and much too cold. I miss the dryness of the savanna. At least there my fur wasn’t itchy and wet. Pronghorn mating season is almost over anyway. I will just wait until then.”

For the next few days, the sloth idled and complained, ignoring the beauty that surrounded him, waiting for the Pronghorn mating season to end.

Once the Pronghorns returned from mating season, the Creator brought the Sloth to the prairie to challenge his new opponent. The Pronghorn accepted, and so the Creator set up a race. He gathered all the prairie creatures for the event, hoping that after this race, the Sloth would finally be satisfied.

The two lined up for the race, and on the Creator’s command, the Coyotes howled to signal the start of the race. To no one’s surprise, the Sloth once again stood victorious over his opponent, this time with an easy stroll to the finish line. The Pronghorn ran away in defeat but blindly crashed into a cottonwood tree, damaging its horns. To this day, the Pronghorn has jagged, curved horns that sit crookedly on its head.

For his victory over the Pronghorn, the Creator named the Sloth the fastest animal on the prairie. As a prize for his winning, the Creator gave the Sloth a vial of rich, fertile soil, straight from the prairie.

The Sloth took the vial from the Creator and grumbled, “You got me dirt? What am I supposed to do with this? It’s nice and all,” he continued, “but I’ve really been waiting for the Peregrine Falcon to return from hunting so I can race him, too. Then I will finally prove that I am the fastest animal in the sky. I’m sick of this prairie! It’s windy and much too grassy; I miss the coolness of the sea. Take me to the forest, so I can be ready when the Peregrine Falcon returns.”

The Creator insisted, “Sloth, this is your final warning. You need to take time to enjoy the success you’ve had up to this point. You’ve already become the fastest animal in the sea, on the savanna, and the prairie! I’ve given you gifts to celebrate your achievements, but you haven’t appreciated any of them. It’s time you slow down and appreciate your accomplishments.”

The Sloth scoffed at the Creator’s suggestion. “Why would I slow down to stop and look around, when I’m about to be the fastest animal in the world?”

At this, the Creator began to think of an idea to teach the Sloth a lesson.

Once the Peregrine Falcon returned from hunting, the Creator brought the Sloth to the treetops to challenge his feathery opponent. One final time, the Creator explained the rules for the highly anticipated race.

“At the sound of the Howler Monkey’s howl, you are to race 400 meters to the cecropia tree. Sloth will swing through the treetops, and Falcon will fly next

to him above the forest canopy. First to reach the tree will be named the fastest animal in the sky.”

The two lined up for the race, and on the Creator’s command, the Monkey howled, signaling the start of the race.

The Sloth burst from the starting line, swinging from tree to tree with ease. The Peregrine Falcon struggled greatly to keep up. It looked like the Sloth was on his way to becoming the fastest animal in the world. With 10 meters remaining and victory all but sealed, a divine sensation shot through the Sloth’s system. His body shriveled up and his muscles atrophied. His metabolism halted, and his agility withered. At a snail’s pace, the Sloth trudged along from branch to branch, trying desperately to force his body to move faster. But the more he tried, the slower he became.

The Peregrine Falcon soared past him to the finish line.

The Creator’s intervention sentenced the Sloth to a fate of humility and meekness, forever forcing him to inch across the treetops of the rainforest, fast enough to survive but slow enough to appreciate the splendor that surrounds him.

And to this day, the Creator has named the Cheetah the fastest animal on the savanna, Sailfish the fastest in the sea, Pronghorn the fastest on the prairie, Peregrine Falcon the fastest in the sky, and the Sloth the slowest animal in the world.

*The greatest misfortune of man is to spend his whole life as a waiter,
waiting, searching, looking for the next best thing,
blind to the magic that is right in front of him.*

NOW SHOWING...AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN LOST AND FOUND

Lost: How did it make you feel?

Found: Exhilarated...just that.

Lost: That seems rather ideal...

Found: That's how I felt...for a moment.

Lost: And then?

Found: Momentarily...

I felt insane/

like I had the universe/

Like I understood the universe/

Something so strong yet so simple

But also being everything and nothing.

Lost: Why'd it end?

Found: Nothing lasts forever;

it wasn't meant to last.

I didn't want it to happen

And I can't let it happen again.

Lost: But didn't it happen again?

Found: Again? No, it never went away!

You know how parents

distract kids from Brussels sprout

by using fancy tricks

like airplane spoon

and chukka chukka choo choo fork?

Well...I used that trick—

But instead of a whooshing spork,

I latched onto someone.

Lost: 10/10 analogy. Could you continue?

Found: One person

Said this was all fake.

It was,

In a way...

I latched onto parts that

I wished I could receive (from her

...and maybe even her).

I could bite into this forbidden fruit

No worry about consequence

It was all for good fun

Just a small little attraction distraction

Yet, I bit too hard

And before I could spit it out

Seeds were planted inside me.

Lost: You distracted yourself too much.

Why couldn't you let go of the feelings as soon as you started falling?

Found: Me?

Let go?

I'm stubborn.

More stubborn than I'd like to be,

Stubborn against myself.

I distracted myself from the rejection

With liking her

To liking her too much

(can't even say love)

To hurting myself again.

A twisted fate

But it was for the best.

Lost: Best for who?

Found: Best for her and her and that someone.

Best for me:

I needed to learn what was real.

I needed to learn I wasn't over certain things.

I needed to learn that I loved more than I thought.

I needed to learn that all that is wrong is right and all that's right is wrong.

And that nothing makes sense—

Because by treating me human, I kept or keep falling.

Lost: Ooh, I see—so you:

Felt the crushing weight of having those big feelings,
Saw that platos and eros were playing mind games,
Stood hand-in-hand with double rejection
And after all that you grew
And now you're—?

Found: Back to not wanting big feelings.

I don't want mixed messages

I don't want deepness

I don't want exhilaration

I just wanna be real with my people

Platos-eros affair aside

I want to be real

Lost: What's "real" to you?

Found: Real...real is change.

Yet change means big feelings

And I've been avoiding it all

I'm scared of revelation

I've moved on or basically moved along

From situations

And I'm scared to get stuck in another one.

Lost: Who won't be there for you?

Who won't stick by you

If you fuck up?

If you cry?

If you love?

If you live?

Who won't be there?

Found: No one important.

Lost: There you have it! You're no ghost.

You're a real-ass human, so go be *real*.

I'VE SAID THIS BEFORE: I LOVE TOO MUCH & I LOVE TOO HARSHLY BUT I CAN'T HELP BUT LOVE LOVING

I open my eyes after dreaming of you; I sing to you when I wake up, I sing:

Wake me up with cherry-bombed kisses
and love me for an infinity's eternity.
See through my rose-colored eyes
and be a part of my pastel-painted universe.

I wanna go on an adventure to the forest
and do what people do in the woods,
Follow the pathway 'til we reach uphill,
Dizzying each other by our mythical ways near the school's entrance.

I wanna go to Nostalgia Hall where my best memories were made,
Memories where I walked, and keke'd
and admitted everything's nothings to all the family of friends' friends I've met.

I wanna experience those things I've done before,
but you'll make it feel anew 'cause we've been:

by the courts, past the baseball field, inside buildings we shouldn't be in,
tiptoeing the dark path, holding hands near Laney when no one looks, sitting
in the middle of the U right before the dip that eats your shoe in its fearsome
small ditch, making jokes in the library, crying tears in the gallery, sitting on
Vail's bench where the sun peaks through the clouds, enchanting our brown
skin with a magical glow, peeling off layers of myself & understanding what it
truly means to be vulnerable, holding myself while in bed, finally grasping who
you are to me, having conversations that started with,

"You've built my trust"

"I'm writing about you"

“There’s no more nuance about it”
“I’m fantasizing about you”
“I’ve never been more sure in my life”
“I’m understanding why I need you.”
“I wanna protect you & hold you”
“I wanna make you feel better; solve your Collatz conjecture”
“I wanna understand your mind—you’re too good & too silly”
“I wanna understand why you wanna do the same thing
& what about me makes me so interesting?”

Love that feels so
Unconditional
That we both detect it in our souls.
You give me acceptance
& interest
& softness

So, if my time with you or words I’ve said came off as
Too distorted
By my emotion, prose, or confusion,
Remember this:

“You’re a supernova that exploded so bright
That people orbit you in your sun-like ways,
Uplifting and lucky and stupidly beautiful,
Illuminating the universe til’ the bigger bang.”

—*Lailah Davis*

WHERE THE SILENCE LIVES

Grief don't knock—it just walks in,
sits heavy in the chest,
makes a home in the quiet spaces
where your name used to rest.
I lost my Pop-Pop in July of '21,
but truth is, I started losing him
that February
the last time I saw him,
his eyes warm,
his presence still mine.
Back then, I didn't know
that a goodbye could whisper so softly
but echo for years.
Then, March 2021 came with fire and tears.
My godbrother—
shot on the same court
we used to dream about it.
Southwest Philly, 55th Street,
where sneakers squeaked and
childhood echoes bounced off backboards.
Now it's stained with a silence
that screams.
I hadn't seen him since 2014
and just like that,
the chance to say, "*What's good?*"
was stolen by a coward
with no regard for life,
only pain.
And yeah, I hate him—
not just for what he did,
but for what he took:
a future, a friend,
a memory that will never finish writing itself.

Grief wears different clothes on everyone.
Some bury it in smiles,
others carry it like bricks in their throat.
Me?
I write,
because some days, words
are the only things that don't lie.
I pray,
I thirst,
I remember.
Because forgetting would be betrayal,
and I still hear their voices
in my silence.

Deajha Britt, Neeeyoh Robinson Green, and Renard Selby

RHYTHM OF OUR ANCESTORS

after Langston Hughes

Drums speak before words are born,
low and deep like the earth breathing.
The high singing of the flute notes,
the clear ringing of the flute notes.
High...Clear.
Clear...High.
They call the dust to rise,
they call the body to remember.

Feet answer without thinking,
heels striking stories into the ground.

Clap!
Hands spark like fireworks
circling shadows into song.
The night hums with ancestors,
their voices in every song.
Boom—boom—
We are more than silence,
more than the weight of forgotten names.
In every sway of the hips,
in every lift of the chin.

The drum does not fade.
It travels in our blood,
steady and strong,
reminding us
of who we've become.



Dawn Marie / *God's Daughter*



Dawn Marie / *Untitled*



Dawn Marie / *Don't Forget the Trees*



Dawn Marie / *Light as a Flower*



Sophia Abdul-Malik / *A Tribute to Coltrane*



Sophia Abdul-Malik / *Double Consciousness*



Ahmad Brisbane / *Untitled*



Nezaraye McNeal / *Sunny Days*



Kelvin Coley / *Thomas Jones #1*



Kelvin Coley / *Thomas Jones #2*



Amani Adams / *Self-Portrait #1*



Amani Adams / *Self-Portrait #2*



Joshua Dey / *Hands That
Grounded Me*



Amina Camara / *Final Bloom*



Olivia Brown / *Untitled*



Tasia Fisher / *Every Night, the Light Returns*



Aniya Gibson / *Untitled*

MELODY

I used to think love was loud.

I thought it had to arrive like a drumline at homecoming—bold, impossible to ignore, shaking the ground beneath your feet. I thought it would look like fireworks over the football field at halftime or feel like the roar of a packed stadium chanting your name. But love, the real kind, found me on a Tuesday afternoon outside the student center at McKinney State University.

Our HBCU sits in the heart of Pennsylvania, wrapped in red brick buildings and oak trees heavy with Spanish moss. It's the kind of place where history lingers in the air like incense. Where professors call you "scholar" and mean it. Where the marching band practices until sunset and the bass hums through your bones. Where you come to find your purpose—and sometimes, if you're lucky, your person.

I was a sophomore then, majoring in Business Management, trying to keep my scholarship and my pride intact. I had just finished a Stats class that made me question my life choices when I saw her. She was sitting cross-legged on the grass, a spiral notebook balanced on her knee, braids cascading down her back like a waterfall at midnight. The wind lifted a few strands and she brushed them away absentmindedly, smiling to herself.

She wasn't smiling at anyone. She was smiling at the world.

And that's what caught me.

Her laugh came next. Not loud, not dramatic. Just a soft, unfiltered burst of joy at something she'd written. It sounded like wind chimes. It sounded like possibility. I didn't know it yet, but that was the moment my life split into two parts: before Melody and after Melody.

Her name suited her.

"Melody Thompson," she told me when I finally worked up the nerve to approach her. I had rehearsed about five different opening lines in my head. All of them disappeared when she looked up at me with those warm brown eyes.

"Hey," I said, eloquently.

"Hey," she replied, closing her notebook but keeping a finger tucked between the pages, like she didn't want to lose her place.

"You always sit out here?"

"Only when the weather's kind and my thoughts are louder than my dorm," she said, grinning.

I blinked. “Your thoughts are... loud?”

“Oh, very,” she laughed. “They sing. Sometimes they argue. Sometimes they harmonize.”

“You a music major?” I asked.

“Pre-med,” she said. “But music is how I breathe.”

That was Melody. Unexpected. Multifaceted. Brilliant.

She was a junior, one year ahead of me, with dreams of becoming a pediatric oncologist. “Kids deserve doctors who see them as more than charts,” she told me once. “They deserve doctors who see their light.”

The irony of that dream would not strike me until much later. At first, we were just two students crossing paths. Study sessions that turned into conversations. Conversations that turned into walks around campus. Walks that turned into sitting in the bleachers at night, talking about everything from faith to family to fear.

Melody believed in softness. She believed in handwritten letters and Sunday morning gospel playlists. She believed in calling her grandmother every week. She believed in saying “I love you” and meaning it.

I believed in achievement. In being the first in my family to graduate college. In landing internships and stacking accomplishments. Love was something I assumed would fit somewhere in the margins. But Melody refused to be a margin. She stepped into the center of my life without asking permission. The first time I realized I was in love with her, it was homecoming weekend.

The campus was electric. Alumni flooded the walkways in old varsity jackets and HBCU pride. Vendors lined the quad. The band’s rehearsal shook the windows. Melody and I were volunteering at the alumni welcome table. She wore our school colors like royalty: deep burgundy sweater, gold hoops catching the sunlight. She greeted every graduate like they were family.

“You’re going to be a legend here one day,” I told her as we watched the parade of former students.

She shook her head. “I don’t need to be a legend. I just want to matter.”

“You do,” I said before I could stop myself.

She looked at me then—*really* looked at me. The world didn’t stop. The band kept playing and people kept laughing, but in that moment something settled inside my chest.

“I think you matter more than you realize,” she said softly.

That night, under the stadium lights, I took her hand.

We didn’t announce anything. We didn’t need to. Our fingers intertwined like they had been practicing for it. Loving Melody was like discovering a new

rhythm. She studied hard but laughed harder. She cried at documentaries and sent care packages to her little cousins during finals weekend. She prayed before exams and danced in the kitchen when her favorite songs came on.

She pushed me. Not in a demanding way. In a believing way. “You’re capable of more than survival,” she told me once when I confessed how tired I was of constantly proving myself. “You’re allowed to thrive.”

We built a routine. Late-night library sessions fueled by vending machine snacks, Sunday brunch in the cafeteria, ranking the worst eggs on campus, phone calls that stretched until 2 a.m. even when we had 8 a.m. classes.

She met my mother over FaceTime one evening. My mom cried afterward. “That girl is special,” she told me. “Don’t you fumble that.”

I didn’t plan to. But life doesn’t ask about your plans. The first sign was small, a cough that lingered.

“Probably stress,” Melody said, brushing it off. “Pre-med life.”

Then came the fatigue. She’d fall asleep mid-sentence sometimes, her head resting against my shoulder.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked one evening outside the Psychology building. She smiled. “I’m fine, Jere. Just tired.”

Jere. That’s what she called me. Not Jeremiah, but Jere. No one else did. But that smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. When she fainted during lab, everything changed. I remember the phone call. I remember sprinting across campus. I remember the sterile smell of the hospital room. She looked so small in that bed. Her braids were pulled back. Her skin looked paler than usual. But when she saw me, she still smiled. “Hey, Jere,” she whispered.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me like that,” I said, trying not to laugh, but failing.

They ran tests. More tests. Then more. I sat beside her, holding her hand, listening to the machines beep in steady rhythms. I told her about campus gossip. About the professor who mispronounced my name again and how the cafeteria had finally seasoned the greens properly. She laughed weakly. Then the doctor came in. I don’t remember every word. I don’t think I wanted to. I remember the phrase “stage three.” I remember “aggressive.” I remember the silence that followed.

Leukemia.

The word hung in the air like a storm cloud. Melody squeezed my hand.

“It’s okay,” she said.

But it wasn’t.

Cancer is not dramatic the way the movies make it seem. It is slow. Relentless. Quietly cruel.

Melody withdrew from classes that semester. The campus that once felt like her stage became a distant memory. Instead of labs and lectures, she had appointments and treatments. I moved my schedule around so I could be there as much as possible.

I learned the language of white blood cell counts and treatment plans. I learned how to read the shift in her expression when nausea hit. I learned that bravery doesn't always look like bold speeches—sometimes it looks like taking a deep breath before another round of chemo.

She lost her hair in clumps. I helped her shave the rest. She cried, and I cried with her.

“Do I still look like me?” she asked, staring at her reflection.

“You look like Melody,” I said. “Hair or no hair.”

She smiled through her tears. “You better mean that.”

“I do.”

She bought bright headwraps. Yellow. Blue. Patterns that looked like the sunrise. She wore them like crowns. Even in the hospital, she found ways to shine. She'd talk to the kids in neighboring rooms, telling them stories about campus life. About marching bands and study groups and dreams bigger than fear.

“You'll get there one day,” she'd tell them. “College is waiting for you.”

Watching her fight while still pouring hope into others changed me. I stopped caring so much about internships and started caring about time. Time became sacred. Every minute felt like something you could drop and break if you weren't careful. There were good days, days when her counts improved. days when she felt strong enough to walk outside. We'd sit on a bench near the hospital garden and pretend we were back on campus.

“You remember Homecoming?” she asked once, sunlight warming her face.

“How could I forget?”

“I want to go back next year,” she said.

“We will,” I told her.

And I believed it.

I had to. We talked about the future like it was guaranteed. About graduation. About the apartment we'd get in whatever city accepted her into med school. About the dog she insisted we'd name Symphony.

“Because if I'm Melody, we need a Symphony,” she reasoned.

I laughed. “That's cheesy.”

“You love it.”

“I do.”

There were bad days, too.

Days when she was too weak to sit up, when pain crept into her voice no matter how hard she tried to hide it, when I'd step into the hospital bathroom just to cry where she couldn't see me. I was terrified of losing her. But I was more terrified of her seeing how scared I was.

So I stayed steady.

For her.

Spring arrived quietly. Cherry blossoms bloomed on campus without her there to admire them. Our friends sent videos. Professors sent cards. The university community prayed. Her doctors adjusted treatments. There were moments of hope, small improvements that felt like lifelines. Then came the setback. Infections. Complications. Words like "spread" and "limited response." I watched as the optimism in the room shifted into something heavier.

One night, long after visiting hours had ended, her mother stepped outside the room with me.

"She's tired," her mom whispered.

I nodded because I knew. Melody had always been strong. But even strength has limits. When I went back into the room, she was awake, staring at the ceiling.

"Jere?"

"I'm here."

"Come closer."

I sat beside her, careful of the tubes and wires.

"Do you remember what you said the night of Homecoming?" she asked.

I tried to keep my voice steady. "That you matter?"

She shook her head. "You said I'd be a legend here."

"You are."

She gave me a faint smile. "Promise me something."

"Anything."

"Don't let this be the thing people remember about me."

My throat tightened. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to be remembered as the girl who got sick," she said softly. "I want to be remembered as the girl who loved loudly. Who dreamed big. Who believed."

"You are that girl," I said, tears blurring my vision.

"Then promise me you'll keep living," she whispered. "Not just existing. *Living.*"

I couldn't speak. So I nodded.

She reached for my hand, her grip weaker than it had ever been. "I love you, Jere."

I imagined hearing those words in a hundred different settings—graduation day, maybe, or on a beach somewhere far from the hospital walls. But this was real.

“I love you, too,” I said.

And I meant it in a way that felt carved into my bones.

She passed away three days later.

The room was quiet. Her mother was on one side of the bed. I was on the other. There was no dramatic moment. Just a slow exhale. And then stillness, the kind of stillness that rearranges the world.

Grief is strange. It doesn't knock politely. It crashes in at unexpected times. I felt it walking past the student center where I first saw her. I felt it hearing the marching band rehearse for the next homecoming. I felt it every time someone said her name in past tense.

The university held a memorial service in the chapel. Students filled the pews. Professors spoke about her brilliance. Kids from the hospital sent drawings. I stood at the podium, hands shaking. “I thought love was loud,” I began. “But Melody taught me it's often quiet. It's showing up. It's believing in someone until they believe in themselves. It's choosing hope, even when fear is easier.”

I told them about her dreams. About pediatric oncology and Symphony the imaginary dog. There were tears, there was laughter, because Melody had been both. Afterward, I walked across campus alone. The oak trees stood tall. The brick buildings glowed in the late afternoon sun. Life continued. That used to make me angry. How dare the world keep moving? But then I remembered her promise.

Don't just exist. Live.

So I finished my degree. I started volunteering at the same hospital where she'd received treatment. I sat with kids who were scared. I told them about a girl named Melody who believed in their light. Years later, I established a scholarship in her name at McKinney State for pre-med students committed to pediatric care, for dreamers who refuse to let darkness have their final word.

Every Homecoming, I return to campus. I sit near the alumni table and watch the parade of former students. I listen to the band. I let the bass vibrate through my chest. Sometimes I imagine her beside me, braids brushing her shoulders, laughing at something only she finds funny.

I used to think loving her and losing her would break me beyond repair. But loving her built something in me. A deeper patience. A wider compassion. A quieter strength.

Melody didn't get the decades we hoped for. But in the years she had, she changed me completely. Love, I've learned, isn't measured in time. It's measured in impact.

And Melody...

She was music. She was warmth. She was faith wrapped in human form. She was the softest, strongest thing I have ever known. And every day that I live fully, every day that I choose to matter, I hear her voice like a song carried on the wind.

Not loud. But steady.

Still singing.

BROWN IS NOT BASIC

In the beginning there was dirt
God made man and woman from it
He allowed plants to grow from it
Life relies on this beautiful brown earth
I sit in a pew with this amazing little book
Its brown leather teaching life's mysteries
I wish to have a nice mahogany wood floor
My brown babies growing up on it
Family gatherings and reunions gracing it
I wish to have a nice oak tree
With a tire swing on it
Where my children can play
Wooden cabinets to hold the family recipes
Brown is the color of soil that brings life
It's the color of memories made
It's the color of the future, of family
It's the color of love
Brown made up the mighty Africa
It created the Harlem Renaissance
Brown fought for freedom
It fought for peace
Brown is such a triumphant color
It is variety telling the story of life
Brown created you, its most wonderful task
Your skin like the brown that gives life
Your eyes shaded with truth like the Bible
Your lips, ever so soft, are graced with love
Brown is so blessed to have you
Among its many shades and hues

THE PERFECT WOMAN

I talked to God the other day
And asked Him, "Show me the perfect woman."
He took me to the beach, out before the tide,
And showed me an oyster with a pearl inside.
God said, "She's precious, she's pure, and she's elegant."
"But I asked you to show me the perfect woman," I said.
So He took me to an old stone wall
Where there was nothing but ivy sprawled,
And God said, "She is resilient like this ivy and its leaves."
Then I begged, "God, please show me the perfect woman."
He held out His hand for me to hold
The most beautiful thing I had ever seen.
So in awe, I hadn't noticed the thorns making me bleed.
He said, "Her beauty mirrors that of this pink tea rose."
"But," I said, "there is no woman here. You have nothing to show."
And that's when God went and sat me down
And I saw the most beautiful queen
With curls as her crown,
Draped in salmon pink and apple green.
Beautiful isn't even the word.
I'm so in awe, and trapped in her allure.
Now I understood what God was saying:
Nobility is everything that she's portraying.
So I talked to God the other day,
To ask for the perfect woman,
Then God gave me her, and called her AKA.

—*Aidan Anderson*

THE WOMAN AT THE END OF THE BRIDGE

“Are you ready, machine?” the soldier shouted, his voice competing with the whirring blades of the helicopter and the whipping of the wind. The helicopter was a heavy contraption, built to withstand the monstrous vortex which had formed outside.

“Yes, sir,” Charlie said politely. The woman squinted out the window, her mind watching anxiously for something to appear from the sandy vortex outside. Her face leaned in, her eyes examining the reflection in the window. It wasn’t her face. Her left hand came up to fiddle with the sleek white armor she was given, her fingers trying to transfer the nerves to it.

“You’re not here for a fight,” the soldier reminded her. “You just have to kill her. She won’t attack you, she’ll barely speak. Just make sure she dies.”

That was in line with the briefing Charlie had been given before. Don’t listen to her, don’t even look at her. Just kill her.

The chopper landed with a thud, skipping off the stone and plunking down again. They’d descended upon some kind of flat, circular surface, barely visible in the whipping dust though they were right on top of it. The tower was the first part of the bridge. In the early days, her predecessors had to climb it quickly, but the United Government had perfected this process after repeated expeditions. The tower had a flat, round top, and thus the helicopter was the best way.

The door opened and Charlie climbed out. Flat, segmented, cylindrical legs made contact with an impossibly ancient brickwork. She walked a few paces before she was called back. She looked, and a sword was placed in her hands.

The sword was of poor craftsmanship, little more than a sharpened hunk of clear, stony material with a rod at the end. Charlie saw the encased bodies of various plants and insects frozen within the blade. It felt solid and unreasonably heavy. The tip hit the ground with a thunk, though neither the sword nor the bricks chipped.

The door on the helicopter slid to a close without so much as a goodbye. Charlie already had the briefing. She already knew the deal. Kill whoever was on the other side of the bridge and she’d live as a queen for the rest of the year. Everyone knew it was a temporary solution. She’d be back next year—unless Charlie went the way of Bravo and Alpha. Los Angeles, gone. Atlanta, gone. Rabat, gone. Now the bridge was over Petra, and she was the one who had to kill the woman.

Charlie began her long trek to the edge of the tower. The sword weighed her arm down considerably. Her body had been crafted for this specific task, and yet it almost seemed like nothing about her worked. Her legs wobbled as she dragged the hunk of stone across the bricks, her eyes stinging from the sand. Walking around the perimeter, she eventually found a staircase.

The staircase was only four steps down, the ceiling only two feet from the ground. Charlie crouched, then crawled, pushing the sword in front of her as she wiggled her way through the claustrophobic space. It was dark, impossibly dark. Her black hair swished around her face and she couldn't even see it. She could see an opening, though. She crawled towards it.

The room opened up into a long, endless pathway. Everything was made from the same purple-blue bricks. The tower, the stairs, the path, the railing for the path, all of it. Charlie couldn't see the end of the path through the dark sand-storm. She placed her hand in front of her face and marched on, dragging the sword behind her.

She walked blindly for what felt like an eternity. She moved hurriedly at first, thinking she had too little time for her task. But eventually she slowed down. Her arm felt tired, her legs were wobbling without feet, her hair was blowing every which way. She walked, walked, walked until she saw it.

It was a garden. A beautiful garden full of every type of flower you could imagine and then some. Bugs galore scuttled about, flappy butterflies and shiny scarabs and wriggling worms in abundance. The wind circled the garden, but the air in this place stood perfectly still at a comfortable temperature. Charlie stood in the garden, mesmerized by the sight. Her eyes drifted up a path. It wasn't designed to be there but the grass had been stamped down by what could only be countless people, or just a small few going back and forth. She followed her foremothers and went up the path.

She walked up a hill, the bugs moving out of her way with each step. When she reached the top, she could see down onto a lonely tree in the middle of a crater. It wasn't anything special, just a thick, hearty oak surrounded by barren grass. Charlie stared for a long while until she could begin to make out a black, shimmering mass on the tree. A woman. *The woman*. She wore a tattered black dress and had similar black hair to Charlie's. Her hands were nailed to the tree's body, her legs crumpled beneath her. She was staring at the grass, her chest rising and falling softly.

Charlie descended into the crater, her footless mechanical legs slipping on every patch of dew-soaked blades. She used the sword as an anchor, slowly dragging herself down the steep cliff. She wondered how Bravo got down here nine times.

She didn't bother imagining how Alpha did it sixty-eight times. Her body slipped and tumbled down the rest of the hill, the sword sliding after her. The grass was so soft she wasn't even sure she had hit the bottom, but she did. She stood, pulling the sword up with great effort.

The woman was only a few yards away now, her skin flawless, her hair still silky and thick. Charlie moved toward her hesitantly, unable to be stealthy or subtle with the hunk of rock dragging behind her. She knew the woman would talk to her, say something. She expected her to offer something, or beg for mercy. But the woman looked up, her face uncomfortably similar to Charlie's, the exception being some extra youthfulness, and a gaping hole in the right half of her face, revealing nothing but a black void.

"Oh...hello mother," said the woman.

Of all the things that Charlie expected the woman to say, why did she have to say...that? Charlie wasn't this woman's mother. She hadn't been alive until a few days ago. At least that's how far back her memories went. She gripped the hilt of the sword, staring blankly at the woman. She didn't say anything. She didn't move. She couldn't move.

The woman stared up at her, noticing the hesitation in Charlie's eyes. "Oh, right," she said, smiling despite her punished state.

The two locked eyes for an extended period. For Charlie it was a face-off, a test of her will, of who she was loyal to. To the woman, it was...well...Charlie didn't know what it was for her. She just knew the woman had to die, and she knew the woman knew, and the woman probably knew she knew.

Charlie took a step forward, stumbled into another. The sword dragged behind her, tip in the dirt and cutting a path through the immaculate grass. She noticed indentations leading to the woman, memories of the history of this moment playing out time and time again. As her eyes wandered, she spotted other swords: one black, impaled in a stone in the far corner; one made of many different metals in some contorted patchwork, hanging off the face of a cliff; one that seemed completely normal, stuck in the dirt just behind the tree. Varying sizes and shapes and makes, no rhyme or reason, each telling a story of a variation of this moment. Alpha. Bravo. Charlie...gripping the heaving lump of stone filled with bugs.

"Well?" the woman asked, staring at her innocently. "Will you do it? You'd be the first to stop on your first cycle."

Charlie paused, her body stiffening. If she could breathe, her breath would be quickening. If she had a heart, it would be pounding. Charlie looked deep into the woman's face, the black void inside her head emitting an eerie glow.

"I will," said Charlie, her voice hesitant but resolute.

The woman's face fell, going from a weak smile to a sullen acceptance. "All right," she said calmly, her body slowly falling limp as she ceased holding herself up by the nails.

Charlie's legs moved again, the cylinders sinking into the lush grass, the sword letting out a vile scraping noise as it dragged along the ground. She came within a foot of the woman, staring into the void. It was infinitely empty, like space itself. As Charlie stared, a small chip off the woman's nose, like porcelain, broke off and fell, disappearing into the chasm. The other half of her face stared back. She looked 30 and 13 at the same time, a woman full of pure innocence.

"Why did you call me that?" asked Charlie. "Why did you call me mother?"

The woman sat there, her body still. Her eyes were opened wide. Not pleading, just...staring. "You have her face, Charlie."

The robot grabbed the handle of her sword with her other hand, lifting the blade to her shoulder like an axe. She screamed as she flipped the stone, raising it over her head and bringing it roaring down onto the woman's skull. The blade stopped around her stomach cavity, the weight making up for the dullness. Red. So much red. The crater, the tree, covered in red. *Too* much red.

Charlie left the sword there, didn't bother pulling it out. The force had shattered the sword slightly and the bugs had come crawling out, scuttling around the woman's body. The void was gone, leaving a hollow cranium in its place. Charlie had to wipe the red out of her eyes to even look. She watched in a daze as the bugs began to eat, and as the scene began to fade away. The tree frayed, blowing apart slowly like it had been made of ash.

The deconstruction of the garden and the bridge was slower. The gray ash blew around her as she climbed out of the crater, stumbling back down the path and across the bridge. The sun was shining, the storm having dissipated the moment the heavy mass came down on the woman's frail body. The stale air felt like water despite the desert heat, the ash falling like snow from the disintegration behind her. Charlie walked blindly, her eyes blurring with dissociation as she moved on auto-pilot. She entered the tower again, finding the tight roof and floor had disappeared into a cavernous void. She took a step. She fell. She fell. She fell.

When Charlie awoke once more, her body was sprawled out over loose sand. The sun cooked her, the armor radiating heat. She didn't mind it much. Around her were houses. Normal houses, ancient structures, abandoned and all covered with ash. She was covered in ash, too, grey particles rubbing into her hair, staining her armor, getting into the segments of her limbs. She spit some of it out. It was everywhere.

In the distance, a helicopter like the one she rode in on was waiting. A few Marines were walking over to her, expressions of relief washing over them. Charlie didn't stand to greet them, instead adjusting herself to sit on her legs. She watched them approach, guns holstered. She watched as they came to take her home.

"Is it...over?" she asked, almost timidly.

But it was a fool's question. She knew the deal. She'd be back here in a year.

STRANGE FRUIT

black bodies on the news
strange fruit on a screen
without the smell of rotting flesh
skin ripe at seventeen

boys turn to men
stripped of youth, a stolen child
a pig in a lion's skin
serving, protecting from the wild

why do their hearts never sink?
their chests never ache?
their sympathetic smiles for a murderous "mistake"

hands in the air
"the talk" permanently drilled
not enough for the swine
not enough monkeys killed

maybe the strange fruit
shares with us its same red sheen
and maybe black bodies on the news
are just strange fruit on a screen

ENLIGHTENMENT IN LOVE

A crush is a flicker, a whispered guess
The glimpse of a shape behind my door
But love is the weight of a world confessed
An unwritten law I cannot ignore

A crush is a spark in the dark of the mind
That glows without heat, a fleeting flame
But love is the fire that leaves you blind
A burn with only myself to blame

A crush is a mirage in the summer's glare
A shimmer that fades when close in reach
But love is the ocean, dense with despair
The drowning current hushing my speech

A crush is a whisper, an empty shape
An unfinished puzzle with pieces unseen
But love is a story with no escape
The deafening wish to reconvene

A crush was a question,
Love is the proof.
Now I see you,
Knowing the truth.

—*Sophia Abdul-Malik*

LOVE, LOVE?

i didn't believe you
when you said you 'love' me
in a generation that confuses
attachment with devotion

love is supposed to be felt, right?
like in fairytales
when the knight saves the princess

but i didn't let my hair down for you
and still
you climbed your way into my heart anyways

i'm not sure i want to be saved,
not by you at least
because if this is love
why does it ache like a warning?

you say my name like a curse,
like no matter how fast i run
you'll always catch up

so i stopped leaving footsteps
they washed away with the rain
and i prayed your absence
would begin to feel like peace

still you return
through glowing notifications
and we smile like teenagers again

but this is no dream
it feels like a rehearsal
for another goodbye

and this is just another text
i'll never send
because i could hand you

my heart, split open
still you wouldn't hold it
the way i need you to

but the next girl you say
'i love you' to
i hope you finally mean it

I'VE NEVER KNOWN LONELINESS

They speak of loneliness as though one must meet it,
as though the world holds a room where silence waits
to claim the soul. They tell of long nights
and empty chairs where no voice answers.
Yet I have never know such a thing.
Before I understood the breath of life,
there was another beside me.

We moved as one,
learning the same steps, feeling the same joys,
growing in the same spaces. Two bags at the door,
two voices in the hallways, two hearts
that needed not the language of others to speak.
Thy laughter and thy glance
were ever present, and in moments of shadow,
I found not emptiness but a mirrored light.

And so the notion of solitude is distant to me.
Where some find silence, I find understanding;
where some see vacancy, I see presence.
I have never searched for one to complete me,
for completeness was there from the very start.

Thus, when others lament the pain of being alone,
I remember that I was never of one story.
I came into life as part of something shared,
I came into it as a pair.
And because of this, I have never truly known absence,
because being a twin is the greatest gift the world could give.

FLUPHENAZINE

January 25, 2008

Dear Journal,

Never in a million years would I have thought I'd be sitting here writing in a diary. No, not a diary. I'm not calling it that. The word "diary" makes me feel like an 8-year-old girl. I'll just call it a journal for now, unless I can think of something better later. Mrs. Cooper, my Humanities teacher, said we have to do these "Document Your Day" assignments every day until we feel we've written enough. I can't get a zero for it because my grade is already tanking. So here I am, documenting my day.

She told us that at the beginning of everyone's journal we have to introduce ourselves. (Which is kind of silly to me because I don't know who else will read this, but I don't make the rules.) So here's my introduction. My name is Warren, and I just turned nineteen in December. I like to read comics, play video games, and write. I'm also a student at the worst school in America: Sundance Canyon Academy.

Now, I know "the worst" is a strong word, but if you went to Sundance Canyon you'd understand my disdain for this place. To start, the place is filthy. Like pure pigsty filthy. I wouldn't sit on the floor even if someone paid me type-of-filthy. The people aren't the best, either. Nobody really wants to be here, so they take it out on everyone else. Fifty percent of the time it's me.

It doesn't help that I've never been the kind of guy to fight, or stand up for myself in general. I never really had the courage to. For example, today Matthew asked me if he could borrow my headphones for a second, and usually when Matthew "borrows something," there's a fifty-fifty chance you'll actually get it back. I learned that the hard way with him.

I told him, "I'm using them now, but maybe when I'm done you can."

He proceeded to snatch them off my head anyway. Him and his friends just laughed, like they were at a front-row comedy show or something. This is one of those embarrassing times I'd only share in a private space like this. I know I should've done something, but I couldn't muster the strength to.

To be honest, the only person I think really understands me here, and feels the

same way about these people at Sundance Canyon, is this new girl named Amy. She gets what being an outcast can feel like.

January 28, 2008

Dear Journal,

Today I woke up really early for no apparent reason. I went to bed at a reasonable time, but I still couldn't feel energized. It felt like I closed my eyes for one minute and it was already time to get up. My day was okay today, though. Better than my usual days, despite my tiredness.

I sat by the large window panes in the cafeteria today. It was loud, like usual. People were screaming and laughing. I think I even saw a girl vomit. All the noises at once started to feel overstimulating.

I put in my new earbuds my mom got me, specifically for these overwhelming moments. I connected them to my Blackberry and started to tune out everything. Music always gives me the most euphoric feeling, being able to leave your space and go to that world that only you and the song inhabit.

I was listening to "Pepper" by Butthole Surfers. (I know the name is funny, but it's a good band.) I was about two minutes into the song and decided to put my head down. Not too long after, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It almost felt like the person was scared to touch me.

"Hey, Warren," the voice said softly.

I knew immediately it was Amy without even turning around.

I lifted my head and looked over at her. Amy is pretty cool. We only met a few months ago when she transferred to my school, but it didn't take long before I realized we have so much in common. It's kind of crazy.

She's in my Chemistry class with Mrs. Hurst. When she walked into class for the first time, she looked really nervous. She's kind of tall, too, about 5' 9". She has long red hair and ghost-like skin. Her eyes are a grayish-blue color and huge. That girl has straight bug eyes. (Not in a mean way, though.)

She's also very skinny, almost in an unhealthy kind of way. But who am I to judge? Definitely not a Utah kind of girl.

Anyways, back to the lunch table.

"Hey, Amy."

She sat next to me and started unzipping her lunchbox. It was a dark purple color and shaped like a triangle.

“Where the heck did you get that lunchbox? Never in my life have I seen a triangle-shaped lunchbox.”

Her eyes didn’t move from her thermos and sandwich, but when I said that she smiled. “You’re not the first person to tell me that,” she said as she kept eating.

She had a creepy look about her. I think it’s the hollowness of her eyes. It’s like if you went behind them there would be nothing to find. It can be unnerving if you stare at them too long.

It was quiet for a while after that short conversation. I learned she doesn’t speak much unless she’s spoken to.

“So, what are you doing after school?” I said, trying to keep the conversation from dying.

“Nothing, really. I never usually do much on the weekdays.”

“Me, either. What is there to do here anyway? Am I right?” I added, laughing a little.

For some reason, after I said that the mood shifted. She looked upset all of a sudden.

“Did I do something wrong?”

She didn’t answer, or even turn to look at me. Something was definitely wrong. I just didn’t know what.

“I have to go,” she said.

She got up and walked out of the cafeteria before I could even get a last word in. I got up too and tried to follow her, but she was fast and it was crowded.

“Wait, Amy!” I yelled, trying to get her attention in hopes she would slow down. When I turned the corner of the cafeteria, she was long gone. She must have taken the steps downstairs before I could catch up.

Now I was just standing there and everyone was staring at me like I was crazy. I didn’t care, though. I don’t know why, but this made me more upset than it should have. I never meant to make her uncomfortable.

Why do I always screw everything up?

January 31, 2008

Dear Journal,

Long time no see. I know I haven’t been doing these entries consistently like I should, but I’m going to try to keep better track now. I haven’t seen Amy at school since what happened on Monday. She hasn’t been to class, either. I know

it probably wasn't anything major, but for some reason I just thought I really did something wrong. I felt like she would never talk to me again, until what happened tonight. You wouldn't believe it, Mrs. Cooper.

I was finally winding down and getting ready for bed. My music was playing loudly in my headphones, and I was just about to fall asleep. I turned over and saw my curtains were still wide open. When I got up to close them, there she was. Amy. She was doing that creepy smile she does when things are awkward, like she was so surprised to have finally been seen, or caught, I should say.

"Holy crap." I opened the window a little more. "Is that you, Amy?"

She held onto the windowsill and stood on her tiptoes so she could peep into my room more.

"I just wanted to, uh, apologize for the other day," she told me, even though an apology was the last thing I was expecting or wanting at this time of night. I was more concerned than anything at this point.

"It's fine, but how did you get my addr—"

She cut me off. "Do you forgive me? Is it really fine?"

Her eyes were pretty wide now and a little teary. I could tell she was probably here for something way more important than making amends.

"I was just so scared, Warren. I hate that place! I just can't do it. You understand, right? It's just so hard, I can't..."

She rambled frantically for a while. I stopped paying attention because my mind was stuck on the fact she had found my address. I also wondered why she was so scared to go back home, but I didn't bother asking her. I knew she would just keep apologizing, and she would be way too nervous to tell me what's really going on.

(I don't know, Mrs. Cooper. Amy has just been acting weird lately. When we first met she was way less antsy.)

"Are you even listening to me?" She sounded annoyed. I guess she realized something else was on my mind.

"Yes, I am. It's just really late, Amy."

She looked even sadder.

"I know you couldn't have come all this way for an apology."

She was quiet for a while, and I waited.

"I need a place to stay," she said.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I just waited for some kind of explanation. After a minute, she got the hint.

"I can't tell you why. I'm sorry. I feel like a bad friend."

It was silent. We were both thinking of something to say.

"I just can't go back home, Warren. I can't. You don't understand how bad it is."

I didn't know what to do. I had never had a girl over before. I knew my mom would be okay with it because it was an emergency, but it was weird, right? I mean, Amy and I were cool, but we had never even hung out outside of school. This was a pretty big favor to ask. I didn't realize she trusted me that much.

"Let me ask my mom, okay?" I turned toward my bedroom and then said to her, "Stay outside until I ask, all right?" She stared at me blankly with no response. (I swear it seems like she's from another planet sometimes.) "I'm not trying to get in trouble because of you."

I started walking toward my mom's room. I gently creaked open the door and walked in, stepping over Risco, my Cane Corso. My mom was knocked out. I felt bad even waking her up for this. She doesn't usually sleep well, but this time she was snoring loudly. I gently tapped her shoulder and stood over her.

"What are you doing awake?" she said, sitting up in bed.

She was squinting. I guess she didn't feel like putting on her glasses.

"So, my friend is having a sort of emergency. She wants to stay here for tonight...Is that okay?"

I saw her expression change when I said "she."

"What kind of emergency, and what friend?" she asked as she grabbed her glasses off the nightstand.

"I don't know. She didn't even tell me."

My mom was just staring at me, puzzled.

"Her name is Amy. She transferred to Sundance Canyon a few months ago."

"I didn't even hear the front door open. Where is she?"

I was hesitant to tell her she was waiting outside my window as we were speaking. I used my better judgment and told a white lie. "You wouldn't hear a burglar if one broke in."

She gave me that puzzled look again.

"You were snoring pretty hard, Mom."

"Right...She can stay for one night. No funny business, though. I mean it."

I was surprised it was that simple. I thought she would ask more questions, but I think because it was so late she just didn't care as much.

"Mom, you know I would never do anything like that—"

She cut me off. "Just listen. I know you're a young man now, so I have to tell you these things. You don't have to give me a hard time about it."

I knew where this was going, and at this point I just wanted to get back to my room. "I know, Mom. I promise, no funny business."

"Thank you. I'm definitely going to have a talk with Amy tomorrow."

She turned out the light, which was my cue to get out.

I closed the door softly and glanced at the clock in the living room on my way back to my room: 2:34 a.m.

When I walked in, I saw Amy. In my clothes. Laying in my bed.

“No one listens to me,” I thought to myself.

I looked down at her and realized she was actually fast asleep. I was a little annoyed, but I didn’t want to wake her. She must’ve had a long night with whatever happened at home. Her hair was a mess, and she was wearing my old Kurt Cobain shirt my dad got me for my seventeenth birthday. I hadn’t seen that shirt in years.

I couldn’t even be mad, though. She’s a pretty sleeper. I grabbed the water bottle that I hadn’t drank that day from my backpack and left it on the dresser for her, in case she got thirsty in the middle of the night. I grabbed a blanket and crashed in the living room that night.

February 1, 2008

Dear Journal,

I woke up with a stiff back and neck this morning. I hate sleeping on the couch. Risco was sitting in front of me when I woke up, pouting and whining, like he’d been trying to wake me up for a while. When he realized I was up, he started barking at me.

“You’ve been holding it in, bud?” I got up and opened the back door, letting him out into the backyard. It was raining, so I thought he’d want to come in after using the bathroom, but to my surprise, he laid down in the wet grass instead. I guess he wanted all the outside time he could get.

I closed the door and walked down the hall toward my room to check on Amy. I knocked on the door, even though it’s my room. She didn’t answer. I figured she was still sleeping. It was already 8 a.m., but I decided yesterday that I would be too tired to attend school today.

I slowly creaked the door open. It was cold, and the window was still open from yesterday. The rain was getting in a little. The weather made my gray walls look darker than they already were. I looked down at the bed and everything was in the same shape, except she wasn’t there.

“What?” I said. I flipped the covers up just to make sure she really was gone. “What is with this girl?”

I looked for the shirt she was wearing. It was crumpled up in the corner of my bed. I'm not sure why, but this made me really mad, Mrs. Cooper. I started rummaging through my room like I would find her hiding. I guess that woke my mom up because I heard my door open. She was standing there with a worried look on her face. I looked around at the mess I had made in that short time and felt embarrassed.

"Is everything okay, hun?" she asked, opening the door a little more. "Where is your friend?"

"I don't know. I think she left while I was sleeping."

I was really ashamed. It was my first time having a girl over, and I messed it up somehow.

My mom sighed. "You know you can tell me what happened, right, Warren?" she said.

I didn't really want to hear this. "I told you already, Mom. I was sleeping when she left. I just came in here to check on her, and she was already gone. I wish I could tell you something different, but that's what happened, all right?"

She looked at me even more worried than she was at first, seeing the state of my room. "I know you would really like a girl over, hun, but you don't have to make up stories."

Why didn't she believe me? I thought to myself, then I just walked out. I know it was rude of me, Mrs. Cooper, but you don't understand how this feels. I'm not lying. I don't know why she'd think I'd make something like this up.

I got in my car and decided I was going to go to school after all. There was ice on the roads, so I tried not to drive angrily. I just hope Amy is at school today.

February 3, 2008

Dear Journal,

I really hope what you read stays between me and you, Mrs. Cooper. Some of this stuff is really embarrassing to share, but I'm doing it for your class. If you do tell anyone, please just keep my name out of it.

I'll pick up from where I left off yesterday. Amy was at school when I came in late, and things didn't really go how I wanted them to.

Chemistry with Mrs. Hurst was the last class of the day. I missed lunch, so I didn't see her until the end of the day. She was sitting by the windows in the back of the classroom, where we usually sit. I sat next to her. She looked up at me and smiled.

"You finally made it. I thought you wouldn't come."

"Why did you bail so fast this morning?"

Her smile faded, and she looked embarrassed.

"You know my mom doesn't believe you were even there now. She thinks I made the whole thing up because of you."

She was really upset when I said that. I feel bad now thinking back on it, but at the moment I was just so angry.

"Aw, Warren, you wanted me to meet your mom? I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I never wanted to get you in trouble," she said, looking down at the table. "There's always next time, right?" She giggled a little, and for some reason that made me spiral.

"You think this is a joke?" I said, really loudly. I think I might've scared her. The room got quiet, and so did she. Everybody was staring at me now.

"This isn't funny, Amy. If you were really my friend, you would take me seriously right now. Not everything is a joke."

I regretted saying that as soon as the words left my lips, but I couldn't stop myself. She was staring at me, and her eyes were watering. I really messed up this time.

"I have to use the bathroom," she said. She was trying to wipe her tears while getting up. She walked out of the classroom as quickly as possible.

About ten minutes went by, and Amy still wasn't back. I saw Mrs. Hurst walking toward my desk. Everyone was staring and murmuring to themselves as they watched to see what she would say to me.

"Do you need to speak to your counselor, Warren? I think it would be good for you, dear. It was hard to see you so worked up like that."

"I'm fine."

"Okay then, let me know if you need anything, okay?"

She went back to her desk, and not too long after, I walked out of the classroom. I wasn't really looking for Amy, but I saw her walking back to class as I was leaving. I didn't look at her or even ask if she was okay. I should have apologized for being so rude.

I signed myself out of school and drove home. I've never been more frustrated in my life. Not just at her, but it felt like everything I've ever been frustrated about all happened on this one day. I was probably better off just staying home today after all.

February 4, 2008

Dear Journal,

When I woke up this morning to get ready for school, my mom was sitting on the couch in the living room. I forgot she didn't have to work on Mondays.

"Good morning," she said, as she lowered the volume on the TV. "I made breakfast if you want some. It's on the table for you."

"Thanks, but I'm not really hungry right now. I might grab something on the way." I tried to just hurry and go to my room, but she stopped me.

"Can we talk for a second?"

She paused the show altogether, and I sat down next to her on the sofa.

"Warren, I know you don't like talking about these things, but you need to understand that I'm your mother. Do you think I wouldn't know when something is going on with my own son? I know you better than you know yourself."

I wanted nothing more than for this conversation to be over.

It was silent for a long time, but what she said next made my heart drop. I hope you don't look at me differently for this, Mrs. Cooper. You told me to be honest in these entries.

"I called your counselor today."

"What?" I finally looked up at her, and there was agitation in my voice. "What did you do that for?"

"Because I'm worried, Warren." She was really serious. "Your Chemistry teacher called yesterday. She said you were having a meltdown in class again, that you were screaming at a window. Also, that diary—you're always writing in it."

"But it's for a class—" I didn't get to finish.

"You promised me we wouldn't keep any more secrets."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing I could say.

"Have you been taking your medicine?"

I didn't answer. I barely had the guts to even look at her, and I'm pretty sure we both knew the answer to that question.

"I'm talking to you!" She was yelling now.

"I haven't been," I told her. "I don't feel like myself on it, Mom. I'm sorry."

She started crying. I know my mom really cares about me. I know I'm just making things harder on her, and I hate that I made so many people cry today, even if one was just in my head.

"It doesn't matter if you don't feel like yourself! This isn't you either, Warren. Your psychiatrist prescribed this for you so you can get better. Do you not under-

stand that? Don't you want this to stop?"

She was crying hysterically now, and I felt worse than ever. She got up and went to her room, closing the door behind her. I wanted to apologize, but now didn't seem like the best time.

I walked back to my room, and Risco was laying on my bed. He was sleeping where Amy was last night. I walked upstairs to the bathroom and closed the door behind me. I looked in the mirror for the first time in a while. I didn't feel like myself. My hair was longer than I remembered, and I looked really skinny, in an unhealthy way. I didn't like who I was looking at one bit.

I opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed the small bottle of Fluphenazine my doctor prescribed me months ago. I read the back label for the instructions. I haven't taken them in a minute, but I'm going to be consistent with it now. I read the direction label out loud to myself just to make sure I was doing it right.

"Continue to take Fluphenazine even if you feel well. Do not stop taking Fluphenazine without talking to your doctor, especially if you have taken large doses for a long time. Your doctor probably will want to decrease your dose gradually. This drug must be taken regularly for a few weeks before its full effect is felt."

I took two tablets and drank some water from the sink. I hope I can make a real friend soon, Mrs. Cooper.

—Sent from my iPad to (CooperT@Sundancesd.org)

THE INVISIBLE WEAPON THEY SEE

They say, “Hands up,”
but the air trembles before we even move.
We were born with our palms open,
carrying nothing but breath.
Still, they see a threat.

Our skin, that sacred midnight,
that sun-kissed testament of survival,
becomes the weapon they swear they saw.
No gun, no blade—
just melanin mistaken for malice.

A wallet becomes a warning,
a phone becomes a final call,
a hoodie becomes a headline.
Every heartbeat becomes evidence—
not of guilt,
but of the innocence they refuse to recognize,
of the fear that lives not in us,
but in the hands that pull the trigger.

They say, “It’s not about race,”
but our names...
George, Breonna, Tamir, Sandra, Ahmaud
keep tolling through the centuries
like bells forged from centuries-deep sorrow,
their echoes heavy enough to shake the ground.

We are born targets in a nation
that claims it cannot see color
yet keeps shooting at shadows.
Our laughter becomes rebellion,
our joy becomes resistance,
our existence becomes protest.

Still,
we rise.
We sing through the sirens,
we dance in the danger,
we love louder than fear will allow.
Because this skin, this invisible weapon they see,
is also amor,
is also history,
is also holy.

And though they aim to erase us,
we keep writing our names
back into our open palms,
held high not in surrender,
but in celebration—
a sky we carry with us
where our joy cannot be shot down.

THE NEGRESS SPEAKS OF THE WATER

I've known the water.
I've known the water in Pangea
when the dinosaurs stampeded through the earth's crust
I've known the water ancient as the universe
appearing through the interstellar dust.

The eternal life in me runs deep like the water of the Jordan
older than the flow of blood in any human.

I too bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I danced in Yoruba masquerade from sunrise
and watched villages from above on high stilts when dusk fell.
I looked upon the Nile and raised my hand to pet the great sphynx.
I heard the singing of the drinking Gourd
in the starry night echoing through a black sky.

I've known the water.
Red water and water that is Blue.

The water has a memory carrying the fingerprints of me and you.

I, TOO (REVISITED)

after Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am a brother, a son, a father, an uncle.

They treat me as if I don't exist, as if I don't belong among the masses.

I, too, am America.

But I laugh,

and eat well,

and grow strong.

Because one day, I will have it all.

I, too, rise from rooms where

I was told to be small,

and one day they'll see

I was always meant to be.

Sometimes life feels like I'm sitting in the background,

watching, waiting, holding my feelings in

like when the room gets heavy

or when I stay silent about my pain.

But I'm still growing,

still learning,

still becoming stronger.

I, too, am HUMAN.

THE SELF-JUSTIFIED UNSCRIPTED MAN

Arthur sat at his mahogany desk, the silence of the office thick enough to taste. He was currently adjusting the alignment of his fountain pen, ensuring it sat perfectly parallel to the edge of his legal pad. It was a matter of principle; how could one expect to render sound judgments if one's tools were in disarray?

Ten feet away, his business partner, Elias, stood by the window, his shoulders shaking with the suppressed tremors of a man whose world had just collapsed. Elias had just received word that their firm was being sued for a data breach—an oversight caused by their senior IT director, who happened to be Arthur's nephew.

"Arthur, please," Elias whispered, his voice cracking. "We need to talk about the fallout. If we don't offer a settlement to the clients today, the board will dismantle us. Everything we built."

Arthur didn't look up. He was busy cleaning a microscopic smudge of ink from the corner of his index finger with a silk cloth. "Elias, your heart rate is elevated. It's affecting your cadence. It's unprofessional, and quite frankly, it's unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?" Elias whirled around, eyes rimmed with red. "We are going to lose the firm! People are losing their livelihoods because of a security flaw we ignored!"

"We didn't ignore it," Arthur said, his voice calm, clipped, and irritatingly precise. "We prioritized. The structural integrity of our internal filing system required an update to the metadata index. It was a task that demanded 100% of the team's focus. The 'security flaw,' as you call it, was a statistical outlier—a trifle, really. One does not stop the construction of a foundation because a stray nail might prick someone's thumb."

Elias stared at him, the shock on his face slowly hardening into a cold, hollow realization. "You really believe that? You think your 'meticulous' filing system is more important than the lives of the people who work here?"

"I think," Arthur replied, finally looking up with a thin, confident smile, "that if everyone followed the system, we wouldn't be having this frantic conversation. You're emotional, Elias. It's always been your weakness. I'm simply right."

He picked up the pen again, savoring the weight of it. He felt the familiar, warming hum of righteousness. He was the only one in the room who understood

the stakes. He was the anchor. He was the architect.

He didn't notice the way Elias walked to the door, or the way his partner didn't look back as he left. Arthur simply adjusted the ledger one more time, satisfied by the perfect, symmetrical alignment of his life, oblivious to the fact that the floor beneath him was already beginning to drift away.

Arthur had always been a mentor to Julian, a sharp, ambitious junior associate who once called Arthur's rigid methods "the gold standard of excellence." But that was before the lawsuit, before the firm's reputation began to bleed out in the news, and before Arthur insisted that everything could be solved by "re-alphabetizing the client database."

He found Julian in the archives, packing a box. The room was dim, the air heavy with the scent of old paper.

"Julian," Arthur said, stepping into the light. "I see you're organizing your files for the transition. Make sure you use the sub-category tags for 'Litigation Pending.' It's vital for the audit."

Julian didn't stop moving. He placed a stack of files into a cardboard box with a dull thud. "I'm not filing these, Arthur. I'm taking my personal belongings. I'm leaving."

Arthur stood still, his posture as impeccable as ever. He felt a flicker of annoyance, not because Julian was leaving, but because he was doing so without following the proper exit protocol. "Leaving? Without a formal handover? That is incredibly sloppy, Julian. We've discussed the importance of process during transitions."

Julian stopped. He slowly turned around, his face devoid of the reverence that used to be there. "Is that really what you're worried about? The process?"

"The process is the only thing standing between us and total chaos," Arthur replied, his tone firm and educational. "If you would just focus on the tasks at hand rather than this...emotional exodus, you'd see that we can still save the firm. I have a 12-point plan to restore order. It requires absolute adherence."

Julian let out a short, hollow laugh that echoed against the metal shelves. "You're not saving the firm, Arthur. You're rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship because you think that if the chairs are straight enough, the ship won't sink."

"I am the only one who isn't panicking," Arthur countered, though for the first time, the statement felt thin in his own ears. "I am the only one who sees the truth."

“No,” Julian said, picking up his box. “You’re the only one who stopped seeing people. You look at us like we’re variables in an equation you’re trying to solve. You’ve been ‘right’ about every technical detail, and you’ve been wrong about every single human element of this business. I don’t admire you anymore, Arthur. I feel sorry for you.”

Julian walked past him, his shoulder brushing Arthur’s arm. Arthur didn’t move. He stood in the silence of the archives, waiting for the familiar, comforting hum of his own righteousness to return, but it was replaced by a strange, cold vibration in his chest.

He looked down at his own hands. They were steady. They were clean.

Why, he wondered, does it feel like I’ve just made a mistake?

The board meeting was, in Arthur’s estimation, a mere formality. He had prepared a binder, two inches thick, filled with color-coded charts and a twelve-point plan for “Operational Optimization and Asset Realignment.” It was perfect. It was logical. It addressed the breach by shifting all blame to a third-party server provider, a maneuver that, on paper, protected the firm’s liability entirely.

He stood at the head of the long, mahogany table, his voice steady. “If you turn to page fourteen, you will see that by reclassifying the client data as ‘transient information,’ we technically fall outside the disclosure requirements of the current statutes. The logic is ironclad.”

He looked around the room, expecting the usual nods of relief. Instead, he saw faces of stone.

“Arthur,” the Board Chair, Sarah, said, her voice quiet. “The press release went out an hour ago. We didn’t shift the blame. We accepted responsibility. We chose to be transparent.”

Arthur felt a sudden, sharp prick of annoyance, as if a needle had been poked into his palm. “That was a tactical error. You didn’t consult the index. You didn’t follow the protocol.”

“We saved the firm, Arthur,” Sarah said, closing her own folder with a sound like a gavel. “By being human. By apologizing. Your plan...it would have been a lie. We would have been ruined, legally and morally, within a month.”

“It wasn’t a lie. It was a solution!” Arthur raised his voice, a sharp, uncharacteristic snap. “I spent seventy-two hours straight ensuring the metadata was aligned for this specific contingency! If you had just waited for me to finish the report, if you hadn’t rushed into this emotional, messy apology—”

“Stop,” Sarah interrupted, her eyes cold. “It’s not about the report, Arthur. It’s

about the fact that you think people are just variables to be managed. You treat our clients like numbers and your colleagues like obstacles. We are done with the ‘meticulous’ approach. You’re dismissed from this session.”

“Dismissed?” Arthur scoffed, though the word hit him with a physical force. “I am the only one who cares about the integrity of this firm! You’re all choosing to be wrong!”

He looked to the others for support, but they wouldn’t meet his gaze. A murmur of agreement—not with him, but with the Chair—rippled through the room.

The humiliation, hot and acidic, flooded his throat. He gathered his binder, his hands trembling—not from nerves, but from a righteous, suffocating anger. He couldn’t believe they were choosing chaos over his order. They were choosing weakness over his strength.

“You’ll see,” he muttered, turning on his heels. The door clicked shut behind him, the sound absurdly loud in the tense silence.

He marched down the hallway, his pace quick, his shoes striking the marble floor with military precision. He reached his office, slammed the door, and locked it. He paced the length of the room, his breath coming in shallow, ragged bursts. They are wrong, he told himself. They are undisciplined. They are foolish.

But as he stopped in front of the window, looking down at the city streets below, his reflection caught his eye. He looked smaller than he had that morning. The office, usually his sanctuary of order, suddenly felt like a tomb. He looked at his desk, still perfectly arranged, and felt a sudden, irrational urge to sweep everything off it with his arm.

He didn’t. Instead, he gripped the edge of the wood until his knuckles turned white. For the first time in his life, the silence of the room didn’t feel like peace. It felt like an accusation.

The silence in the office was no longer a blank canvas; it was a weight.

Arthur sat in his high-backed leather chair, the glow of his computer monitor casting a sickly, sterile blue light across his features. The cursor on his screen blinked—a rhythmic, mocking pulse. He had drafted the opening sentence of his explanation to the board four times, and four times he had deleted it.

“Regarding the unfortunate and misguided decision made in today’s session...”

He stopped. His fingers hovered over the keys, trembling slightly. The logic was sound—he had written it out on a notepad, mapping the pros and cons in two perfectly balanced columns. But as he looked at the screen, the words seemed to detach from their meaning. They looked like empty shells.

He stood up, his joints popping in the quiet room. He walked to the filing cabinet, his hand reaching out to straighten a drawer that was already flush with the frame. He nudged it a fraction of a millimeter. It was perfect. It was exactly as it should be.

Why, then, did it feel so wrong?

He walked to the window. Outside, the city was a tapestry of lights, chaotic and uncoordinated. People were rushing, laughing, hurrying toward homes that probably weren't as tidy as his, to families who were likely messy, loud, and unpredictable. For years, Arthur had viewed that chaos with a mixture of pity and disdain. He had spent his life trying to bring order to that entropy, believing that if he could just structure their existence—if he could just make them follow the plan—they would be happier.

He remembered a time, long ago, when his sister had brought her daughter to the office. The girl had spilled juice on his carpet. His reaction hadn't been to comfort the crying child; it had been to immediately pull out a cleaning kit and lecture the mother on the proper way to sanitize fibers to prevent staining. He remembered the look in his sister's eyes—not gratitude for his help, but a cold, distancing pity.

He had told himself then, *She is just emotional. She doesn't understand the long-term benefit of my actions.*

He turned back to his desk. He looked at the fountain pen, the legal pad, the color-coded binders. They were artifacts of a life he had curated with surgical precision. But as he looked at them now, they didn't represent excellence. They represented a wall.

He thought of Julian in the archives, and Sarah at the board table. He realized, with a jarring clarity that made his chest ache, that they hadn't been defying his logic because they were stupid. They had been defying his logic because they were starving for something he had never provided: empathy. He had treated them like variables in an equation, and in return, they had treated him like a machine.

He felt a sudden, frantic need to undo it. He sat back down and began to type, his movements uncharacteristically fast, lacking his usual measured rhythm.

"I see now that in my attempt to protect the firm's structure, I failed to protect the people within it. I have been meticulously wrong."

He stared at the sentence. It was the most honest thing he had ever written, and yet, as he hit the 'Save' key, a wave of nausea washed over him. He knew, deep in his gut, that the apology would not work. You could calibrate a system, you

could align a ledger, but you could not—no matter how meticulously you tried—re-align trust once it had been shattered.

He realized then that his righteousness had been a shield, a way to keep the messiness of life at a safe distance. And now, the shield had become a cage. He was the most orderly man in a building that no longer had a place for him.

He looked at his watch. 2:00 a.m. He was alone, his life's work was in ruins, and for the first time, he didn't want to fix it. He just wanted to stop.

The sun didn't rise so much as it bled into the office, a thin, grey light that revealed the dust motes dancing in the air—the very kind of imperfection Arthur would have spent an hour chasing away only yesterday.

He didn't touch the desk. He didn't align his pens. He sat there, his tie loosened, his eyes burning from a night of absolute, suffocating stillness. He had sent the email. It was a digital ghost now, floating in the inboxes of people he knew, by and large, would not read it with any sympathy.

When the clock hit 8:00 a.m., the first footsteps sounded in the hallway. They were fast, efficient, and purposeful. The sounds of a day beginning.

He stepped out of his office, his movements heavy. He looked like a man walking toward a judge's bench. Julian was at the coffee machine, his back to Arthur.

"Julian," Arthur said. The name came out raspy, lacking its usual crisp authority.

Julian didn't flinch. He poured his coffee, the steam rising in a lazy coil. He turned around, his expression polite but distant—the look one gives a stranger in an elevator. "Morning, Arthur."

"I sent an email," Arthur said, his hands hanging limp at his sides. "To the board. To the firm. I... I wanted you to know that I am aware of my failures. I see that my priorities were inverted."

Julian took a sip of his coffee, his eyes tracking Arthur's face, looking for the tell-tale sign of a trap. When he found none, he sighed, a sound of genuine, weary disappointment.

"You think this is like a coding error, don't you?" Julian asked quietly. "Like you found a bug in your logic, you patched it, and now we just reset the system?"

"I am simply stating a fact," Arthur said, his voice rising in that familiar, defensive cadence before he caught himself. He took a shaky breath and started again, lower this time. "I am trying to apologize. I treated you as a means to an end. That was wrong."

Julian stepped closer, his voice low. “Arthur, you’re doing it again. You’re being ‘correct.’ You’re being ‘logical.’ You’re dissecting your own behavior like it’s a lab specimen.” He gestured vaguely at the empty office. “Do you know what people have been saying this morning? They’re not talking about your email. They’re talking about where they’re going to work next. You spent months building a reputation for being ‘right,’ and you spent all of yesterday proving that you didn’t value a single person here. You can’t just apologize that away. Trust isn’t an asset on a spreadsheet you can balance.”

Arthur felt a hollow, aching pressure in his sternum. “Then what am I supposed to do?”

Julian looked at him, and for a fleeting second, Arthur saw a flicker of the old admiration. It was quickly extinguished by a profound, irreparable exhaustion.

“I don’t think there’s anything left for you to do, Arthur. I think you should go home.”

Julian walked away, his footsteps fading into the hum of the office. Arthur remained by the coffee machine, the silence rushing back in to fill the space where a conversation should have been. He looked at his hands again. They weren’t shaking anymore. They were just empty.

He turned toward his office, but he didn’t enter. He simply picked up his coat from the rack. For the first time in his life, he didn’t care that his tie was slightly crooked or that his papers were left in a heap on his desk. He walked toward the exit, passing his colleagues, who stopped talking the moment he approached, their eyes sliding away from his, avoiding the contact, avoiding the man who had been so obsessively “right” that he had rendered himself entirely irrelevant.

He stepped out into the city air—cold, chaotic, and messy—and for the first time, he realized that he had no plan for the rest of his life.

MARGINALIZED YOUTHS

A new country with no more “stains” we ask for.
We are called the leaders of tomorrow,
But that tomorrow is not guaranteed.

We are forced to give away
Our resources and pay taxes.
At the end of the day,
We can barely feed ourselves.

You draw your scale of preferences
But our names never make the lists,
Coz nobody cares about the poor.

Our needs no one cares about,
Our freedom of speech and expression is stifled.
You shut us out,
Telling the world that we are amateurs
Who are not fit to lead.

But the armed robbers adored in “agbada”
Move around with potbellies swollen with greed.
Treasury looters siphoned ALL the country’s funds
And financially “crippled” the nation.

The looters send their children overseas to study.
Education systems of the country are in shambles.
You can fool some people sometimes,
But you cannot fool all the people at all times.
We are not going to sit back and let you fool us for eternity.

On the streets,
The youths live with harsh realities,
Little children sell items
Just to feed the family

Coz moms and dads no longer
Have the capabilities.

Youths drop out of school;
Education is no longer the key to success.
Why have keys when there are no doors?
The keys and the doors are now replaced
With connections and lootings of the country's treasury.

Youths going astray,
No jobs after graduating high schools and universities.
Young girls turn to prostitution,
Young boys engage in fraud.

After acquiring university degrees,
The youths are still destitute.
Certificates acquired are just names/titles added,
Certificates can't get anyone to his/her desired destination(s)
Coz there is no gainful employment to guarantee a decent livelihood.

On the streets, we draw "weeds" and "weeds"
With blind-folded eyes.
We see no clarity and transparency.
Grant us a chance for a better livelihood.
All we want to do is to thrive and
Take care of our families.

How do you plant hate in our hearts
And not expect us to see you as enemies?
We are tired, frustrated.

But we are never going to give up.
We will continue to fight and advocate
For a new and better nation with no more "stains."

A Nigeria where oppression will cease to exist,
Nigeria in peace and with security for all,
SO HELP US GOD!

IF WE WERE TRULY FREE

If we were truly free,
The weight of the world would fall.
No heavy shoulders, no deep sighs,
No fear hiding in our soul.

If we were truly free,
Our joy would not be watched.
We'd laugh out loud in every space
Without being told to "stop."

If we were truly free,
Our names would open doors,
Not pause them, or delay them,
Not make folks search for more.

If we were truly free,
Our dreams would not be "big."
They'd be normal, fully welcomed,
Not something folks just dig.

If we were truly free,
Our kids could walk with ease.
No talks about surviving
Just living how they please.

If we were truly free,
Our pain would not be shrugged.
Our history would be honored,
Not hidden, deleted, or judged.

If we were truly free,
We'd rise without a fight.
Not fighting to be human,
Just standing in our light.

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