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WINNERS

2022 Poet Laureate Contest

First Place // Giovanni Casson, "Harriet v. Frederick"

Second Place // Jamal Hughes, Jr., "The Revolution Will Be Streamed to Your Mobile Device"

Third Place // Ezenwa C. Onu, "Resilience"

7th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Place >> Chinyere Offor, "Confronting My Past Demon"

Second Place >> Taylor Richardson, "Safety"

Third Place >> Carolina Lautaret, "Juniper"

1st Annual Writing and Reading Center Essay Contest

First Place ## Matthew Ashley, "Abolished or Transformed?
From Chattel to Medical Enslavement"

Second Place ## Carolina Lautaret, "Langston Hughes's Writings About the Spanish Civil War: An Home to Black Heroes"

Third Place ## Tyra Mitchell, "Social Disorganization Theory and Crime"

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for Jawine

OVERTIME

You have made history;
You rise and build your voice in times of misery;
Your resistance has paved the way to
A greater purpose, a better future.
You constructed a change that you wanted to see, strong woman;
They have stretched to push you down,
They have tried to keep you still,
But you are with waves:
You keep spreading your ocean winds like birds flying.
You have kept your head up high,
And the lights up there, they shine bright,
Oh, woman,
You so strong.
How tall they stand against you,
But you have not bowed down;
You are limitless,
You are history's maker;
You inform your intentions to a higher world:
It is an inclusiveness,
Oh, woman.
Your title gives a new name to womanhood.
Because of you,
I am proud to be called a woman, too.

VOICELESS

A cry for help when darkness is all around,
A vocal presence that fades
Like a mic with an echo but no sound.

Voice of the voiceless,
Or that's how it was implied.

Not a care in the world was given,
As a young brother sat there and tried.

Saddened, shorted, stuck ...

Patience was running thinner than a string,
But,
The pace of the clock keeps going,
As the young brother is primed to do magnificent things.

A well-educated man of color is a dangerous
Thought in the eyes of the nation,
But to be the *voice of the voiceless*,
He must stand tall, be brave,
And rise above the population.

BLACK CENTRALISM

The black man is something so amazing to me.
The black man is something only certain eyes can see.
The smooth, dark essence that holds
The power of the strongest and boldest of men.
It is the upshot, the aftermath
Of the blossoming female lotus,
From implementation of the fruitful male seed,
Forming the restoration of the black man, the black woman.
We continue to find the joyous thrill that makes
The melanin in our skin stir our inner passions
To stand up for who we are as a people.
We are the central piece that holds
Everything together in the universe,
When all other forces try to come down and crash around us,
Try to crash into us,
Try to blend with us.
Such a bliss of ignorance to follow blindly
In the belief that we were ever underneath.
The white chocolate could never bring us to defeat.
The black man is a versatile being
That cannot be fathomed by other men,
For it is our man who shall bring along
The journey of black centralism,
Bring us right back to the beginning,
As the cycle continues to flow into the central circulation
Of black people to the end of time.
So, walk with me in our journey of black centralism.
Take back the fear,
Throw away the slave mentality,
Drown away the bath of brainwashing
To discover the centralism in black.
It will shine bright,
It holds light,

And that light
Holds the secrets of black centralism,
Which those of a different skin could only hope to be a part of:
It is simply ours, and forever will be.

MISTAKES

I am the eraser of someone else's pencil.
Their mistakes make me weak.
The more they make,
The more I break.
To pretend it's fake,
The more pressure I take.
I am the eraser of someone else's pencil.

—*Nahjah Phillips*

Social Disorganization Theory & Crime

Criminology explains the causes of crime, including the nature, extent, and control of criminal behavior. The criminological theory that best reflects criminality in America would be the social disorganization theory. This theory was created in the early 1920s by two Chicago sociologists, Clifford R. Shaw and Henry McKay. It was their belief that life in transitional slum areas was linked to an increase in criminal activity. According to *Criminology: The Core*, social disorganization is currently defined as a branch of social structure theory that focuses on the breakdown of institutions in inner-city neighborhoods. Shaw and McKay's research and concepts remain prominent within criminology even though there have been many cultural and social changes since their theory was first developed.

Characteristics of the kinds of neighborhoods they studied include mixed-use areas where residential and commercial buildings are in close proximity to each other, as well as high unemployment and dropout rates because institutions of social control are unable to perform their expected functions. There is also residential instability: neighbors are constantly moving, leading to strained relationships. When residents are interested and able to leave, they are not usually concerned about community affairs, so the sources of control, including schools, businesses, and other institutions, are weak and disorganized. Theorists also found that there is a lack of consensus on norms, values, solidarity, and integration among residents. For instance, if a community wanted to prevent burglaries, they could implement a neighborhood watch, because of that common goal and the solidarity they have amongst each other. Citizens in disorganized areas would not have a common interest in the prevention of crime. Due to these elements, there is a spike in deviant behavior, particularly among the youth, and crime tends to thrive in disorganized communities.

When looking at a theory that attempts to explain crime, there

will always be strengths and weaknesses, because, at its core, a theory is a system of ideas backed by evidence. Earlier critiques occurred when crime began to subside in the 1950s, and the field of criminology moved toward more individual approaches like social learning and labeling theories. A stronger criticism was that researchers could not test the social disorganization model with observed or experimental procedure. “Although Shaw and McKay collected data on characteristics of areas and delinquency rates for Chicago communities and were able to visually demonstrate a relationship between the two using maps and other visuals, theirs did not constitute a test, in the strict sense, of social disorganization theory” (Kubrin, 2010). Formal testing of social disorganization theory did not take place until the late 1980s by Robert J. Sampson and W. Byron Groves. Some people questioned the theory’s biases surrounding lower-class communities, because these theories were created by theorists with relatively the same middle-class background. Lastly, social disorganization theory does not account for extra-community influences related to a community’s access to money or other assets. This includes gentrification as well as disinvestment and redlining done by banks.

Contrarily, the strengths of this theory have led to ways to combat social disorganization. The strengths include the ability to point out factors that produce crime, and the identification of urban crime rates and trends. Even though the theory has been modified, it continues to stay relevant. It specifies the larger structural characteristics of communities that contribute to disorganization. This theory also gives policy insight, like where to direct public funding to prevent crime (shown by mapping models). It stipulates that both public and private funds must be used to support programs located in lower-class neighborhoods run by people with ties to the community. “These agencies not only provide services, but can also provide jobs for neighborhood residents. As employment opportunities increase and better-funded local agencies become centers for social action, pressures on working- and middle-class residents to flee should decrease” (McMurtry). This approach would also strengthen community ties and interconnections, which is a key factor in the social disorganization theory.

From in-depth research, I have learned that crime is more successfully prevented in socially organized communities. To conclude, I believe people are products of their environment, and no one is born a criminal. Environmental factors and community structures are just as important as behavioral, psychological, and genetic predispositions. Social disorganization theory is a justifiable reason to explain why crime rates are higher in some communities than in others. With funding and resources to combat social disorganization, we could see a drastic change in crime trends.

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CONFRONTING MY PAST DEMON

I stood there not knowing what to do. Why had I gone there in the first place? I felt my heart slamming against my ribcage. I had sworn never to see him again, but there I was, a few years and a distressing phone call later. I slowly wiped my hands across my face; my eyes burned with tears that threatened to fall. Several memories flooded my already crowded mind. I slowly opened the door to the hospital room. I was greeted with the smell of antiseptics and the sound of hysterical coughs that came from a frail figure sprawled on the white bed.

“Dad.”

The word left my mouth, barely audible. It was more a question than a statement. Was this the man I had spent the greater part of my life hating? He looked almost unrecognizable. He had lost so much weight that I could see his collarbone poking out from his neck.

I wasn't surprised when I saw him glance in my direction; he had heard me. His ears were still as sharp as ever. Those ears that sought me out when I hid from him. They discovered all my hiding spots, one after another, until I had none left. Those ears heard every cry, every plea, every time I begged him when he did the unimaginable to me at night. My mind flashed back briefly. I could see him walk in through the door one cold night. My mother had been just three rooms away. The image was so clear and for a moment I thought I was back there. His hands were pressed against his lips, a gesture which signified me to keep quiet. Now that I thought about it, I wondered why I never screamed out. When I got back to reality, I saw that I was covered in sweat. My heart was still racing, and my knees were getting too weak to support my tiny

frame. I took a step forward, then another, and another, until I was only a few steps away from him. There was a lump in my throat as our eyes made contact.

He knew what I was thinking, I knew he did. I felt his gaze on me, as much as I saw it. I didn't know what to tell him. All the words I had practiced, everything I promised myself I would let out, they eluded me. Don't get me wrong—the hatred was still there. I felt the same way I did sixteen years ago when he began molesting me, but I didn't have anything to say.

The door opened and mother walked in. She was very happy to see me there. She threw her hands around me in an embrace, but I wouldn't move. I didn't hug her back. The hurt on her face was evident when she withdrew. She didn't understand why I was the way I was. I was her only child, yet I stayed as far away from her as I could. When I eventually showed up, I acted like I didn't care.

"How have you been?" she said, smiling faintly. "It's been a while."

I didn't reply.

I blamed her. She had been so blind to everything. Why had she not noticed when her husband left her side at night? Why had she not heard the creak of my door opening? Why had she not noticed when my walking pattern changed? I shouldn't have to be the one to tell her, should I? And now, sixteen years later, there she was, completely ignorant of all my years of abuse.

"Is he going to die?"

There was a hopeful tone in my question. It was more like I wanted him gone. My face was plain, void of emotion. Mother looked at me, hurt spreading across her face more rapidly than it had before.

"We hope not." Her reply was almost a whisper.

Then there was an awkward silence. I just stood there, trying to guess how my mother must have felt about me. Maybe I would try to be closer to her when he died—that is, if he died. Why did I hope it was the former?

"The doctor said his chances are very low."

Her voice caught me off-guard. I had expected the silence to progress for a longer period of time.

“Both his kidneys are not responding to dialysis,” she continued. “The cancer has become malignant, too”.

I turned to look at her and then I saw that she had been crying. Her face had turned red. She looked as if someone was ripping her heart out. She tried to say something else, but her emotions overtook her. I had known she would be broken if he died. He was the love of her life. He gave her a reason to believe in love again after her first marriage to my father. To her, the frail figure on the bed could do no wrong. Inwardly, I felt hate make its way round my body. I couldn't take it anymore.

I was already out the door when I realized it. Hot tears of anger were making their way down my face. I was angry with myself for going to see him. I was even angrier for not saying anything when I had the chance. What was wrong with me?

My trip to my therapist's office was very long. I had deliberately taken a longer route to give myself some time to calm down. I needed to get my heart to stop racing. I needed to stop my mind from playing that night over again in my head. The images were clear, despite the fact that my eyes were clouded with tears. They were in my mind after all. I could hear his chesty grunts, barely inches from me. I could feel his sweat drop on my face with each movement he made. I could hear his voice, too. It was low, deep, and commanding. It made me sick to the stomach.

The next day was better than the first. I didn't spend as much time in front of the door, contemplating whether to enter. I knew why I was there; I knew what I had to say, and why I wanted to say it. The timing was perfect, too. Mother was nowhere in sight. As I cut through the chill air, across the room to where he was, my heartbeat increased in its pace. I stared deep into his eyes when I got to him. I knew my eyes held hatred, but I couldn't tell what he felt.

“I hate you so much,” I began to say. It wasn't what I had rehearsed with my therapist, but I needed to say it.

“I have spent every day wishing you dead. People like you don’t deserve to live. I hope you die from this.”

My heart was still racing when I finished. For a few seconds, all I could hear over the sound of my heartbeat was the sound of the machine in the room. But then I heard him speak.

“I know.”

His voice held regret.

Later that day, when I collapsed in tears upon getting home, I felt angry with myself all over again. Why had I gone there and said those things? Why was I listening to my therapist? I should be moving on, shouldn’t I? I had stayed away from them for so long and I was doing just fine, so why did I answer my mother’s request to see him in his final moment?

I was fine without them.

I shouldn’t go back there.

I was healed already.

Maybe if I said it long enough, it would become true. Another memory flashed through my mind. It was the day I packed up for boarding school. My mother had become frustrated with my bad grades and isolation from people. She had thought that sending me to boarding school would do me a lot of good. I could imagine how bad she must have felt when, less than three months later, I was expelled for sexually molesting a fellow student. He had made me a monster. He had created a hunger within me that I wanted to satisfy. Back then, I hated him even more, but I wanted to go back. When I regained myself, I realized that I was sprawled across the floor, still in my work clothes. A tear rolled down my cheek and I realized I had been crying.

My third and final visit to the hospital was not what I expected. I walked into the usual room to find it empty. At first, I thought I had lost my way. The machine, which usually lay by the bedside, was all packed up and ready to be moved elsewhere. I just stood there, confusion evident on my face.

“He died this morning. We are sorry, Miss”

The female voice came from behind me. I whipped my head around to see a student nurse looking at me with pity. Then the realization dawned on me.

He was dead.

I felt all the hatred disappear, and the emotion that replaced it surprised me. It was anger, anger that I hadn't made him realize how much he had damaged me. Anger that my mother was probably bawling her eyes out for a person who wasn't worth it. The anger stayed in my heart for days, and it only went away as I watched his coffin being lowered into the ground a few weeks later. I heaved a sigh of relief that I didn't realize I had been holding. My mother stood right next to me. She was probably quiet because she had no more tears left to cry. I placed my hands over her shoulders in comfort.

We had a lot to talk about, and I was sure she wouldn't cry over him when I was done.

DAD'S WORKSHOP

Firewood burning in the forge,
Sparks that fly out
from the soldering gun
onto your feet,
but you don't seem to feel them.
Nothing you cannot do.
You're soaked in this place,
and it in you.
Familiar smell of wood and iron,
smoke and soil.
I see you in the scraps
of peculiar news
and pictures of youth
and stolen treasures
and long-lost gems,
admired intentionally
and poetically displayed.
Bits and pieces of stories,
of ships and factories and trains,
Marilyn Monroe staring back at you,
Carlos Gardel singing his tango on even hours,
and seas of nails and screws and hinges,
crazy-colored glasses and forgotten wine glasses,
tiny spiders creeping up through last winter's timber,
drills and sanders and worn-out wrenches,
tired hammers galore,
witnesses of your fructiferous madness.
Every corner is you:
the artist,
the monster,
the genius.
I know
your open veins

and laborer's hands
by heart.
Blind eyes can still see you.
You are eternal,
and you always will be,
in every corner of the workshop.

THIS TOO SHALL PASS

We are a thing,
the kind of thing I wish for my best friend.
I'll tell you more about this thing we have:
You bewildered my stubbornness
so seamlessly,
got me stumbling in and out of consciousness,
blowing out every candle of my sensibility.
Aware of the power of your golden-hour eyes,
I'm at trial with myself.
Do I deserve this?
Fearlessly reaching for more,
craving the ripeness of your lips,
eyes closed, windows shut,
lights off,
no warnings,
no ocean strong enough
to put out
this ever-growing fire.
Come into our warm love shack,
lay on our bed of forget-me-not petals,
follow the shadows of burning desire.
Let me be dazzled by your blinding smile.
Let's forget our names,
and plunge into the depths
of a moonless November night,
with no intention of letting anyone save us.
Invade me like morning light.
Let us unlearn trodden paths
and together, blindly, dive deep once more.
Let us meet in a dream to dance forever.
Let us drink our laughter
And bathe in our voices
And plan a murder or start a religion.
As you untie my shoelaces
And I sink my nails into your velvet skin,

I know
that this thing we have,
this unforeseen, wild ride,
this too shall pass.

—*Carolina Lautaret*

REDDEST ROSE

Sprouted from the darkest & deepest soil.
Thorns meant to not only harm,
But to instill fear, before an inevitable death.
Steam made and formulated to intoxicate,
With the slightest touch of hand.
Your deep ruby pedals, as red as the most gracious heart,
Upon which your loose pedals glide.

Red rose, I beg for your tranquil kiss.
Bestow upon my lips a beautiful bliss,
One only your pedals could make me feel.

Red Rose, I'm infatuated by your Beauty.
Reddest Rose, I am not another naked hand
That treads unconsciously upon your roots.
I am a Gardener of true tranquility, here to carry and comfort you
With the care you deserve, with the Gloves of Passion and Love.

I see the blood dripping from your thorns,
Due to how past pillagers deformed your beauty
With their irrational foreboding.

Dear Red Rose, I am but an admirer
Who wishes to glance upon your beauty,
Before you bestow upon me a fatal kiss
That leaves my soul in harmony.

So please, my Red Rose, bloom for me.

MY LOVE

Dig my grave, dig deep,
Dig my grave from head to feet,
And remember I needed love.
Remember I shouted from the abyss for you.
I'm suffering and in need of assistance to change for you,
But should I change what's really wrong with me?
You paint me in a mirror as a monster, a creature with no heart.
You want me to be a replica of the girl you envision in your head,
But is that really me?
You said you loved me for who I am, from head to feet,
But am I not good enough?
Yes, that must be.
I can't move on; I want you to want me,
Comfort me, hold me.
Let's travel back in time to the very beginning,
To the flowers every morning,
The long stares into my eyes to see my soul,
The laughs after the pecks of kisses you would give me,
The love that warmed my heart.
Was it all an illusion meant
To sweep me into your arms
And rip the love out of my body?
For this empty corpse you begin to dig my grave,
But I swear to everything above me, I will be good enough,
And only good enough, for you.

TWO SOULS UNDER THE LIGHT

The campus was quite peaceful at night. There was little to no noise left from the repetitive school day. The students were in their dorms on this chilly autumn night. Tiny insects chirped and the wind rustled the leaves on the trees, making them silently crash against the pavement. I always liked to walk the campus at night. For those small moments, you are alone within your own head, and in these moments, you don't have to think critically. No thinking about the next assignment or thinking about the future. There is only now. It's simply existing and living in the moment. There is no interruption or second-guessing. The moon and the stars were always shimmering and shining brightly and following me with every step. At the top of the campus, there lay a freshly cut lawn and a bench was placed by a lamppost that lit up the area. It was my place, or so I thought.

I saw a black figure sitting on the very bench where I have sat many times before. I approached slowly with my heart pounding in my chest, but it wasn't out of fear; it was out of pure curiosity. I inched closer. The person must have heard my footsteps because they turned their head, and it was then when the light illuminated his face. His skin was dark, and he had beautiful locs that were pulled into a messy bun and a few loose locs framed his face. He wore an oversized graphic tee and dark, fitted jeans with white kicks.

"Hello," I said, and took a few steps toward him.

"Hey, you." He flashed a white smile at me. "You can sit. I don't bite, you know."

He chuckled and I timidly sat beside him. "What are you doing out here so late?" I felt myself relax.

"I could ask you the same thing." His eyes were warm and invit-

ing. I saw a half-grin pulling at the right side of his face.

“You’re in my spot.” I side-eyed him and he cocked a brow at me.

“Your spot?” He looked behind, under, and on the sides of the bench before stating, “I don’t think I see your name.”

“Maybe I’ve seen you.” It wasn’t a question. His voice was low and raspy, making my stomach flutter.

“You haven’t seen me.” My eyes fell to the ground as I tried to hide the growing shyness creeping into my face and into my voice. “Y–you have a name?” I hated that I could hear how timid I was.

“Kapri. You?”

“Parker.”

I wiped a strand of my hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. For a brief moment, silence was our companion. It didn’t run stale. It was a moment for us to take in the growing curiosity within us. I felt my heart racing in my chest, and I didn’t understand why. How could this person, who I’d known for only a minute, get this type of reaction from me?

We talked about the obvious thing we had in common, which was school. He was a music major. We shared stories about some of the crazy things we had witnessed in our classes. We talked about—whatever. Everything really. His favorite color was royal blue. Obviously, his favorite hobby was writing songs and producing music. He had no siblings. He was a party animal—never skipped a party. We laughed at stupid random shit like dancing, life-sized teddy bears on TikTok. We laughed until our bellies were weak and our lungs were empty. It was the weirdest feeling; I didn’t know much about him, and he didn’t know much about me, but I felt like I’d known him for a lifetime. Before we knew it, the sun had completely disappeared, but we didn’t care. Neither of us were ready to walk back to our room and face the piling assignments waiting for us.

“Come on.”

He grabbed my hand and gave it a little tug, pulling me closer to him. I didn’t reject him. I moved closer to him and saw the half-grin on his face.

“Look up,” he said.

“Huh?”

“What do you see?”

“An open black sky and shining stars.” It felt very peaceful looking into a sea of darkness illuminated by stars.

“Make a wish,” he said. “Anything you want. Free pizza, win the lottery.”

“I think I know how to make a wish.” I chuckled and closed my eyes with the intent on making a stupid wish.

“What did you wish for?” Kapri asked.

“For my Literature professor to cancel class tomorrow. I don’t really want to go. She drains me quite honestly.” I laughed.

“You mustn’t know anything about making wishes, because, if you did, you wouldn’t be telling me what you wished for.”

I cocked a brow at him and burst into laughter. He sounded way too serious about something so silly.

“You’re hilarious,” I said. “Your turn, Kapri.”

“Say it again.”

There was a shift in the air and his low voice captured me. My heart dropped into my stomach. His index finger grazed underneath my chin, lifting it up so that my eyes met his. His signature half-smile appeared on his face as he caressed my cheek before pulling me closer and planting a kiss upon my lips.

“Say it.”

He broke the heated kiss. I leaned in and whispered his name against his lips.

“Kapri.”

I felt his tongue slip into my mouth and our tongues danced together harmoniously. He pulled me onto his lap and I felt him growing between my legs. He pulled me as close as he could and even that wasn’t close enough. I felt his hands making their own exploration of my curves as he smiled against my pursed lips. I felt his hands travel from my hips to my hair, where they were knotted,

the perfect mixture of pain and pleasure. Still holding me close, he moved his lips from my mouth to my neck, and I instantly melted in his arms. I felt a moan escape me and it only made him hungrier. I didn't want to come up for air. I was drunk from the warmth of his lips, and I only wanted more.

Kapri and I spent a month coming to this bench. When the nights were chilly, we brought blankets and snacks. We never worried too much about the time. We simply enjoyed each other's company. Our conversations were light-hearted. I felt like the pieces of him were starting to come together. I liked the growing friendship that we had. It was new and exciting and a change of pace. I liked to be around Kapri. He was a goofball, creative and intelligent.

One night, I found myself rounding the corner to see his all-too-familiar silhouette sitting in the very place where we had spent a month's worth of precious time. I felt a smile pulling at the corners of my mouth. I drew in my bottom lip to suppress my grin, but it didn't work. I was excited to see him, and I didn't want to hide that. But the smile that had been plastered on my face quickly disappeared. There was another person sitting there beside him.

I quickly made myself scarce. I hid behind the nearest tree and saw that it was another woman. He laughed with her, and it made my stomach uneasy. *I shouldn't jump to conclusions, right? Maybe she's just a friend.*

I saw him tuck a piece of her hair behind her ear and pull her in closer. She caressed his cheek before pulling him in closer and planting a kiss upon his lips. From that moment on, I felt my stomach churning in ways I didn't know were humanly possible. It felt like taking a hit to the chest, like all the air was being knocked out of my body. One part of me wanted to feel this despair and another part wanted him to see my growing anger. *Get yourself together, Parker. He will never see you sweat. Hold your head high and make your presence known.*

I stepped out from behind the tree, adjusted my fitted, distressed jeans and oversized crewneck, took a deep breath, and headed over to the bench.

“Hey, Kapri.” I popped a smile on my face and batted my eyelashes.

“Uh, hey, Parker. What’s up?” His eyes grew wide in fear and the woman beside him looked at him and then at me.

“Nothing much,” I said. “I was just about to come sit here and relax. I didn’t think you would get here before me. That never happens.” I chuckled and twirled a loose curl that dangled on the side of my face.

“Uh, yeah. We can totally meet up tomorrow night. That sound cool to you?” He stammered and stuttered his ass off and I was eating it up.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I have other things to do. But you know what? You have fun.”

I smiled and walked away. I started to feel hot tears pricking the backs of my eyes and then laughter erupted from my mouth. I headed back to my dorm room with my head held high and a smile on my face.

YOU'RE A WOMAN NOW, GIRL

Everything I had to offer, all my dreams and wishes,
Got plucked on the mouth by adulthood.

No one can truly know
about those stressful jaw clenches

And the unfiltered moments that should
have just been left alone.

A depiction of what were my best times—
bless my teary eyes.

A negative plus a negative equals nothing but a busy mind.

THAT THING

What's that thing called when you've hit a wall?
When you've gone too far but don't know where to turn next?
When you've lost all motivation,
And just think it'll be best if you're
Alone for as long as you can be?
Not only to be alone just for the hell of it,
But to collect your thoughts,
And hopefully gain a new mindset.

You know?
That moment where things don't seem to be adding up.
When life seems confusing,
And you start overthinking something you did yesterday,
That many probably didn't notice.
There's a word for that.

It's like you're stuck in a hole,
Dark, damp, and deep,
And as much as you want to get out and try,
You can't,
Probably because you're procrastinating,
Or maybe you just don't feel like it.

There's a word for that.
That thing where no matter how hard you want to try,
It's going to take some time to gain
The strength and motivation to do—something.

There's a word for that,
And, according to research,
It's called a "rut."

Some have tried forcing themselves to be social,
Some have even tried waking up early
To start their day on a good note.
Many have tried expressing their emotions,
Either with others
Or by writing them down.

You could try this, too.

But side effects may include
Inconsistency,
An irregular diet,
A low social meter,
And possibly
Another rut.

RED BALLOONS

Balloons floating through the air they blew,
2 red and the rest blue,
Cast out by her surroundings, broken inside,
But only she knew.
Depression, bitterness, anger, strife,
A lunatic in a straight-jacket was her life.
Abandoned and left at the age of nine,
Surviving on her own, not connected to her bloodline.
The powerful wind blows her in the wrong direction,
So she becomes the epitome of vexation,
Devil shooting fiery darts into her head, no sense of relaxation.
Days, hours, minutes went on, more temptation,
Which made her not quite understand the equation,
That two wrongs don't equal a right.
Her big, beautiful brown eyes blinded,
She lost her sight:
Red Balloon 1.

Balloons floating through the air they blew,
2 red and the rest blue,
Challenged by the destruction of her body tissue,
Broken inside is all that she knew.
Sickness, immobility, and bedrest were not her only life,
But having a spirit of joy, laughter, and contentment—
This is also what she was like.
Diagnosed with the sickness, headlined as “CANCER,
The disease coming for us all.”
Symptoms such as bumps, fevers, night sweats,
Weight loss, hair loss, headaches, fatigue;
Oh yeah, let's not forget the most important one, death.
The list goes on and on,
But choosing not to believe this, she puts her fears aside,
Knowing she can conquer it all.

As she rises into the sky,
The strong wind separates her from the crowd,
And God gives her the strength, and on her head
Places a crown:
Red balloon 2.

So now, the real question is to pop or to fly,
Grace Jean-Baptiste,
To let your circumstances bring you down,
Or to overcome your problem and rise high?
Which red balloon do you want to be?
The choice is all yours.

Abolished or Transformed? From Chattel to Medical Enslavement

Before the thirteenth amendment was “ratified,” chattel slavery was legal, meaning humans could be owned like property. Since they were not considered human at the time, African-Americans were owned, traded, sold, and enslaved. But in 1865, when slavery officially ended, new and unique systems were created to ostracize Black people and keep them trapped in a subservient role. When most people think of oppression after slavery, they think of Jim Crow, but racism was embedded in many different corners of society. Prejudice found itself intertwined in science through the ideologies of the Eugenics movement, biological racism, coerced sterilizations, and ethically abusive studies, all of which targeted men and women of African-American descent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Eugenics is defined as the practice of improving the human species by selectively mating people with specific desirable hereditary traits. The goal of the Eugenics movement was to reduce human suffering by *breeding out* disease, disabilities, and undesirable characteristics from the human population (“Eugenics”). These undesirable characteristics would include feeble-mindedness, pauperism, criminality, promiscuity among women, and insanity. These characteristics were all stereotypes attached to Black people, making them a target. This movement discouraged anyone who was not deemed desirable from reproducing—most of the time through unethical means such as coerced sterilization. This ideology of perfecting the human race quickly became ingrained in racism, because being black was considered an undesirable trait.

As eugenics became a widely known theory, it was only a matter of time before it was commonly practiced. Soon, scientific racism, also known as biological racism, would be used to support the foundations of eugenics. Scientific racism is the pseudoscientific belief that empirical evidence exists to support or justify

racism, racial inferiority, or racial superiority. Scientific racism also spawned other pseudoscientific methods like craniometry, or the measurement of human skulls, which supposedly proved that whites were biologically superior to Blacks (“Scientific Racism”).

One method of eugenic practice that occurred in the early nineteenth century was coerced sterilizations. Coerced sterilization removes a person’s capacity to reproduce, usually through surgical procedures performed against their will or without their knowledge. The most prominent target of these coerced sterilizations was black women. California’s Asexualization Acts of the 1910s and 1920s made it legal to sterilize 20,000 disproportionately Black and Mexican people who were deemed mentally ill. Throughout the twentieth century, nearly 70,000 people, an overwhelming number of whom were working-class black women, were sterilized in over 30 states (Stern 3). Although sterilizations occurred all over the nation, black women were more susceptible in the southern states. In North Carolina in the 1960s, Black women made up 65% of all sterilizations of women, although they were only 25% of the population (Manjeshwar 4). Fannie Lou Hamer, a renowned civil rights activist, was subjected to an involuntary hysterectomy. Preliminary analysis shows that from 1950 to 1966, Black women were sterilized at more than three times the rate of white women and more than 12 times the rate of white men (Stern 4). This pattern enforced the idea that Black women were not capable of being good parents and poverty should be managed with reproductive constraints.

In the early nineteenth century, physicians and anthropologists claimed that, due to their mixed blood, *mulattoes* were considerably more susceptible to disease than either of their parents and thus exceptionally short-lived (“The Ideology of Racism”). One form of scientific racism was the claim that there are biological dangers involved in racial interbreeding. As the field emerged in the early twentieth century, geneticists warned that intermarriage might result in genetic disharmonies. Though biological research easily refuted these ideas, they were quickly replaced by assertions of social scientists that mixed-race children were morally and intellectually inferior (“The Ideology of Racism”). This led to anti-mis-

cegenation laws in a myriad of American states, which banned interracial marriage.

Scientific racism not only influenced societal views and legislation, but it soon led to unlawful experiments on black people. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study is an infamous example of the ethically abusive studies black people were victim to in the twentieth century. Formally known as The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, this study was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and conducted by the United States Public Health Service (PHS) between 1932 and 1972 (McGill 2). The initial goal of the study was to observe the effects of the disease when untreated, and black men were deemed the perfect guinea pigs to infect.

In the study, investigators enrolled a total of 600 impoverished black sharecroppers from Macon County, Alabama. Of these men, 399 had latent syphilis, with a control group of 201 men who were not infected (McGill 3). Over 100 men died over the course of the experiment. The uninformed participants were enticed and enrolled in the study with incentives including medical exams, rides to and from the clinics, meals on examination days, free treatment for minor ailments, and guarantees that provisions would be made after their deaths in the form of burial stipends paid to their survivors (“About the USPHS Syphilis Study”). These were all privileges that black men weren’t used to receiving, which motivated them to want to participate in such a study. Although physicians did provide these men with both medical and mental care that they otherwise would not have received, they were deceived by the PHS, who never informed them of their syphilis diagnosis. Physicians and investigators lied to the participants in an attempt to further the progress of the experiment, even to the detriment of black lives.

Ethically abusive studies and medical experimentation are only the tip of the iceberg. The general disregard for black life continued in the twentieth century, when the genetic property of Henrietta Lacks was stolen. Henrietta Lacks was a young mother of five who visited Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland in 1951, complaining of vaginal bleeding. Upon examination, a large malignant tumor was found on her cervix. Dr. Gey, the physician treating

her, had been taking cells from his patients who were diagnosed with cervical cancer without their knowledge, and Lacks was no different (Remsberg 4). Some of the tissue from Lacks's tumor was sent to a researcher without her knowledge or consent.

In the laboratory, her cells turned out to have an extraordinary capacity to survive and reproduce. Later, Dr. Gey realized that, where cells from other samples would quickly die, Lacks's cells doubled every 20 to 24 hours. Tissue samples taken from Lacks's tumor before she succumbed to cervical cancer have been used to study the effects of toxins, drugs, hormones, and viruses on the growth of cancer cells without experimenting on humans. Her cells also became the first human cells to be successfully cloned (Remsberg 5). Reproduced infinitely ever since, HeLa cells have become a cornerstone of modern medicine, enabling countless scientific and medical innovations, including the development of the polio vaccine, genetic mapping, and even COVID-19 vaccines (Remsberg 7). Although Lacks has greatly contributed to the advancement of medicine and saved countless lives, this was all without any of her consent. Dr. Gey disregarded any respect he had for his patient and violated her rights.

America's checkered past with African-Americans didn't end with the abolishment of slavery; it was simply repackaged and filtered through other facets of society. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Eugenics movement, and the story of Henrietta Lacks are just a few examples of white people weaponizing their power to treat black people as less than human. Ultimately, science was used to perpetuate racism and keep African Americans medically captive through means of unethical research and abusive medical practices.

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A LETTER TO SHARON

We didn't know each other long, but you meant the world to me.
It hurt to see you in so much pain and misery.
I could be selfish and wish you had never left,
But I'm happy that now you can finally rest.

We'll always have coffee and bacon from when I was a little girl,
And the conversations about the state of the world.
You always knew what to say at the right time,
And of all the grandmothers in the world,
I was proud to call you mine.

The days will pass and the years will go by,
But every time I think of you, I'll start to cry.
Not because I'm angry, mad, or sad,
But because I know you're up there, happy, and that can't be all bad.

I love you for life.

DEFINITELY, MAYBE

“Hello, my name is Sarah.”

I change my name every time I go to Starbucks. Some may say it's because of my pending identity crisis. Ever since my mother died, I've been trying to find a place where I belong. If changing my name brings me solace, so be it. When I say my name is Sarah, it is because Sarah didn't lose her mom or her self-confidence; I did. The cool-whipped mocha frappe I ordered is the only thing keeping me from dying of pure despondency.

When I allow the savoring taste to consume my thoughts and relax the nerves in my body that I never knew I had, I became whole again, even if I am using a name that is not my own.

Growing up, I was always very shy, considering I only ever stayed at a school for less than two months. I was like an army brat. Always moving around, never staying in one place. When I used to lie awake in bed at night, I would wonder if I was wind. Like wind I always drifted, never staying in one place longer than I should.

Dad used to say that I was one of a kind, that I had the imagination that adults had long forgotten, and that I should always keep it with me no matter what. I only wish that that same imagination had kept him alive, because, in a perfect world, he would have been front row at my graduation, cheering me on alongside my mother.

My dad died in a fatal car crash when I was nine and left my mother to carry the load of bills and to raise me. The reason I moved around so much was due to the odd jobs my mother worked to take care of me. Heartbreak just seemed to follow her. I remember my mother would change her work uniforms like costumes on Halloween night. As a kid, I thought it was the coolest thing. My favorite memory is when she was booked to dress as Cinderella for

a little girl's birthday party and she allowed me to wear the tiara the whole drive to the party. She glanced in the rearview mirror as I played with my dolls until she finally said, "Baby doll, you look beautiful."

"Really, mama?" I asked.

"Of course! Remember, even though I am the princess tonight, you will always be the belle of the ball."

As we got out of the car, she began to tickle me to distract me as she grabbed the tiara off my head.

"Now, baby doll, let's go. We don't want to be late!"

That night she was the true belle of the ball, the way she gracefully danced around the room as her dress flowed. I was so proud to call her my mom that night.

But as time went on, mom began to grieve, and I mean *hard*. Sometimes I would hear her crying herself to sleep through the thin walls of our ever-changing apartment. But she finally found a way to cope with her grief—relationships.

Failed relationships, I might add. Every time a Billy or a James broke her heart, we moved. I became the new girl more times than I could count, which is probably why I have this not-so-pending identity crisis now.

Mother would always say there's always a new adventure that needs to be explored; this was her way of telling me it was moving day. I'd like to think that her greatest and last adventure was to heaven. Her death was so unexpected: one minute we were planning her 50th birthday, and the next we found her face-down in the kitchen. The doctors said she had had a stroke, but I like to imagine she was in the kitchen, like she always was on Sundays, getting ready to cook one of her famous dinners, when my father appeared in the window to call her home to be with him, just as she had wanted for so many years. So, as I said before, I was somewhat of an army brat, but without the stripes and honor. Just a walking sob story about someone who lost the people who cared about her too soon.

Now, twenty-three-years-old and at the brink of total destruc-

tion, I live alone with my cat Stormy and dog Lightning in a shallow apartment that's inhabited by dust. The other day I thought it was snowing, but my window was just so dirty I couldn't see anything out of it. Life is hard and my job as a professional dog walker isn't helping. Yes, you heard right. I walk dogs for a living. I pick up poo, walk them through the park, and I'll even bathe them if you pay me extra. Everything in my life is a complete load of crap, and all I have to show for it is the imagination my father told me to hold on to so long ago. I walk around believing everyone gets their happy ending, hoping that someday I'll soon get mine.

I suppose it's my fault for not going to college, another thing that dear old dad mentioned that I didn't do. My dad would pick me up from school and drive me around all the expensive neighborhoods, just so we could see the cars and the families with their designer clothes come out of their lavish homes. He called it "touch it, see it, obtain it," a way to see what you want in life so it isn't so unreachable. On the drive back to our small but quaint home, he would tell me that if I ever wanted to be anything, I would have to go to college.

This morning, I am going in for a job interview to determine whether I will be a dog walker forever. It's only for the cashier position at Marc's, but a girl can be hopeful, right? I decide to wear a white button-down shirt to the interview with khaki pants and my lucky Nike sneakers. In hindsight, I could've done better, but I had to make do with what I had.

As I walk into Marc's, the manager, an elderly white woman, greets me with the standard red vest on.

"Welcome to Marc's," she says. "How can I help you?"

"I am here for a job interview."

"For what position, honey?" She twirls her curly black hair.

"Cashier, ma'am."

"Oh, that's right. Theresa Whitfield, is it?"

There it is—my real name. Theresa Whitfield, the girl with no parents and no career.

“Yes,” I say. “This is her.”

“Come on, honey. I can interview you in my office.”

She gestures toward the back of the store. As I follow her through the aisles, I fidget with my paint-chipped nails, beginning to feel anxious and, quite frankly, small. I just know she is going to take one look at my several attempts at being an adult and kick me out the door I just came through.

“Here we are,” she says as we reach a wooden door with the name Brenda Thomas on it in bold. “Feel free to make yourself comfortable while I review your application.”

Her desk is crowded with portraits of what I’m assuming is her family. In one photo, she is seen hugging a little girl on a couch in front of a Christmas tree. There is an elderly man kissing her cheek. They look happy. I am envious. I guess I was staring a little too long for her liking, as her eyes meet mine. She flips the photo face-down on her desk.

“That’s my husband, Sam, and our granddaughter, Lily. They are my everything! Really, you should sit down. This won’t take long.”

Great, here I am standing awkwardly in this lady’s office, glaring at a picture of her family. She probably thinks I am crazy. I finally sit in the surprisingly comfortable chair and try to keep good old dad’s words in my mind: “touch it, see it, obtain it.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I just spaced out for a minute.”

“No problem, suga! Now, I see here that you are a dog-walker and you haven’t worked a cashier position before. We usually hire people with experience. You see, I’m low on staff and don’t really have time to teach you, but...”

“I am a fast learner,” I say, cutting her off. “Trust me. I learned how to make spaghetti after only two hours on YouTube!”

Brenda begins to laugh, and loudly I might add. I mentally face-palm myself and prepare for rejection. Just as I’m about to get ready to leave, she says, “Theresa, buttercup, you are one funny young lady! As I was saying, I don’t have the time to teach you the cashier position, but I do have a janitor position available. That’s

only if you are okay with it?”

Now I know this doesn't sound like much of an upgrade, but hey, it's better than smelling like a wet dog all day.

“I'll take it!” I say.

Time seems to go in slow motion as Brenda begins to work me into the schedule. In this moment, it finally feels like I have my life in check. After the interview, Brenda shakes my hand and says, “Welcome to the team, honey! See you on Monday!”

“Thank you so much! See you Monday!”

When I reach my car, I look up to the sky and say a short thank you to my dad. Now that the hardest part is over, it is time to go make the box I've been living in a home. Once I step in the apartment, I rush to the dusty cleaning supplies under my kitchen sink and go to work, wiping down every insecurity masquerading as the walls of my home, the floors that I dragged my sorrows across countless times before. When I reach my bedroom, I see Stormy and Lightning asleep, snuggling my pillows. I begin to clean around them, but I stop as soon as I see my reflection in the mirror. I haven't looked at this mirror in ages, not since my mom put it up on my wall a year ago. I don't really like mirrors. If I look at myself too long, I just see how broken I am, but my mom insisted on it.

When I lift it off the wall to dust behind it, a small envelope falls to the floor. I pick it up and I see that it has my name on it. I push Lightning's tail to the side so I can sit on the bed. He snuggles his head against my lap. I wonder what this could be as I flip it over. It says, “From Mom.” I am shocked. Mom never said anything when she put the mirror up. As I take the letter out, it smells like her signature vanilla perfume.

“Theresa, my baby doll,” it reads. “I am so proud of you! Congrats on your new apartment! I love you so much! Now I know you hate mirrors, but I wanted to gift you this because I want you to see yourself just as I do, as the belle of the ball. Mom.”

I release a breath I didn't know I was holding and begin to break down. So many thoughts swirl around my head, like how I let my mother down, how she'd never be proud of me if she could see

me now, and how both my parents died before they could see me succeed. The room begins to spin as I try to put the mirror back up. When I finally do, I see someone in the glass that I hadn't recognize before. Her eyes are bloodshot red, her skin seems lifeless; it is as if she is just a shell. She is me.

But then something happens. I feel my father's presence. I feel his hand on my shoulder and a whisper in my ear saying, "You are enough." Right then and there, all the walls I had built to block me from seeing myself freely fall down. I look in the mirror and I imagine myself changed. I imagine a world where I no longer pity myself, a world where I am happy.

I spend the weekend getting to know Theresa Whitfield, and on Monday morning I go to Starbucks before work. As the barista asks for the name behind my order, I say, "Theresa."

"What a beautiful name," says the barista.

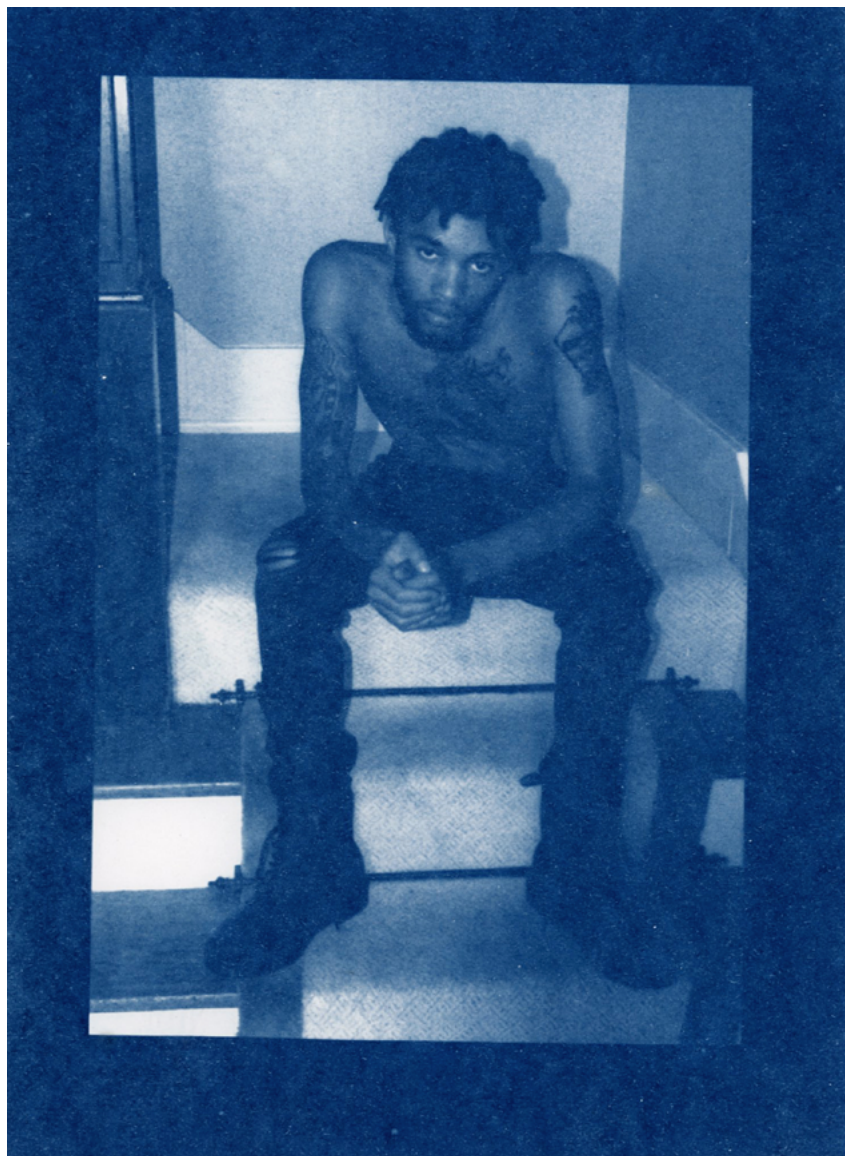
Yes. Yes it is, I think.

MISS MARY JANE

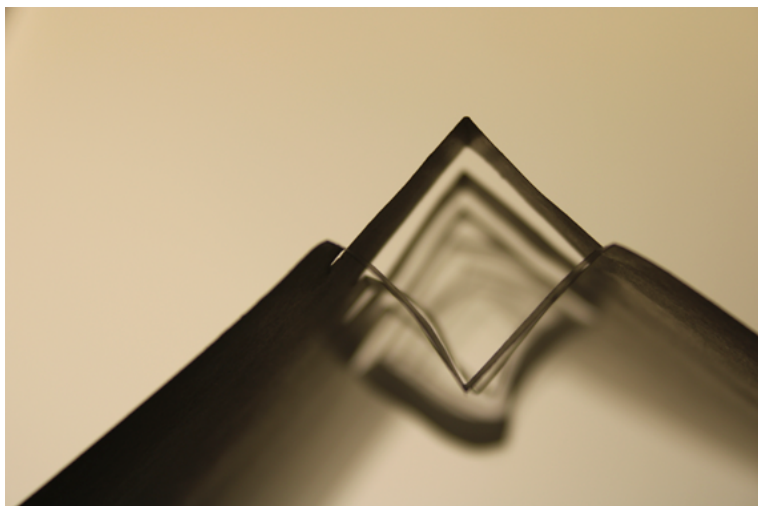
Something about the way you smell
Could be the reason I'm so infatuated with you.
I love to feel your heat inside me:
It's the only thing that keeps me calm.
You cloud my brain with your toxins,
Make me forget about my problems;
Instead, I stare up at the sky,
Gazing at the stars, wondering,
"How the fuck did they get up there?"
Sometimes you got me trippin',
Or you mess with my memory,
But you solid,
And you green,
And you make me smile,
Make me feel—good.
I be so damn high when I hit the blunt,
Be so far gone,
I'm in my own world with you,
Wishing I could feel like this all the time,
My eyes bloodshot red,
But I'm feeling as good as ever,
Not worried about a thing,
Just wishing for some Mary Jane.



London Banks/*Happiness Ignited*



Jalin Walker/*Eyes of Pain*



Jalin Walker/*Through the Lines*



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled*



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled*



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled*



Matthew Andrews/*Untitled*



Deborah Neal/Nine Muses



Samaya Jones/*Self-Portrait*



Jayana Chyna/*In My Blood*



Darnell Neely/*Virgil Valore*



Jala McKan/*Vacation*



Jala McKan/Responsibility



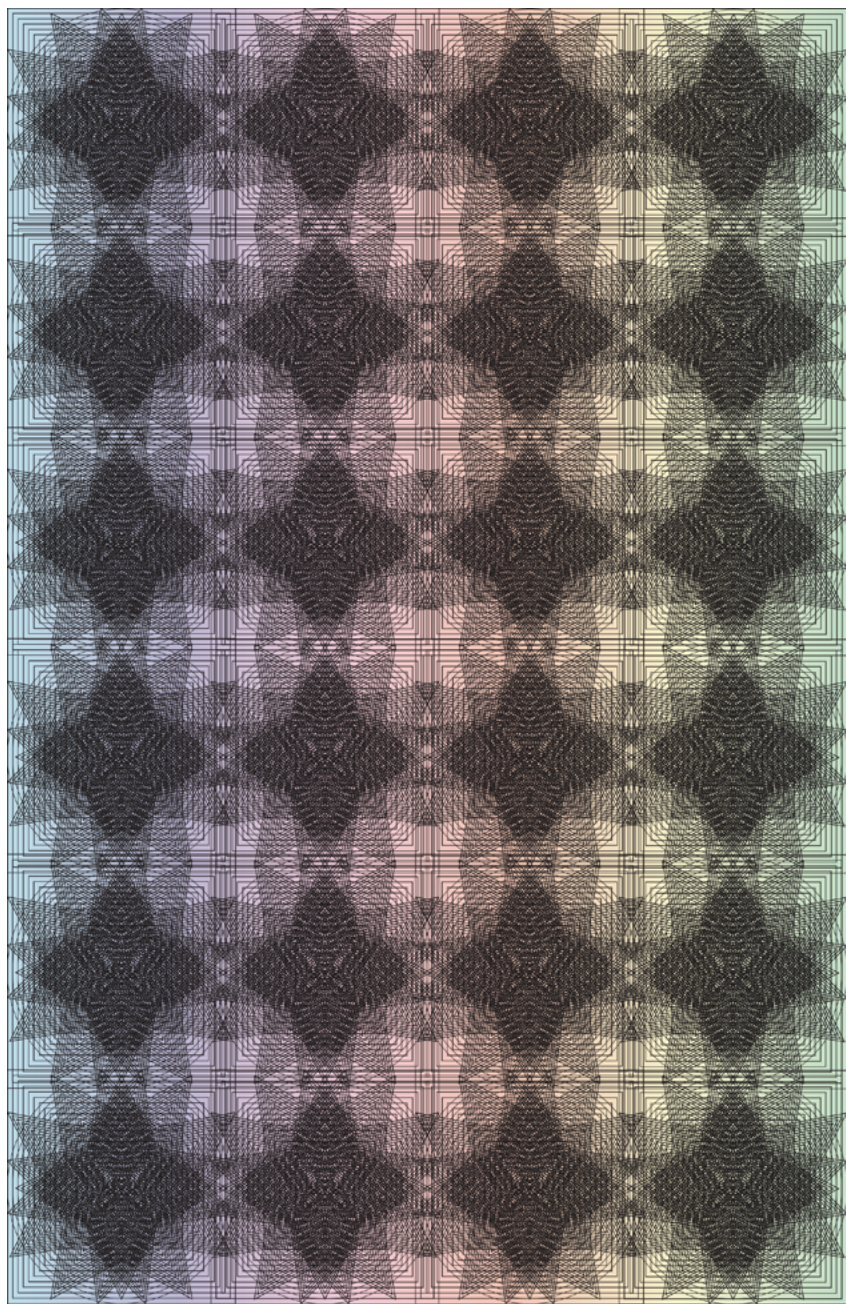
Jala McKan/*Nation's Icon*



Pujan Patel/*The Eye of Nirvana*



Pujan Patel/*A Summer's Sight*



Jaden Harrell/22



Hashone Carry/21st Century Basquiat: New Me



Shamica Terry/*Untitled*



Asha Gunter/*Untitled*

Personal Interview

The Death of Jawine Evans

On the night of Wednesday, February 16th, Lincoln student Jawine Evans was stabbed and killed by a university alumna, 39-year-old Nydira Smith, during an altercation in the LLC dormitory. The incident, which was covered by several local and regional news stations, shook the school to its foundation, and started a frank discussion about the stake that both students and administration have in cultivating and maintaining campus safety. Staff member Aziza Harmon conducted an interview with Bronx native and Health Sciences major Daejarie Jones for her thoughts on Jawine's murder, administration's response to the tragedy, and the steps Lincoln needs to take to truly protect its Pride.



Daejarie Jones

How did the murder of Jawine Evans affect the overall atmosphere on campus, and in what ways did it alter your personal behavior? For example, did you stop going to class or doing work? Did you skip out on parties or social events because you were afraid?

Jawine was a great friend of mine. His murder definitely affected the atmosphere on campus and our community as a whole. The overall mood on campus was very dull and sad for a long time. It also caused lots of controversy in regard to public safety and the administration. Many students, including myself, felt like the administration lacked compassion for the students during this traumatic time in many of our lives. Personally, I have really been struggling overall after Jawine's death. I didn't think it was going to affect me the way that it did. It definitely took a toll on my mental health for sure. I would say I stopped going to class as often and have been more reserved and to myself, which is new for me. I just feel less motivated and feel as though Lincoln doesn't really care for their students.

Do you believe that administration handled the incident appropriately? In your opinion, was Jawine's murder a failing of the students, public safety, administration, or the culture at large?

The administration 100% handled the situation wrong. Coming to Lincoln, they sold me on the family aspect, and I would say that I don't feel like the administration was there for their students enough after something so traumatic. We shouldn't have to fuss and fight with administration for them to come up with some kind of temporary solution. Don't even get me started on public safety. The lack of urgency with public safety has always been an issue. Public safety does not really protect us at all. They allow anyone on campus, and they are unaware or don't care about things that are unsafe for us. Fighting is so common at Lincoln, with no consequences. That is a problem. We should not have looked at that video and thought about how normal it was for people to be fighting or stabbing in the dorms. There are no set safety protocols, and if there are, public safety doesn't enforce them at all, and neither do we.

In the days and weeks following the incident, were students adequately communicating their displeasure to administration? How can students take grievances out of the chats and bring them to the attention of the university's change-makers?

Following the incident, the students were communicating their displeasure to administration for sure. Lincoln does a great job at just trying to move forward after stuff happens. This was a situation where that shouldn't have occurred. The incident affected too many people in too many different ways for admin to just try and continue the semester as if nothing ever happened. Students were trying to figure out different ways to get through to change-makers in the form of different events and even some kind of protest. I feel as though fear plays a big role in everything. The fear of no one showing up, the fear of getting in trouble, and the fear of no change happening.

What needs to happen on campus to ensure that something like this never happens again?

Honestly, I feel as though Lincoln needs a whole reboot. They need new systems in place for everything regarding public safety, administration, etc. The same things are going to keep occurring if Lincoln doesn't find a way to update many protocols. Rules need to be set in stone. We do whatever we want here, and that's the problem. There are really no consequences for our actions, whether that's fighting, smoking, partying, etc. If we know that there will be real consequences for the things that we do, maybe bad things will happen less often.

Are you still proud to be called a Lincoln Lion? If you can, share with us some of the more positive experience you've had on campus this semester.

I would say that I am not really proud to be called a Lincoln Lion. I really wanted to transfer after this semester. Don't get me wrong, I have a strong Love-Hate relationship with Lincoln, but I am just hoping that change will come, so that I can leave Lincoln proud to be a Lion. Honestly, I haven't had too many positive experiences this semester; it has been very challenging for me to even still be on campus. I would say that the basketball season was one for the books! I loved going to the games to support my school!

PUNCHLINE

Growing up, everyone's joke had the punchline, "I hate Black people."
Every cry of frustration was followed by, "I hate black people."
Hating black people was a phrase
Engraved into the back of my brain by society.
I was programmed to be this way.

Was it because I had potential?
Or that I had found a way out?
Or that I just couldn't be myself?

The hood broke me. The hood shaped me. The hood made me.

I grew up in a single-parent household.
I grew up with no hot water.
Food was scarce in my home at times.
Grew up abused by a parent, neglected by another.
Men hurt me,
Boys hurt me,
Women hurt me,
Shit, I hurt myself.

I clinched to life at times,
Missed school cause of blackened eyes and busted facial features.
I was fed bread and water, while others dined like royalty.
I felt like a slave to my own family, a slave to my own people.

I beat the odds with many sacrifices.
Survived with peers and family six feet under,
But why...do I still feel that I'm not Black enough?

My people and pain are synonymous.
My people and poverty are identical entities in the universe,
But what happens when our people rise above the pain?

Nobody talks about those select few who no longer feel pain.
What happens to them?
What do they identify with:
The “strong black people” or the oppressed people?
Do they identify with their beaten demons or their dreams?

Do I not belong because I do not believe the punch line,
“I hate black people?”
Will I ever belong in a world that’s simply not made for me?
I changed the program, the coding of my existence,
From pain to excellence,
Re-wrote my ancestor’s dreams, took from those who died in the sea,
All to still be a punchline in the eyes of everyone else.

HARRIET V. FREDERICK

Harriet—Flashes from God, in a haze...I looked up towards my Hope. My Star...that led me to this very moment. I stared in wonder...my people, whose luck seems to run dry like raisins. God share your prophetic vision with me. Please. Let my people go.

Frederick—If bursts of blues, reds, and whites shimmer across the sky...why am I so glum? Why must my heart feel so scorned and unholy? Lady Antebellum seemed to change dresses from white to black. Black and White. This is no 'Passover.' This is your day. Not mine.

Harriet—Oh, Delaware to Canada. My freedoms seem to run away from me. I will sure 'nough hunt them down however, and good ol' Minty will be free. Cause, didn't you hear? Minty is relentless. Minty is cunning. Minty is brazen and even dangerous. Good ol' Minty is a conductor, honey.

Frederick—My momma, Bailey, loved me. This I knew but couldn't show. Each day there was one more Frederick and one more Bailey. Called home to Glory, I hoped she would remember me at those pearly gates. I would stand there and wait for her to give word of safe travel. I would ask her as I dreamt, Momma, what do you see, from high up there? She said, August, I see a northern star. Tell the others to get ready.

Harriet—I looked at my hands to see if I was a person.

Frederick—I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

Harriet—If you hear the dogs, keep going.

Frederick—My dear...if there is no struggle... there is no progress.

FLESH OF MY FLESH, BLOOD OF MY BLOOD

for Daunte Wright

Dust to Dust,
Ashes to Ashes,
I lie here with you.
They didn't just take one beating heart,
They took two.
Two:
Me
And
You.
My love
So beautiful,
My sweet baby,
Whose life I cherished more than my own,
Whose love captured me at first sight.
I didn't know then
That you would be every breath I needed,
Through storm and rain.
You watched my ups and downs.
Glory be to God,
You were all mine.
My sweet baby
With pigment that glowed
Bronze like Him,
With beauty made in His image.
I thank Him
For you,
And yet,
I'm angry,
I'm pissed.
How could they take my gift?!
My Gift, Intricately Made, Fearfully and Wonderfully Done,
How could they take my Hope?!

The smile that made those sleepless nights bearable.
How could they not see
What I see,
What God sees
As nothing short of perfection?
He was..
She was...
Perfect
To me.
The audacity.
Well, now I exalt them both
With that same audacity,
Yet stronger
And wiser I march.
My blackness runs strong, but my patience,
My patience runs thin.
Here I am with him.
You have not taken one beating heart,
But two.
You have stolen, like a thief in the night,
Two beating hearts wrapped in love,
Kissed by a bow made of joy and wonderment and curiosity,
Curiosity thwarted out of fear
Of what we would do,
Could do,
Might do,
But have never done.
You kill out of assumption,
You kill out of worry,
Hoping to extinguish what is not there,
But now will be.
I lie here with their hopes and dreams
And aspirations.
I blossom from the soil you polluted with the roses I created,
Vibrant with thorns.
Each petal will spread
And with it
More roots with anchor.

I AM NOT GOING ANYWHERE.
Neither are my children or my children's children.
We will continue to cry out for justice,
Continue to cry out for peace,
And as my garden fills
I will lie here overjoyed
That my seeds will plant seeds
With that same song,
And maybe one day
My garden will overflow,
And you will see
What I see,
What God sees
As nothing short of perfection.

—Giovanni Casson

Langston Hughes's Writings About the Spanish Civil War: An Homage to Black Heroes

The articles and poems written by Langston Hughes (1902-1967), American journalist, poet, novelist, and writer, that constitute his "Writings about Spain," represent an invaluable record of the reality of the Spanish Civil War. They shed light on its unsung heroes, namely the 3,000 American volunteers who were part of the Lincoln and Washington Brigades. Focusing on these writings, this essay seeks to demonstrate Hughes's intention of not only informing the American people of the events happening in the Spanish Civil War, but also of raising awareness about the deep-rooted racism in the United States, which stood in stark contrast to the climate of freedom and equality experienced by blacks in Spain.

Hughes, a black man, transmits a profound appreciation of his Spanish experience, especially in regard to the possibility of different races co-existing in harmony: "And all of them finding in loyalist Spain more freedom than they had known at home" (Hughes 160). In his encounters with the most distinguished writers and intellectuals, as well as brigadiers in Spain, he explores his own identity as a writer and as a man of color and digs deep into the problem of racial discrimination in America and the absence of it in Spain. His admiration is conveyed in his writings:

To colored visitors, the Spaniards are just as hospitable as to any others. And many of them are interested in discussing the problems of colored people in America, having read so often of the lynchings held in our country. They do not, however, realize the extent of the economic and social discrimination which we have to face, and when I tell them about Jim Crow theatres, trains, jobs, and schools, they wonder, since there are fifteen million of us, why we don't do something radical about it. (Hughes 172)

Soon after arriving in Spain in 1937, Hughes joined the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas (Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals), created to support the Republican cause. Hughes wrote several articles, letters, and poems *in situ*, which were later published in *The Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper, *The Cleveland Call-Post*, and *Globe* magazine, among others. His articles and poems advocate for the principles of democracy, justice, and freedom. This essay covers the following articles: “Soldados de diversos países unidos en la lucha Española,” “Escritores, palabras y el mundo,” and “Negros en España.” It also covers three of his poems: “Escritos sobre España,” “Héroe - Brigada Internacional,” and “Semillas del Mañana.” Through these works, Hughes presents a strong case against fascism and American racism, and pays homage to the men from different parts of the world who joined the Spanish Second Republic in order to fight Franco’s regime. The material Hughes produced during his stay in Spain stands as valuable archival memory of a crucial historical period. On top of writing articles and poems, Hughes also translated work written by his most-admired Spanish poets, helping to carry their voices to the rest of the world.

In 1937, Hughes wrote “Negros en España” (“Negroes in Spain”), in which he seeks to highlight the bravery and courage of those brigadiers who fought in the war against fascism. He tells us about their lives, their backgrounds, their ways of seeing the world, and he especially underlines the heterogeneous aspect of the Lincoln Brigade, where a cosmopolitan group of men followed the ideals of freedom, democracy, and social justice. The poem was published in *The Volunteer for Liberty*, which was founded in 1937 to encourage and unite the English-speaking battalions and to condemn Franco’s Nationalist party. Its articles were meant to inform readers of the worldwide support for the Republican cause.

This article is concise and impactful. Hughes declares some of the realities he perceived and experienced within the context of the war. Also, he retells the stories of individuals he met from different nationalities: Dominicans, African Americans from the Antilles, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Africans, Moors, and more:

All the countries of Europe have sons here in Spain. All the countries of America, too, both the English and Spanish-speak-

ing lands. Far off Australia is here. China and Japan. Negroes are here from the States, the Islands, Africa. I have seen and talked to them, white, and black, and yellow, and brown. (Hughes 178)

These men have been called by the will to fight for a common cause, to fight against a fascist ideology that embodies the concept of white supremacy. African descendants from all over the world feared, with good reason, that fascism would bring about a new wave of severe racism, thus endangering the rights for which black populations had been fighting.

For this reason, the author expresses his consternation over the participation of thousands of Moors who had been tricked into fighting for Franco: “Thus the Moors die in Spain, men, women, and children, victims of Fascism, fighting not for freedom—but against freedom—under a banner that holds only terror and segregation for all the darker peoples of the earth” (Hughes 157). He explains that these men are not fighting for freedom but against it; they have been on the wrong side, deceived and betrayed through terror and abuse, “an oppressed colonial people of color being used by Fascism to make a colony of Spain” (Hughes 156). The writer states that Africans and other minorities should become aware of the power of the enemy, fascism, and the danger of this regime for people of color: “Someday the Moors will know better, too. All the Francos in the world cannot blow out the light of human freedom” (Hughes 158).

In 1938, at the Meeting of the International Writers Association for the Defense of Culture, he writes “Escritores, palabras y el mundo” (“Writers, Words and the World”). Hughes’s main message is to highlight the importance of words, books, and writing. He stresses the role of the writer as a key figure who has the power to create awareness and interweave the issues of the world through his storytelling. The writer has a responsibility to commit himself to the task of understanding the social and economic forces that move the world so that he may transmit them with clarity and provide faith in life and hope for the future. This is a short but overwhelmingly poetic speech that Langston Hughes read during the meeting:

Words have been used too much to make people doubt and fear. Words must now be used to make people believe and do...Words put together beautifully, with rhythm and meaning, are as the branches and roots of a tree—if that meaning be a life meaning—such words can be of more value to humanity than food to the hungry or garments to the cold. For words big with the building of life rather than its destruction, filled with faith in life rather than doubt and distress, such words entering into the minds of men last much longer than today's dinner in the belly or next year's overcoat on the back. (Hughes 197)

Hughes is describing his deepest feelings about the influence of words, and he defines them as a powerful tool that can sometimes be a double-edged sword. Words, says Hughes, can cause action and awareness, but they can also lead to people believing in the wrong ideas, ideas that threaten life and freedom.

In this speech, Hughes reflects on the importance of a writer's understanding of global issues, which he considers vital in helping people to understand the immense complexity of the world. He places emphasis on this concept:

To understand! In one way the whole world situation today is very simple: greed against need. But within that simplicity there are many complexities and apparent contradictions. The complexities of race, of capital and labour, of supply and demand, of the stock exchange and the bowl of rice, of treaties that lie and bombs that tell the truth. And all these things are related to creative writing, and to the man or woman who writes. (Hughes 199)

A writer, then, is never neutral. A writer has power over the minds of men, hence creative writing's importance for global awareness and understanding among human beings. Moreover, we can associate the message behind this speech with the sense of commitment to a cause, whether it be social, political, or ideological. Hughes relates the symbolism of books being protected or burned to this idea of commitment:

For there are two depositories for books today: on democratic shelves or in reactionary bonfires. That is very simple. Books may live and be read, or be burned and blown away. So there may still

be those who use words to make people doubt and wonder, to remain inactive, unsure of the good in life, and afraid to struggle for it. But we must use words to make them believe in life, to understand and attempt to make life better. To use words otherwise, as decent members of society, we have no right. (Hughes 199)

Hughes is a committed man, and as a writer, journalist, and poet, he is willing to admit that he will never be neutral, at least not in the life-or-death reality of war. Men, he states, in such a context, are either on one side or the other.

In the article, “Soldados de diversos países unidos en la lucha Española” (“Soldiers from Many Lands United in Spanish Fight”), written for the *Afro-American* and published in 1937, Hughes discusses the numerous nationalities represented in the war. These men, who volunteered to become part of the Republican cause and occupied different roles in the International Brigades, were highly admired by Langston Hughes. However, he wanted readers to learn more about the Nationalist side, which comprised Italians, Germans, and Moors, and which had been deceived into participating in the war. He compares their lack of personal commitment to the dutifulness of the Republican fighters, whose defense of democracy and desire to bring down fascism was outstanding. While Republican brigadiers were willing to give their lives to fight against white superiority, minority oppression, and racism, the Moors, who fought for Franco, were quite different. Hughes describes them as such:

Illiterate African colonials forced to obey the commands of the Fascist generals in power. To keep up their morale, they are spurred on by promises of loot, rape, and the doubtful pleasure of killing some of those Spaniards who in the past have taken so many shots at them. But unfortunately, the Moors are shooting the wrong way. In pointing their guns against the workers and farmers of democratic Spain, they are only further aiding the rebel generals to tighten more surely their grip of despotism on Africa as well as on Spain. (Hughes 179)

He also states that the Italian and German soldiers were mostly paid soldiers who needed to earn a salary, or poor peasants whose

only way to earn a living was to sign up for the army in search of income, blindly obeying orders. Fortunately, Hughes explains, some of the Moors who became aware of the lies they had been told later joined the International Brigades against Franco. To conclude his article, Hughes defines fascism in the following way: "Fascism is oppression, terror, and brutality on a big scale" (Hughes 181).

Lastly, the writer highlights the absence of racial segregation during the war. Numerous black brigadiers occupied important positions on the Republican side, working as officials, doctors, nurses, professors, drivers, etc. Sadly, this inspiring reality marked a contrast with the situation in the U.S. Hughes reflects on the need for change and the continued pursuit of integration, equality, and freedom in America, motherland to so many African Americans who volunteered to fight in the Lincoln Brigade. About this, Hughes writes that the violence he saw on the front, as soldiers were fighting fascism, was nothing compared to the violence he experienced at home, where lynchings and social and economic discrimination were still tearing American society apart. For this reason, he understood that the anti-fascist cause was based on fighting for a society free of divisions, where social justice is the higher law and rights for all are guaranteed, where triumph and prosperity come from the joint efforts of all individuals, regardless of their skin color.

Men like James Yates (1906-1996), who was a leading figure of the Lincoln Brigade, are an example for the American people. He is one of many African Americans who fought in the war against fascism in Spain. In the documentary, *Invisible Heroes: African Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (2015), Yates confesses that the first time he had felt free in his life was in Spain. During the war, he experienced, first-hand, the values of solidarity and racial equality. Sadly, upon his return to the United States, he was met with latent racism and severe persecution from the FBI. Thus, we can understand why Hughes is not afraid to compare Franco's side with the members of the Ku Klux Klan: "Give Franco a hood and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a kleeagle. Fascism is what the Ku Klux Klan will be when it combines with the Liberty League and starts using machine guns and airplanes instead of a few yards of rope" (Hughes 181).

Thus, in Hughes's eyes, fighting the enemy in Spain was equal to fighting the enemy at home. In his 1952 poem, "Héroes - Brigada Internacional" ("Heroes - International Brigade") he writes:

Blood,
Or a flag,
Or a flame
Or life itself
Are they the same:
Our dream?
I came.
An ocean in-between
And half a continent.
Frontiers,
And mountains skyline tall,
And governments that told me NO,
YOU CANNOT GO!
I came.
On tomorrow's bright frontiers
I placed the strength and wisdom
of my years.
Not much,
For I am young
(Was young,
Perhaps is better said -
For now I'm dead.)
But had I lived four score' and ten
Life could not've had A better end.
I've given what I wished
And what I had to give
That others live.
And when the bullets
Cut my heart away,
And the blood
Gushed to my throat
I wondered if it were blood
Gushing there.
Or a red flame?

Or just my death
Turned into life?
They're all the same:
Our dream!
My death!
Your life!
Our blood!
One flame!
They are all the same!

The poem honors the deeds of the combatants of the Lincoln Brigade and other International Brigades. It summarizes the essence of the ideals of the men and women who fought against fascism, and of those who, even today, fight for noble causes. The poet expresses that both life, death, and a flag are the same, because causes, principles, and ideals are worth living and dying for. For him, a noble death caused by following a dream is valid and honorable. In the poem, Hughes mentions the obstacles that fighters had to face in order to come together in Spain. Still, they stood up in the face of adversity and joined their brothers and sisters to resist the fascist regime.

The men lost in the war are represented in the poem as a flame symbolizing life, hope, and victory. This message is relevant in current times, as hate crimes, murder, injustice, and war are still part of our society; however, as long as people are willing to fight for a better world, there is still hope. The concept of life, death, and dreams being “all the same” is powerful, conveying the idea that human beings must join in the fight against poverty, injustice, discrimination, and violence, since the future is in our hands. If we fight for what we believe in, any and all death will also mean life, in the sense that fraternity and brotherhood will be stronger than loss and darkness. The flame we must keep burning is the flame of our ideals, of our dreams, of our will to thrive.

“La semilla del mañana” (“Tomorrow’s Seed”), written in 1952, memorializes and conveys admiration for fallen soldiers during the Spanish Civil War. Hughes writes:

Proud banners of death,

I see them waving
There against the sky,
Struck deep in Spanish earth
Where your dark bodies lie
Inert and helpless -
So they think
Who do not know
That from your death
New life will grow.
For there are those who cannot see
The mighty roots of liberty
Push upward in the dark
To burst in flame -
A million stars -
And one your name:
Man
Who fell in Spanish earth:
Human seed For freedom's birth.

This poem also talks about the new life that arises from death. Hughes understands that the resistance and commitment of the fighters does not die when their bodies die, but stands as hope for all men. He refers to the tragedy of war as a seed from which freedom will bloom. In this poem, his sense of admiration shines through, as he praises those who fought on the Republican side. Comparing these men with eternal stars, he honors and promises that, through recognition and remembrance, their deaths will be transcendent.

The poem thus stands as an ultimate homage to the brigadiers and combatants, to the heterogeneous group of brave and humble men who voluntarily fought in the Spanish Civil War. But most importantly, through the poem he grants them the recognition they never received from their own countries. Moreover, Hughes recognizes their fearlessness and bravery for dying in a foreign land, fighting for a foreign nation, speaking a foreign language, and gaining brothers from all over the world, regardless of their nationalities, backgrounds, or skin color. His poem is a tribute to these loyal men, many of whom became Hughes's brothers.

Several of the articles and poems analyzed in this essay were written during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and others were written in its aftermath. These writings have historical value because they represent vivid recollections of the lives, experiences, and stories of the men Langston Hughes encountered during the war. The stories are told from the inside: from the mountains, from Madrid being bombarded, from the hospitals full of wounded men from both sides, from restaurants and hotels, from iconic battlefields and ghastly trenches. He situates us in Spain through experiences, adventures, and the individual stories of men and women. Above all, Hughes was astonished by the harmony of races and nationalities that fought together against the common cause of fascism and racism. His work challenges us as human beings, inviting us to reflect on issues of race, borders, justice, democracy, civil rights, and freedom, as he educates us on the meaning of life and death. Hughes's work inspires us to question, in today's world, how far we have progressed, or regressed, in relation to his ideals.

Hughes's words are still valid today: we cannot be neutral bystanders or indifferent to these issues. They still challenge and interrogate us, they encourage us to keep fighting and committing to the ideals of justice, equality, democracy, and freedom, which are not guaranteed for all human beings. They urge us to be critical individuals and take action for the causes we believe in. Only in this way will societies truly progress.

The importance of Hughes' writing is unmeasurable for its universal and timeless reach. Without his records, humanity would not know about the stories of numerous unacclaimed heroes that gave their lives to stop fascism. Modern literature would be blind to the stories of so many murdered writers, poets, and artists lost to a ruthless enemy, brave men who gave their lives for a noble cause.

Finally, Langston Hughes's work proves to us that he was not only an excellent poet, journalist, and writer, but an extraordinary human being whose remarkable legacy reminds us of our humanity and our moral obligation toward human rights, truth, justice, and freedom. Hughes's noble spirit and honest writing transcend borders and time periods and have left us invaluable records of a crucial

chapter in human history. The participants in the Spanish Civil War, remarkable heroes who fought as brothers, regardless of their race, should never be forgotten.

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THE WAY MY DAD RAISED ME

You don't love me anymore.
Well, at least that's the way it seems when birthdays
Aren't just milestones, but a reminder of yet another year
You aren't here with me.

Your name has been spoken in rooms
Your feet haven't even touched yet.
I mean that's crazy, right?

You taught me to miss a presence that could hold me
Like you were supposed to when I scraped
My knee and cried for hours on end.
Or when I got my heart broken by men who loved street corners
Before they could ever love themselves.
Or me when I would try to pull them from their own personal hell.
Doesn't that sound familiar?

You see, I tried to find you in men
Who caressed my body before they ever did my mind,
But I fought through the lies and abuse...I survived,
Built walls so high that no one can reach around them,
But honestly, who would want to?

I am just damaged like mama's pride
When you walked away with her heart at the bottom of your shoe.
So yeah, I'm okay if you were wondering,
Letting the insecurities become burdens on my back,
Branding the "I love you and only you, and if you
Love me you wouldn't leave" from men on my lips.
You know—that compulsive masculinity that breeds
On just one single kiss.

The very hood fable that rocked me to bed at night
Had circled the block longer than you ever did,
And like a fool I never stop hoping you would,
So I began to pray on bended knee,
Trying to piece together the ruins you left me,
Asking myself, Is this what I'm worth?
With these hand-me downs suffocating my airwaves with no remorse.

You morphed me into the woman that birthed you,
Leaving that shell of a man that I can
Always find somebody to compare to,
But what is there to expect?
After all, this is how my dad raised me when he left.

SAFETY

It's the end of the month, so that means it's time to collect more supplies for survival. Last month, my older brother, Joseph, went with our younger sister, Carole, on this journey; that means it's my turn and I'm not too excited about it. At home, we're surrounded by trees, which helps to provide us with cleaner air for the moment, considering the trees are slowly dying, and as we go off into the city to gather supplies, it's becoming harder to breathe due to the higher levels of air pollution from gas emissions and factory pollution. This is how we've lived for the past six months: travelling with gas masks, sickness taking out half of the population including our parents, and clean water becoming scarce every time we go on this journey. This isn't a zombie apocalypse, a new strain of a virus didn't come out of nowhere to slowly kill us, and aliens didn't land on our planet hoping to wipe us out to create a new and "improved" civilization for themselves. This world that we've become accustomed to was brought about due to climate change.

Do you remember those commercials? The ones that told us to reduce, reuse, and recycle? Do you remember the many websites they created, GoFundMe campaigns, and the perfectly edited videos explaining how "woke" they were and how we should do something before our small world goes through changes we can't undo? Let's just say we should've been listening. I saw those ads, and the millions of dollars many tried to throw at these disasters, but nothing ever changed, so much so that by the time the government realized the natural disasters came at the hands of us not taking care of our world, it was too late. Towns flooded, wildfires became a regular thing, crops died, and animals followed suit, and with the rise of air pollution and no one being able to fix it in time, people died from either a stroke, heart disease, or some form of respiratory disease.

Since then, people have turned on one another, and the neigh-

bors that we do have, we only speak to when we make eye contact. To be honest, I forget what life was like before the world fell apart. All I can say is that at some point we had parents, until we didn't. Two months into this new world, our parents got sick. With my mom already suffering from asthma, she was the first to go. As my dad grieved, he also got sicker, considering he already had heart problems to begin with. But before he died he tried his best to teach Joseph and I how to survive in this world since we couldn't rely on electronics anymore; he taught us how to properly read a map and use a compass, how to plant certain foods, where to look for drinking water, how to keep our food fresh for long periods of time, and how to use a gun, which, if you knew our circumstances first-hand, has been invaluable, because we need as much protection as we can get.

Joseph and Carole are staying behind today, the only time we all leave together is if we need a change of scenery away from our parents' gravesite in the backyard.

"You have your gas mask?" asks Jordan, my little brother and the twin to Carole. He looks up at me with those big brown eyes that always make me melt.

"Yes. You got the first aid kit?" I ask as I run my hands down his ponytail of thick locs.

He is about to respond, until he decides to check again. "Yes, I do," he says with a proud smile.

We grab our snacks and water, place them in our bags, and say our goodbyes. We stopped saying "See you later" after our parents died because the phrase gave us the false hope of making it to see tomorrow, which scared the younger ones, and me too, if I'm being honest.

I have Jordan always walk in front of me during our journey; ever since Earth's downfall, kids have gone missing at alarming rates and no one has the answers to why, so, to avoid the same happening to our little family, we do things a little differently compared to the others. It seems that everyone else but us has adapted to the "every-man-for-himself" rule.

It takes a day to get to the city and back, so we had to leave as soon as the sun made an appearance. When nightfall hits, it's as if

people add a new meaning to the word animal. Since things have taken a turn, law enforcement has been scarce, so people have a way of terrorizing the city when they feel like it, stealing from other families, and marking their territory if they come in groups.

As we go down the hill, and go across the river, we hit a field and we walk slower so we can take our last few gasps of clean air before we hit the city. This part of the trip is my favorite; as the sun continues to rise, its warmth hits you like a warm blanket, and we take it all in because in the span of just ten minutes the sun will be unbearable due to the high rise in temperature lately. This field is also the home of a makeshift graveyard; if you ignore the unmarked crosses and the cries of the families who have just dug a new hole, you can see its beauty in the flowers that have grown or have been laid out upon the shallow graves. Even though they're rare, the flowers come in a range of colors: pink, blue, and yellow, and we can smell the sweet nectar that accompanies them. But soon this calm atmosphere is interrupted as we put on our gas masks and enter the forbidden forest, also known as the city.

We first stop at the supermarket, even though the food and drinks that are left are either destroyed or expired. You'd be surprised, though, at what this family can turn into a good meal—brothy soup that we'll sop up with stale bread, chicken that we've made last long enough to enjoy, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for special occasions, if we can find the bread. Then we stop at the pharmacy to find medicine that hasn't been tampered with. A couple days ago, Carole started coughing and sneezing, and even though I admire the beauty of that graveyard, I refuse to watch a flower grow next to her cross. We pass by people that are most likely looking for the same things we are. I see this mother who looks like she has been crying for hours. We briefly share a glance, but I don't say a word as we carry on with our day.

At this point, we have been on our feet for about two hours looking for undamaged goods, so we do one of Jordan's favorite things: we sit in the movie theatre to take a quick breather without our gas masks. Sometimes we come home just as nightfall hits, and of course, Joseph is never pleased. Our warden already has a hot head due to our tardiness, so we never tell him the real reason for

us being late. We just come up with something on the way back.

As we make our way inside, we see old posters for *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*, *Eternals*, and *Dear Evan Hansen*. The other posters are halfway torn off the walls. There's surprisingly still a faint smell of popcorn, or maybe I'm so used to that that I choose to believe it. We always roam the hallways or sit on the floor of the theatre; we never go inside one of the movie halls because that's what many people call home and it's the only amount of privacy they'll get for a while. So, we sit close to what used to be the concession stand.

"I wanna' go see if they still got some good candy," says Jordan.

"You know it's probably all expired," I say.

"Maybe I'll be surprised this time," he smiles. He's the only person I know who smiles at the darkest times. It used to annoy me, but now I count on it.

"Okay, but stay where I can see you, and don't touch anything that looks like it could grow legs at any moment and walk away."

"I'll try," he laughs.

All I can do is roll my eyes and hope that he takes me seriously.

With this time, I take out my journal and a new pen that I grabbed from the pharmacy to document another day being trapped in this hell we call life now. I open it to a clean page and take out the necklace that I use as a bookmark. The necklace has a rusty gold chain and a heart-shaped locket. My father gifted this to me when I was just two-years-old. He gave all of us jewelry pieces once we reached that age, but I seem to be the only one that never lost, broke, or traded in their gift after all these years. I don't wear it anymore because of the simple fact that I don't know what I'd do if I lost it; it's the only piece of my parents besides my siblings that I have left.

I realize that at this point I don't even want to write anymore. I haven't opened the locket in these past six months, afraid that I'll damage or lose it somehow. I take a breath and hold it so close that I start to cross my eyes as I look upon it, then I carefully open it. There they are, my beautiful parents, with me in my mother's arms as they smile for the camera. For a moment, I can't hear a thing,

it is as if I am floating and everything around me just disappears. Carole has dad's brown eyes, Jordan has our mom's dimples; Joseph has our father's broad shoulders and our mom's slim nose, and if I look in a mirror, I can see their smiles within mine. Looking at my father brings back a memory.

"I can't believe you just did that!" I said as I stormed out of the dojo, making my way to the car.

"I'm sorry. What exactly did I do?" my father asked, completely oblivious to the situation.

I quickly turned around. He could see the amount of annoyance on my face.

"You know I'm not ready for my black belt, yet you had the bright idea to tell sensei that I was. Why?!"

I was a brown belt in Karate, and my dad had always been adamant about me moving up the ranks, quicker than I was ready for, and this moment was the last straw.

"You're ready," he said confidently. "You're just having a hard time seeing that."

"Well, how about from now on you let me worry about that. You don't know what I'm feeling because you're too busy living through me to notice. That I can see."

I turned around and made my way to the car, sitting in the back seat so I wouldn't have to sit next to him, as he continued to call my name.

Two weeks later, I earned my black belt while my dad cheered me on from the sidelines, and as I looked at him, he didn't have that look of "I told you so," but a look of pride.

"Cathy."

I hear the whisper of my name, and it almost sounds like...

"Catherine!" Jordan yells.

"What? What's wrong?" I ask as I quickly yet carefully put my locket back into my journal and give Jordan my undivided attention.

"Somebody needs our help," he says with sad eyes, stepping aside to reveal a little girl.

I put my things away and stand up, pushing Jordan behind me.

“What does she want?” I ask Jordan as I continue to create space between us and the little girl, who has curly dark hair and pale skin. She is wearing layers of clothing to make herself seem bigger, but I can tell she is small, and probably around the same age as Jordan.

“I don’t know. She said she couldn’t find her mother, so I came to find you.”

“What did I tell you about strangers?! You can’t just go trusting everyone you see, especially now!”

Just as I finish my sentence, two men appear in front of the little girl, looking menacing as ever. A woman comes and picks her up to take her away from the scene.

“Cathy.”

“I see them, Jordan.”

“No, look.”

He slightly tugs on my arm, and with the men in front of us still in my peripheral, I turn to see two more men behind us, blocking off our exit. Jordan grabs my arm tighter as I pull him closer.

“What’s in the bags?” says one of the henchmen as he tries to step closer.

“Stay where you are,” I say, glancing in both directions to make sure none of them gets any closer.

“We just want to talk,” says another as he forces a smirk to look intimidating.

Before I know it, they rush toward us all at once, ripping Jordan from my grip and grabbing me and taking my bag.

“Cathy!!” Jordan screams.

In all the chaos, I only get a glimpse of him before I realize Jordan is getting farther and farther away from me. They are trying to take him; this is how kids have gone missing lately: cowards lure people in by using other children as bait, but the question is why?

I continue to struggle in their grasp, trying desperately to get

to Jordan. One of the henchmen is going through my bag, and as he gets to my journal, he sees the locket hanging from it and takes it out.

“Aww,” he says as he looks inside it. Then he looks back at me and tucks it into his inside jacket pocket.

Two of the men are holding me as one of them suddenly pulls out a knife.

“Catherine!”

I look up to see Jordan fighting back as best as he can, then I hear a scream as Jordan kicks him where the sun doesn’t shine. As retaliation, the henchman shoves him to the ground. Seeing that, it’s as if a switch clicks in my head, and I immediately fight like hell to get back to Jordan. The men holding me are slightly distracted by what’s happening to my brother, so I use this to my advantage.

My attention goes to the guy without the knife. I stomp on his foot, which causes him to loosen his grip, and by the time the guy with the knife realizes it, I grab the blade, twist it out of his hand, and stab him twice in the abdomen. I move on to the other guy, his face looking as if he’s just seen a ghost. He quickly realizes that his fate will be the same as his friend’s.

As I turn to deal with the guy who took my locket, I feel a fist go across my face. I stumble back a bit, dropping the knife, but quickly regain my composure as I look him square in his scared eyes.

“You hit like a bitch,” I smirk as I uppercut him in the nose, which causes it to break and immediately gush blood. Then I swiftly kick him in his temple to instantly knock him out. Jordan’s henchman is watching the whole thing unfold, and as I face him, he quickly grabs Jordan and puts him in a chokehold. I don’t ever like to use my gun, but I grab it from the holster under my sock and point it right between his eyes.

“I’ll break his neck,” he screams, obviously scared out of his mind.

“And I’ll put a bullet through your head,” I calmly say, clicking off the safety. “Try me.”

He starts sweating as he frantically looks for a way out. “You

don't understand," he whispers, "we have no choice." He finishes with tears forming in his eyes.

"Let my brother go, and we can talk about it."

He finally lets him go and Jordan quickly runs toward me, staying out of range of my gun.

"Do me a favor," I say to Jordan, "put all my stuff back in my bag so we can get out of here."

Jordan does exactly that. I keep my gun pointed at the guy and ask, "What choice don't you have? You can choose not to kidnap and break up families, so what's hindering you?"

"They made us. They said if we don't do it, everyone will die." At this point his tears have made their way down his face. "They have my family. I just want to see my family."

"Who are 'they'?" I ask as I step a little closer to him.

"They..." he starts, and then collapses to the floor.

I am too stunned to move, and I feel some liquid hit my face. I lower my gun to wipe it away. I see that it's blood, and with that, a piece of his flesh. I walk closer, my gun raised, to see what's happened. He has a bullet wound in his head, through and through, but I didn't hear a gunshot before he hit the ground. I look at Jordan, who is just as shocked as I am.

"Get away from the windows!"

He quickly obeys, taking my bag with him. I run toward the henchman that I previously knocked out and shake him to wake him up.

"Who are you and who do you work for?" I yell as I hold my gun to his temple.

He looks over to his friend, but I straighten his head so that he's looking directly into my eyes.

"Your friend's gone, and now I want answers. You lured my little brother into the shadows using another child. You then tried to kidnap him, and were probably gonna' kill me as soon as you had the chance. I am tired and most of all I'm angry." I push the gun further into his temple. "Now tell me what I want to hear."

With a trembling voice he says, "It's just the beginning. They've been kidnapping so many kids from everywhere."

"Who are 'they'?!"

"I don't know! But they're powerful people, and no one knows what they're working on. But from what I've heard, they're using them as test subjects."

I rough him up a little more, only for him to tell me that that is all he knows. I stand up, away from the windows, and look down at him.

"Get out of here," I say, still pointing my gun at him.

He quickly gets up, and then, just as quickly, he collapses. I don't even flinch this time, mainly because I fail to hear the gunshot, and to make matters even stranger, the glass from the window is still intact. I inspect the guy once more; there is no gunshot wound. It's as if he had a tiny bomb in his head that just went off, today of all days.

I put the safety back on my gun and put it away as I look at Jordan. He is staring down at the man's body. I slowly stand up and make my way toward him. I grab his shoulder. "I will never allow anyone to take you from me or hurt you," I say. "Everything will be fine. Just promise that you'll trust me."

"I'll always trust you, Cat," he says, and hugs me so tight that I can't breathe, but I don't complain. I grab my bag out of Jordan's hands. He puts on his gas mask and fixes his bag on his shoulders. Before I put mine on, I lean over the henchman once more and grab my locket from his bloodied pocket and place it in mine. I put on my gas mask, take a breath, and take Jordan's hand. "Let's go," I say.

On the way back, we walk in complete silence. Even though we make stops to take off our masks, rest, and breathe, we don't talk about what took place at the movie theatre, but we hold hands the entire time.

As we walk through the door, all I hear is Joseph screaming, "What the hell happened to your face?!"

Music to my ears.

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES

We've been fighting this racial war for more than 400 years,
This war that seems to build chaos,
This war that seems to never end,
This war that they can't find a solution to.
You call this America,
The land of diversity,
The land of freedom,
The land of equality,
Yet why are we still fighting for our lives?
They say the strongest species in the world is the blue whale,
But there is one that is ranked even higher,
One who must grow a shell to protect itself from danger,
Even if it means blocking out those he loves,
One who stings her attackers, and angers them.
This species is endangered, yet also very common.
Look around:
You can point out several even now.
That's right—the black race,
Both male and female, young and old,
Dying at a dangerous rate.
Every day is hunting season, targeted by society,
Whether at home, in the street, in the store, or at the park.
Black Lives Matter.

RACIAL AMBIGUITY

I have had people whisper in my ear
The unholiness in which they've appeared,
Asking me such devilish questions
And expecting me to delve in their questionable despair.

The question they thought was innocent
And would be answered with indifference,
The question they thought I would not be irritated by
Stands yet to be defeated.

The gall of some that come to me
To ask such with vicious curiosity
And ponder my racial identity,
And yet will say, "I already know."

But to me it is certain
That I am Black, full of hurt, but
Not stereotypically so,
And it pains me to see such ignorance grow.

And if I am not what they believe,
The indignation is not hard to perceive,
As they think I tricked them
With this revelation of ethnicity.

Now don't quote me incorrectly:
I do get privilege due to the way I exist;
However, the amount of times I've been asked
Makes me want to whisper away, I wish.

I am not a little project
Or a puzzle that needs to be solved.
Pray tell,
Why does my racial ambiguity bother you at all?

The conversations we can have are endless,
A beautiful melody in the making,
But your ignorant and suffocating acts
Have my block button waiting.

So I'm gonna' need you to stop asking
What my or anyone else's race is.
The disrespect you have is so loud,
And I really do not have to give.

Yes, I may look like many races,
But let's all stop acting bad.
Black people can have these features,
And these features have already been had.

I may not look racially how you expect,
And I do not fit in the stereotype,
But here's a really good promise:
There's more to me than your "plight."

So take a deep breath
And clamp your mouth, please.
Though I truly don't think they'll stop
Asking me about my racial ambiguity.

OXYGEN

I had a conversation in Starbucks
With a woman, her locs gray and full of wisdom,
Her hands brittle from holding onto her sanity for too long.
Her voice spoke of history and nostalgia
For the woman she used to be,
And she had freckles scattered around her skin
Like hide-and-seek at noon.

Sometimes, the moon aches for her.
This is the kind of secret she will never know.
Something about her reminds you of stardust,
Of burning bright, of happiness.
You could hear an overcrowded cemetery in her throat.
She has gravestones embedded in her heart.
She knows that her world is ending.
It's all black cloud and smoke trails,
Roads covered in ash.

She told me her grandson just passed.
Tears filled her face, because eons have passed
Since her hands knew his.
She has forgotten everything but the color of his eyes,
But after the sun has set and risen countless times,
His voice will find its way into her breath again.
There is something in the air that smells of his name.

She has become accustomed to black boys dying.
She has nightmares of carrying coffins.
Her heart can't handle another burial.
She lives in a world that lacks oxygen.
She also can't breathe.

Now her smoke trails follow me
As I reminisce of burials.
I need oxygen;
I can't breathe.

I see so much of myself in her.
She is all wounded heart and salty tears.
She's all wanting to be a kid again.
She is oxygen.

THE TRAIN

As I sit on the train,
this quasar of an ambience makes mischief of my being,
tracks screaming through the serenity.
Sorrow can only be cured through
Sticky fingers and leaf after-taste.
Ain't it classy?
Or do you wanna' see me do a trick?
Call me entertaining,
mouth and nostrils filled with smoke as if I swallowed a Phoenix.
Ain't it beautiful how with all this fire my lungs don't melt?
There are no burn marks;
it's almost calming,
but I'm too scratched-record, too clawed-chalkboard, too rough,
and all my edges be razor sharp.
Me and demon be brother,
Be one and the same,
But even as a heathen, we still beg for forgiveness.
Bad seeds like us could send a cacophony of unanswered prayers.
Oh, the pathetic symphony
Sound like heartbreak
Taste like bitter soul
Feel like broken spirit
Look like it don't know love
Smell like sad songs and ashtrays.
Train cars and underground look like old friends to us ne'er-do-wells.
We always ignore traffic lights
To see if we still feel.
We don't.
Us and death always give dap when we cross paths,
And he always says see you soon,
And we hope he's not lying.
But don't pity our agony,
For it is only destiny,
And we know it.

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE STREAMED TO YOUR MOBILE DEVICE

The Revolution Will Be Streamed To Your Mobile Device.

You will be able to stay home, friend.

You will be able to plug in, turn on, and connect to your Wi-Fi.

You will be able to lose yourself and order pizza and beer online,

Delivered to you in thirty minutes or less.

Because the revolution will be streamed to your mobile device,

It will be uploaded to YouTube and have a Million hits by Thursday.

The revolution will be brought to you Live by all the major networks,

Reporting from all districts, from all states, and the winner

Will be predicted before the polls close.

A product of the propaganda

Will become president, voted into power

By products of the propaganda.

The planet will be hacked, but not by the people or for the people.

You will have to worry about the drone at your bedroom window,

The mic in your television set, the surveillance cameras in your

Everything.

The revolution will be brought to you by Netflix

In twelve episodes without commercial interruptions.

The revolution will be made into a Disney movie

Starring Samuel L Jackson as President Barack Obama,

Mark Wahlberg as President Donald Tiberius Trump,

Scarlet Johansson as Hillary 'The Smile' Clinton,

And Gary Oldman as the evil Dr. Platypus.

There will be videos / of Pigs / shooting down brothers / On the replay.

There will be videos / of Pigs / shooting down brothers / On the replay.

There will be videos / of Pigs / shooting down brothers / On the replay.

The revolution will be screen-captured
On your mobile device,
Posted on Facebook,
Liked by your friends
And your friends' friends,
And forgotten
Until its anniversary,
At which point Facebook
Will send you a reminder
To repost it.

You will look ten pounds lighter
Because the revolution will
Be photoshopped, filtered, and posted
On Instagram.

The revolution will be turned into a meme,
Crying Jordan pasted on its face.
The revolution will be tweeted, retweeted,
Then an image of the tweet
Will be posted on Reddit, on Tumblr,
Used in news articles, real and fake,
And finally turned into click bait with ads powered by Google.

The revolution will be streamed,
Will be downloaded,
Will be pirated.
The revolution will be watched.

It will become overplayed and mainstream,
No longer entertaining.
It will be stored in the depths of our browser history,
And soon the revolution will be deleted,
Just like everything else on the internet.

—Jamal Hughes, Jr.

JUNIPER

Her mind was absent. It may have been the mojitos she was having at the bar or the thought of losing her mind after another bad dating experience. The guy was too serious, too short, and too boring. Nothing he had said had been particularly upsetting, but the whole time she'd been wishing to leave. As much as she tried to smile and laugh and ask interesting questions, they both knew it was pointless. After paying the bill that they split without too much arguing, he had said he was tired and headed back to his car. She had pretended to do the same. As she watched him cross the street and disappear, she immediately came back to the bar for some alone-time. The occasional laughter from couples walking into the restaurant and the faded sound of some jazzy background music made her think about her own life and how she couldn't tell what the next chapter would be. Something was missing. Her heart desired a companion, a life partner, someone who for once would be there for her and her daughter unconditionally. In the last five years of being a single mother, she had dated casually but hadn't met anyone who could measure up. Men tended to be upset about her not having all the free time they had, and with the ones that had kids, it was hard to find time to get together, as divorced dads usually had their kids during the weekends. She'd been introduced to several men, but, somehow, they all felt like a wrong-sized shoe.

Thirteen bucks for a mojito? It's more than I should be spending, she thought, but I deserve it.

Things were finally starting to go well at work, and although she wasn't making all the money she wanted, she knew they were getting by all right. Her and seven-year-old Danielle were living a pretty decent, comfortable life. The only thing that was bothering her lately was that she'd been feeling lonely on weekends. That's when she was home alone.

She was home that night when she saw an incoming call on her phone. It was Danielle.

“Hi mom! Where are you?”

“Just got back home, honey. How about you? Having fun?”

“Yeah, and did you go on a date? Is he the one?” she said, giggling.

“I don’t think so, baby, not this time. It’s all right. Enjoy your grandpa and grandma and be good. Love you.”

Her former in-laws took their granddaughter back to their place and spoiled her and filled her with all the love and gifts and food and family traditions she deserved, things that her mother sometimes couldn’t give her. Gabby had been a single child raised in a dysfunctional family. Her dad had been a sweet man: hard-working, kind, funny, smart. His problem was that although he loved Gabby with a passion, he loved the bottle even more. In the years when he started drinking more heavily, mostly due to his failed marriage and boring life (or so she assumed), he began cursing more and was often moody, so their moments of quality time slowly died out. His best friends were beer and wine. He suffered from bad health from his job as a factory welder and, together with his drinking, they killed him at the age of forty-one, leaving her and her mom to struggle with a single income to make ends meet.

She would never forget, though, that he really had loved her infinitely and had been her idol when she was a child. Her mom had always been a devout Christian, always at church to get away from her problems. After her husband died, she found more and more excuses to spend every little bit of free time at church, like it would make her grief disappear. She had loved him in her own way, even with all his flaws. They were simple people who had done what they could. Outside of dressmaking, her whole life was her faith. She even donated most of what she made as a dressmaker to the church, and she didn’t like spending time at home. She just wasn’t the loving kind.

Gabby remembered a conversation they had had when she was sixteen:

“You’re going there again? You’ve been at church every single day this week. It’s not like you’re gonna’ miss much by skipping a day,” she said sarcastically.

“You are welcome to come and congregate with us at the church,” her mother said. “It’s a big family. There are so many lovely people who would love to get to know you more. You must come and you will see. He loves you infinitely. God is good all the time.”

“Uh, no thanks. They’re not your family or mine. They want your money, that’s all. Those people...they’re fake. I am your daughter, and you don’t pay attention to what I want or what I need. We don’t do any of the stuff normal families do. You don’t even know I’m not a virgin anymore!” Gabby said this with a provoking smirk, although she hadn’t planned to say it. The words just came out.

Her mom slapped her in the face, hard. There was a huge silence, and the topic was never mentioned again.

This lack of communication, sex education, and boundaries, along with the absence of anyone to truly care for her, led to Gabby meeting her first boyfriend and getting pregnant at the age of seventeen. To her mother’s horror, she told her she was getting an abortion. Although her mom would never admit it to any of her fellow Christians, she preferred that to having an unmarried teenage mom at home. The scandal would be worse than the sin. The secret was kept, the incident was never mentioned again, and the boy soon forgot about Gabby—but would never be forgotten by her. A few years later she decided she would do anything to get out of that stupid town she hated, her home, and would try to change everything in her sad, little life. She graduated from nursing school, working two jobs to pay her way through college, and met Danielle’s father.

Back then, they were both young and in love. They had met at a party at one of the bars college kids hung out at. She was an attractive girl, auburn hair, big, sad, hazel eyes, and a strong character. Dan seemed stable, charismatic, fun, attractive, and she really needed to get away from her mom. Without much hesitation, they moved in together and she quickly got pregnant. They didn’t feel like getting married since he was always complaining about

money, and she had promised she would never set foot in a church. Her mom stopped calling her or responding to her calls. She soon heard that her mother had met a cop at church and they had gotten married. After losing touch with her mom, Gabby held onto Dan like a lifeline. However, she raised Danielle on her own. He was always working, but somehow there was never enough money or time to go out or do family activities like take a vacation, things Gabby had never had and longed for. He wasn't a loving father or companion; he was cold and absent even when he was home, preferred playing video games rather than watching a movie together, and he took off on business trips as often as he could.

"Did you show them pictures of Danielle? What did they say?" Gabby had asked him one day after he had come back from a get-together with work friends. The baby was only a month old. "My co-workers think she looks like you."

"Uhm...no, I forgot. We were blowing off some steam and having some beers, and plus, it was poker night. Who wants to talk about kids with their buddies on poker night, babe?"

Eventually, she realized he wasn't capable of loving. Or, at least he didn't give her the love she needed and longed for. As time went by, she saw in him all the ugliness she had been too blind to before. It was like the birth of their daughter had brought an unbelievable sense of commitment, responsibility, and joy for her, but for him it was a burden, and just highlighted his selfishness and narcissistic behavior. Of course, he never showed this outside shut doors. In front of the world, he was Mr. Perfect. They split up soon after. And she was happy about having made that decision. As painful as it was, she decided her daughter and her would be better off on their own. Danielle was two-years-old by then, but Gabby did everything she could to get by and provide for both of them, with a little help from her in-laws. Her daughter didn't see her dad often. He was always busy, but she loved spending time with her grandparents and that was enough for her. Now she was seven, a smart and sweet little girl.

The day Gabby met her new neighbor was a sunny Saturday morning in early spring. She was coming back from a morning run after being a bit hungover from her lame date the previous night. Those mojitos really hit hard. I shouldn't have had that many, she thought. When she saw him, she felt her heart pounding and wished she wasn't wearing sweaty gym clothes with unwashed hair. The handsome, dark-skinned man who was moving into the next-door apartment was almost too good to be true.

Say something, she thought.

"Hi. I guess we're gonna' be neighbors?" she said and giggled nervously. "I'm Gabby. Let me know if you need anything. I live here with my daughter, Danielle, although she's not home right now"

Why am I even saying this? Did I want him to know that I'm a single mom, and also that she's not with me tonight? Can you take it easy? Jeez.

"Nice meeting you," he said. "I'm Anthony. And thanks! I appreciate that. It's nice to have good neighbors to count on."

She noticed his toned body, genuine smile, and sweet, light-brown eyes with eyelashes that seemed to reach for the sky.

"Sure, anytime. I gotta' go. See you around!"

She left feeling a little embarrassed, hoping he didn't realize how nervous he'd made her feel.

That night she didn't feel as depressed as the past few weeks or months. She was surprised at herself for admitting that she wanted the new guy to call, to need something, to run into him somehow. She lit some candles, took a long shower, all the time thinking about him, and then went to the kitchen to make herself some snacks. She hated cooking and avoided it when possible. She kept her music low as she didn't want to miss a knock on the door or the bell. Finally, it happened. There he was.

"Oh, hi! Can I help you with anything?" she said with a flirty smile that she couldn't control.

“Hey, I just wanted to know if you wanted to have some spaghetti al pesto I just made. I added too much pasta and I think I’ll be eating spaghetti for days.” He laughed a beautiful laugh. “Unless you’ve had dinner already. Think of it like a welcome treat.”

“You do know I should be the one giving you a welcome present, not you, right?” she said and tried to act confident and smart. “No, I actually haven’t had dinner. Not much of a cook. I do have a bottle of wine I’d like to try. I just haven’t found the right occasion.” She lied. She would have opened it that night anyway.

“Sounds good. Should I grab the dishes and come over? My place is a mess right now,” he said.

And with that, it all started. They ate, talked, and laughed. He told her all about his childhood and how he had been raised in Brooklyn and finally moved to Florida for work. He was a children’s football coach and he had played the sport most of his life. They both talked comfortably about their lives, hobbies, backgrounds, music interests, favorite movies—until there was a moment of silence, and the sexual tension was unbearable. Things escalated quickly. They kissed like they had known each other’s lips forever, they made love like it was the last night they would ever have.

Soon, he started coming over more often, since her apartment was bigger and more nicely decorated and cozy. Danielle liked him and he liked her too. He was naturally good with kids, and it made sense because of his job. Meals were shared and movies were watched. Weekends were spent at the park and breakfast in bed was a blissful way to start more and more happy days. Gabby had never felt more blessed, and she found it hard to believe things could be this perfect. They were almost becoming one of those “happy families” you see in TV commercials, where everyone has big smiles and there’s perfect harmony and beauty all around, as if they didn’t have a care in the world.

One day, Gabby decided to surprise Anthony with a few house plants and decorative couch pillows she had bought for him to make his little one-bedroom house a little bit more cozy. He had left his keys at her place, and she knew it was the perfect surprise

to show him she cared. She had thought about the idea of moving in together soon. It made sense, but she wanted to give him the chance to mention it, and she wasn't in any rush since they lived next to each other and he mostly spent every day at her house. As she was placing a small succulent on one of the shelves, she noticed something odd. There were several self-help books related to grief, overcoming loss, overcoming trauma, how to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder, and so on, all aimed at this topic. She tried to remember if he had ever mentioned anything about losing a loved one or something dramatic in his life, but she couldn't think of anything.

That evening she anxiously waited for him to come home and see the surprises. She hoped he would feel happy and thankful, and see it as a loving, caring gesture. The knock on the door made her jump off the couch and quickly head to the door:

"Hey! You're home! Come in!" she said, trying to figure out if he'd stopped by his place before or not. She didn't want to spoil the surprise.

"Hey. I noticed you came to my place," he said. "Did you need anything?"

"Well, didn't you notice anything different?"

"Yeah, yeah. I saw the plants. They're nice. Thanks. Just please let me know next time. I'm not used to having someone over when I'm not around. And you know, my place is a hot mess, usually. I wouldn't want you to feel like you need to go and clean or decorate."

She wanted to ask him about the books, but it didn't feel like the right time. He saw Danielle and got into a happier, bubbly mood as they played in her room for a while. Then, he helped Gabby make dinner. Later on, as they lay in bed together, she couldn't hold it anymore.

"Hey, can we be honest? I'm sorry about the surprise break-in today," she laughed. "You seemed to be pretty uncomfortable with it. I didn't think you'd be mad about it, but I won't do it anymore."

"It's fine. No worries. I'm just kinda' weird in that sense. My space is, you know, personal."

“Yeah, I get it. But, is there anything I should know about you, that maybe you’re self conscious about? I mean, you can tell me anything. I’ve told you about my shitty childhood and my family. I won’t judge. Since we’re getting to know each other, I want us to be able to open up. You know that, right?”

“Absolutely. I agree. Uh. Nope. Nothing I can think of right now. I’m sorry. I’m exhausted,” he said and closed his eyes.

The next day, Gabby felt something was off, and she couldn’t stop wondering whether he was hiding something. Her dad had been an alcoholic and used to lie all the time about where he went and where his money went, so she could recognize when someone was hiding something. Something in the way he reacted told her to look for answers. Because he was new in Florida, and all his family lived in New York, she hadn’t really met any of his friends or relatives. He had a sister, too, but she lived in Amsterdam. However, Gabby had a friend, Amber, who worked at the same school where he worked. They weren’t close friends but they had been to college together and Amber had invited Danielle for play dates with her kid a couple times, years ago. She decided to call and invite Amber to get a coffee after school, as she had to pick up Danielle anyway.

Gabby tried to poke around to see if she could find out anything about him as they sat down in a cute, bougie coffee shop near the school where all the “cool moms” hung out to catch up and gossip. As the kids played and ate their blueberry cupcakes, the moms got into the real talk. Amber told her she had found out they were dating, but didn’t know they were so serious. She was genuinely happy for Gabby and Anthony. Apparently, she confessed, there had been a rumor going around that he had been in prison, and when he got out he moved to Florida for a fresh start, but the teachers and school staff and parents all liked him and found him a great guy. She said that it was probably a stupid rumor someone had started and it just got out of hand.

Gabby’s heart stopped. She asked Amber why, for what crime, how long had he been in jail? She had never imagined it could be this bad. Amber couldn’t say. Gabby kept repeating it was impossible.

How would they hire someone with a criminal record to work at a school? It just made no sense whatsoever. It couldn't be. Why did everything in her life always have to go south?

She left the coffee shop confused, sad, and tried not to cry in front of Danielle. She still cried in silence as she drove home. She couldn't believe she had brought someone into her life who might put them both at risk. She had opened her home, her heart, her life to this man, and now it all seemed a mistake. Still, she needed to play her cards well, take matters into her own hands and somehow get to the truth, as painful as it might be.

At home, things were awkward. She was distant and so they both felt weird around each other. It was the secrets growing between them and tearing them apart. Although Gabby hadn't been in contact with her mom for years, she felt it was time to reach out to her. Her mom had visited her and Dan only twice after Danielle was born. She hated the fact that they hadn't married and that Danielle hadn't even been baptized or "raised properly," as she liked to remark. In the past years, they called each other for Christmas or birthdays, but that was all. Neither had made an effort to accept each other or to build something healthy, but now wasn't the time to think about that. She picked up the phone and made the call during her lunch break at work.

"Hi, mom. How are you? It's been a while," she said to break the ice.

"Well, hi there. We're good, thank God. How are you doing and how's Danielle?"

"Oh, she's just fine. Getting taller and smarter every day. Listen, mom..."

"I'm guessing you need something," her mom interrupted. "You never call or visit, so go ahead and ask."

"Uhm. Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Actually, I need a favor from your husband. It's really important, and there's no one else that can help me." At first she heard a silence on the other end, but then her mom said she was willing to hear her out.

She explained to her mother that she needed information

about someone she had met, a guy that meant a lot to her, but that there was something possibly dark about him and that she was desperate to find more information. Her mom told her she would talk to him, and he was a good man who would do anything for his wife. She was pretty sure he would help her.

“Aren’t you going to tell me how dumb I am for always choosing the wrong men?” Gabby asked.

“I’ve made my own mistakes, too,” her mother said. “God knows I have. I will do this for you. I’m still your mother after all.”

“I appreciate that. I do. And mom?”

“Yes?”

“I love you,” Gabby said and hung up, not wanting to give her mom the chance of not saying it back.

Gabby and her mother’s husband, Joe, talked on the phone and arranged to meet at the hospital where she worked. They grabbed coffee at the cafeteria and she told him everything. He seemed kind-hearted and had the saddest gray eyes she’d ever seen. He said he was willing to dig into Anthony’s past and give her whatever information he could.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he said, “but I’m doing it for your mother. She’s an angel.”

Gabby was grateful, and she felt like her heart was in her throat from the anxiety and constant worrying. Three days passed with no news. She tried to avoid Anthony, took longer shifts, and hired a nanny to look after her daughter instead of accepting his offer to do it. She was uneasy and couldn’t find a better way to cope. Finally, she received the call from Joe. She was shaking as she picked up the phone.

“All I can tell you is six years ago he was charged with vehicular manslaughter. He had been drinking, too. He paid a large fine and did four years in prison in New York. Seems like he got out, moved down here, and got his shit together. Can’t say much more than that. Good luck, Gabrielle.”

After the initial shock, she found it difficult to speak, but she told him how grateful she was for his help, and to let her mom know how much she loved her. Despite all their differences, she was happy that she had found a man like him. Whatever happened, they were family.

“Your mom will be happy to hear from you more often,” he said, “in good and bad times. And, by the way, she loves you too.”

Her head was all in a spin from what she had heard. She didn’t know what to make of all this. Why didn’t he tell me? Why would he hide such a huge part of his life from us? If he killed someone, how does he deal with the guilt? Well, now the books make sense. I guess my intuition was right. I need to talk to him. Tonight.

“Hey stranger! Come in.”

He kissed her softly on her forehead. “How was work today? You’ve been crazy busy. I haven’t seen you in days.”

“We need to talk,” she said bluntly. “You need to come clean. I know you’ve been hiding stuff, really important stuff from your past, and I’m gonna’ give you a chance to explain.”

His face changed completely, and they both sat down on the couch, looking at the floor. After a long sigh, he began:

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ve been trying to find a way. I’m assuming you know what I’ve done and you think the worst of me right now. It’s not what you think. I’m not a murderer, but I took someone’s life and it’s the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. It was an accident. It’s gonna’ haunt me forever and I’ll never forgive myself for what I did. But, I promise you, I’m not a bad person.”

He tried to grab her hand but she didn’t let him. She wiped the tears off her cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. “We were supposed to be real with each other! I told you to be honest! I let you into my whole world. My daughter loves you. I...loved you.”

“You want me to be real? What I did is so unforgivable that I thought you would never, ever accept me.” He was shaking. After

a long pause, with his head in his hands, he said, "I hit a little girl, nine-years-old. I didn't see her. I was coming home from a dinner party, and it was a blind curve. It happened so fast. It changed my whole life and the life of that girl's family. I destroyed a family. I hate myself so much for it. I did my time and I got out not knowing what the hell I was gonna' do with myself. I thought when I met you that life was giving me a second chance. I've been depressed, angry, suicidal, but then I was offered this job because I knew one of the people in HR from my hometown. They were willing to overlook my past because the guy knows me well and knows the kind of person I am. I was so lucky, and then I moved and met you."

Gabby spoke from her heart, with words that had been buried deep within her. "And did I not deserve honesty and trust? Did I not show you all of me? Flaws and all? Did I not open up to you? What is the purpose of being together when all along you've been hiding your truest self? I thought I loved you, but now I don't know what I feel anymore."

She cried, avoiding his eyes, feeling her heart exploding in her chest.

"I didn't want to ruin the only good thing that's happened to me since the accident. I didn't want you to see me as a monster, the ugliness I see in me and how fucked-up I am. I love you with all my heart and I don't want to lose you."

He took her hands that were wet with tears. She released them from his grasp and he went on after a brief pause.

"I love you two. Being a dad to Danielle has meant that my life is still worth something, like there's still a purpose for me being alive. I've thought about us moving in together. I've even been looking up rings. I want it all with you guys, but this mess has been holding me down and I had no clue how to deal with it. I still don't. I just hope you can forgive me for not telling you. I don't want you thinking I'm a criminal and a lying piece of shit."

She got up and left without saying a word.

Little did she know that three years later she would be married to him, and would give birth to Juniper Lou, named after the little girl who died that night and who would never be forgotten. Each year, Gabby, Anthony, and the kids visited her grave to bring her flowers and talk to her.

On one of those occasions, Gabby held his hand as he said, teary-eyed, "That night, I took your life, and I wanted to die too. Regret, guilt, and anger were eating me up from the inside, but somehow you gave my life meaning and purpose again. I found a lonely woman and I've made her life better, and she made me a better man. I found a little girl that needed me, and I can't live without her anymore. I found a job coaching children that look up to me. I'm making others happy, and I've been born-again. I promise you, we will never forget you."

The sun shone on their faces, nourishing their hearts with new hope. Gabby looked at the yellow fall leaves on the grass and thought about shedding old ways, clipping their wings to make room for new ones, to soar to new heights, together.

THE KING

For fifty years, my family has fished these waters,
Guiding the headboats to Haddock and Halibut.
They were fortunate, confronting their own challenges in their day;
I, on the other hand, must battle the most obdurate of beasts.

Earlier that morning, we set out on the Montauk.
It was an ordinary summer's day on the Chesapeake,
I, Pujan on the wheel, and Tony on the stern.
Tony, often called "Ant" because of the size of his fish,

Set up rigs that caught the least ravenous of Rainbows.
A half-ounce egg and steel Aberdeen topped with a bloodworm:
It was foolproof, for the ferocious fish, apparently.
We caught crap for hours, a cape, and some carp.

Hours later, the dusk sun unleashed a hellish heat.
Now was prime time, and pikes started pouring in.
My fifty-pound braided line pulled, the reel popped and screamed.
We took our positions, engine positive.

The dammed river rider turned, its size lesser only to Moby Dick.
With the scattered scales of a sturgeon, it dragged the Montauk.
Ant throttled down, the beast thrashed its tail, and I raised drag.
This was the King of the Esox, the biggest and keenest of its kind.

It should never be trifled with, told legends of the beast.
I slowed the sturgeon to a stop, raising the steeped drag of the reel.
The yellow sun now orange, Ant neutralized the Yamaha.
We had him where we wanted him; now came the headstrong battle.

Drag pulled at max, Ant used the Yamaha opposite of where I pulled.
In the stern, I pulled and reeled resolutely.
The King thrashed but never yielded, causing the water to wake;
The boat shook, but it didn't shake us.

The formidable beast jumped; I had never seen such a jarring image:
The King, about five feet in length, locked its haggard eyes with mine,
And I saw the heart of hell. I kept reeling until the King was close,
Then, I cut the hook—he was too captivating to be caught.

Ant understood my action: some fish are too amazing to eat.
We could've had a year's worth of caviar, but we chose camaraderie.
We took the Montauk back to the marina, gathered our memories.
We talked till nightfall. We couldn't believe that was the King.

FALL IN LOVE WITH ME

Jola gripped her blanket tighter as she watched Lee Min-ho confess his love to Park Min-Young in *The Heirs*. The series was released in 2013, but it had a special place in her heart because it was her first drama. At first, she was skeptical about Korean dramas because of how much her classmates seemed to hype them. But after one of said classmates had shown Jola a picture of Lee Min-ho, she became an avid fan. Her favorite character in *The Heirs* was not the swoon-worthy Min-ho or the trance-inducing Min-Young. It was Kim Ji-Won. The woman knew how to act. Her character had unrequited love for Min-Ho's character, but she was unafraid to show her attraction.

Jola reached forward to her bowl of popcorn and brought a handful to her mouth. She watched as they moved in to kiss each other and she covered her mouth with her hands. They stared into each other's eyes for the longest moment and started moving in for a kiss. Just as their lips were about to touch, the adverts rolled in, and she sighed. *Someone's child has to wait till next week before they can kiss now, eh.* Jola moved over to pick up the remote and turned off the TV. She glanced at the clock on the wall in the living room of her two-bedroom house and the time was 5:00 a.m. *Shit! I meant to only stay awake till 1 a.m. I have a presentation at 9 today, so is sleep even still a plan at this point?* She cursed at herself as she cleaned up the mess that she had made in the living room.

Jola worked at a marketing firm in Ikeja as the manager of her team. The presentation she was working on was a proposal for an important client, and it would play a big part in her evaluation to get promoted. She hated her job, though. The commute was long, the hours were shitty, and her supervisor was overbearing. The only good thing was the pay. And Femi.

Jola had met Femi at a family friend's birthday party eight

years, seven months, and four days ago. It was one of those parties where you *definitely* did not know who was throwing it, but you just went because your parents told you to. She just knew that it was an older person from her mother's family. The party was in a house on Victoria Island, so she knew that the person was swimming in money, and she was not disappointed when she and her parents had arrived at the house. It was one of those houses that royalty used in Nollywood movies. It had two stories and a balcony on the second floor. There were so many cars that it was hard to find a parking spot, and the aroma of jollof rice cooked over firewood was pungent in the air. She could hear Adewale Ayuba's "Ijo Fuji" the moment they drove into the compound, and she started mouthing the lyrics. Her parents listened to a lot of Fuji music, and they had rubbed off on her. After greeting as little people as she could without seeming rude, she went to a corner of the yard to sit. Unsurprisingly, she met some people that looked around her age. *We were all dragged here by our parents*, she reasoned, and smiled as she went to find a comfortable place to sit and play games on her phone.

She had been sitting there for close to thirty minutes when she heard shouting.

"Bros! How far, na? How you dey?"

"I dey, na. How far, you?"

One of the people that was already there was greeting a guy that had just come in. He looked younger than her, but not by much. He was tall, good-looking, and seemed like he could hold his own in a fight. He had a very nice smile, too. She was staring at him for so long that he turned, and their eyes met. She felt like Park Shin-hye in *The Heirs* when she saw Lee Min-ho for the first time. The sounds of people talking became muted, and it felt like just the two of them existed. He started walking towards her and she felt her breath catch.

"Is someone sitting there?" He gestured to the space beside her on the bench that she was sitting on. She shook her head, unable to speak. He sat down and turned to face her.

"My name is Femi-Oluwafemi."

The Lord loves me, she thought. And I love you, too. Jola continued to stare into his eyes as if bewitched.

"And you?"

Jola raised her eyebrows in question.

He chuckled and asked, "What's your name?"

"Oh, my name is Jola," she answered, embarrassed.

"Your name is very nice."

Jola smiled shyly. "Thanks."

"What are you listening to?" Femi pointed at her phone.

"It's nothing. Just a soundtrack from a Korean drama that I like."

"You watch K-Dramas too?!"

"You do?" Jola looked at him, surprised.

"What's your favorite?"

"*The Heirs.*"

"Mad! Me too!"

They spoke until Jola's mother called, asking her where she was. They exchanged numbers and kept talking for months after that day. Six years went by, and she met Femi again when he came to interview for a position in her firm's accounting department.

Jola dragged herself out of her memories to look at the clock. It was already 5:30 a.m. *Might as well just take a shower now and go to work. The commute is an hour and Lagos traffic can humble anyone.*

Jola entered the office building, and as usual she saw a cup of coffee on her desk. She smiled as she sat down and read the note by the cup: "Have a good day today!" *This Femi boy, eh. Just making somebody's child blush left and right.* The coffee delivery had started about a week after Femi began working there, and there was no one else she was as close with at work that would bother getting her coffee every single day. She gathered the documents she needed and went into the boardroom to prepare for her presentation.

“Jola!”

She jumped from her seat as she heard her name being shouted from across the room. It was her supervisor, Okafor.

“Yes?” she answered warily.

“What is this? Why did you approve this?” He was holding up a poster and pointing at a spelling mistake. His potbelly was the proof of many years of drinking, making his already small stature appear even smaller.

“I didn’t approve that,” Jola said confidently.

“Then who did?”

“You did, sir.”

“Ehn?”

“I did not work on that poster, sir.”

Jola was slowly getting irritated, as she knew she wasn’t at fault. *I was having a good day since the presentation went well. Why does this man have to spoil my mood now?* “You worked on that while I was on sick leave,” she said to him.

“Why are you so rude? You don’t have to talk in that tone. You just had to say that you were not around while the project was going on.”

“I just said that!” Jola shouted, unable to control herself any longer.

“Ahn ahn, see disrespect o,” Okafor said, the hand holding the poster already lowered. “You’ll pay for raising your voice at me.” He looked at her over his glasses.

“Pay for what?!” Jola said, already frustrated with the unending loop of the conversation.

Okafor raised his hand as if to hit her. Jola closed her eyes and braced as if to block him.

“That’s abuse, sir,” said a man’s voice. “I know you don’t want to lose your job.”

Jola opened her eyes to see Femi holding Okafor’s arm. She smirked and stood firmly behind him.

"I'll deal with you later," Okafor said, eyeing Jola as he waddled back to his office.

"Are you okay?" Femi asked, his eyes scanning Jola.

"I'm fine."

"But will you be okay?"

"Yeah. This is not the first time this has happened; he likes making empty threats. I think he just doesn't like me." Jola shrugged.

"Do you want to go outside to cool off?"

"Sure."

On their way out, Femi grabbed a bag of chin chin from his desk. He glanced at her and smiled.

"These are your favorite, right?" He raised the bag.

"Yeah." She smiled back.

Jola and Femi spoke for a few minutes before Femi received a call that he was needed in the office, and Jola chased him with a dreamy smile. As if doused with cold water, she was snapped out of her trance by a mosquito bite. *There's no way he's going to be mine if I don't tell him how I feel.*

Boldened by her resolve, she texted her friend, Titi, to ask if she was free that evening. She needed advice on how to best confess her feelings. Titi was the closest and only friend she had, and they had been friends since secondary school. They went to different universities but kept in touch. After working for a few years as a radio DJ, Titi quit after she got married. Titi responded that she was free and suggested a place to meet up.

After work, Jola met Titi at a restaurant on the topmost floor of an expensive hotel. The night view was spectacular and was one of the reasons Titi and Jola liked meeting there. Titi had already arrived, and she waved at Jola to come over. Jola walked to her friend and caught the tail-end of the phone conversation that Titi was having.

"Love you, too," Titi said into her phone, smiling as she ended her call.

"I'm jealous of you, Titi."

"Why?" Titi asked, puzzled.

"You're happily married to a rich, handsome man."

"Happily married, *ke*?" Titi scoffed. "I'm just hanging to this man."

"What do you mean?"

"I used *juju* to hold him down."

"Why?" Jola's eyes widened in shock. "I thought your husband was already in love with you. Why would you want to use black magic to keep him?"

Titi sighed. "His parents were pressuring him to get another wife because we were unable to get pregnant after being married for five years."

"I thought you said you guys chose to not have children."

"That's what I said to people so they wouldn't bother me." Titi dropped her head, unable to make eye contact with her friend.

Jola was unsure of how to console her friend, so she kept quiet. *What if Femi does not like me back? Should I use juju to make him mine? No, that's not free will. But that's what Titi did, so it's fine.* The silence weighed down on both women until Titi started laughing out of nowhere.

"Fuck the world," she said, and raised her glass to Jola.

"Fuck the world," said Jola.

They clinked glasses and downed their drinks, their worries forgotten, at least for the moment.

"Why did you want to meet anyways?" Titi said.

"So," Jola started shyly, "I want to tell Femi how I feel but I don't know how to."

"Finally." Titi smiled. "You've had a crush on that boy since forever."

"Any advice?"

"Advice, *ke*? Just tell him how you feel *now*. Grown woman like you."

"Just like that?"

“Yeah,” Titi shrugged. “Just like that.”

“Okay.”

Jola nodded her head. Titi smiled at her friend, happy that she was finally ready to let go of her million-year-old crush.

“Hey, Jola!” Femi called at Jola as she was about to leave after work the next day.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Something like that. Are you free now?”

“Did you want to talk about something?” *Does he want to tell me he likes me? If he doesn't, should I tell him I like him?*

“Yes. You know Kemi in your department?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think you can give me her number?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m attracted to her,” Femi laughed, and Jola’s heart sank.

“I don’t have it.”

“Okay.”

Femi furrowed his eyebrows in confusion as Jola walked past him.

The tears started falling before she got into her car to drive home. *Why doesn't he like me back? Did I do something wrong? Was I reading too much into things? I like him. He should like me. He has to like me. But how? Juju? No! But that's what Titi did, so it's fine.*

“That’s what Titi did so it’s fine,” she whispered under her breath as she took a sharp U-turn to Titi’s house.

“What are you doing here?” Titi asked.

“Introduce me to the person you got the *juju* from.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask any questions. Just take me there.”

“Are you sure? You don’t need this.”

“I said to take me there!”

“Fine.”

The two friends got to the witch doctor’s place later that night. The house was derelict and remote. It was just out of sight, hidden by the forest that they had driven through for hours. The house had a pair of two-foot statues on either side of the entrance. They were made from clay and looked to be some god or goddess Jola didn’t know the name of. As if understanding the gravity of what was about to occur that night, the forest was quiet, with only the whistling of the wind through the leaves. The moon was full and bright, allowing for perfect vision even in the darkest of nights.

Titi knocked on the door and waited for a few seconds before knocking again. An old woman with horizontal tribal marks on both cheeks opened the door. She was hunched over, and her face showed all the years that she had been alive.

“Don’t you know what time it is?” she asked, annoyed.

“*E ma binu ma,*” said Titi. “I apologize for coming to see you this late, but my friend wants to get the same charm that I got.”

“You can come back tomorrow,” she said, closing the door.

Jola pushed Titi behind her to stop the witch doctor from closing her door.

“I really need this done tonight, ma,” she pleaded. “The man I love loves another woman.”

“All right,” the witch doctor sighed. “Come in.”

The putrid smell of rotten food slapped Jola as she walked into the house. The interior of the house was poorly lit, and more statues were displayed in the house, with most of them forming a pyramid-like structure in front of a red sheet.

“What’s his mother’s last name?” the witch doctor asked, a wooden calabash filled with strange-looking items in her hand.

“Ashimakun,” said Jola.

The woman nodded and proceeded to speak the name she had been told three times and spat into the calabash. After waiting for a moment, she began to recite incantations, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. Then she stopped and dropped the calabash at the feet of the statues.

“It is done.”

Titi and Jola looked at each other and nodded.

The next morning, Jola woke up and went to work as usual. Her cup of coffee was absent, though. After an uneventful day at work, Jola got home and the aroma of freshly cooked *ogbono* soup hit her nostrils. *Did mummy come by?* As she texted her mother to ask if she had come to her house, she saw Femi come out of the bathroom.

“Oh, you got back from work already.” He smiled and walked toward her.

“Oh, it’s you, *sef*. You should have told me you were coming. I gave you my keys for emergencies.”

“I’m here to cook for you.” Femi looked confused, the smile still on his face.

Perplexed, Jola fell back a few steps. The smile on Femi’s face didn’t reach his eyes. It took a few seconds, but the memories of the night before hit her like a slap and Jola fell to her knees in disbelief of what she had done. A lone tear dropped from her eye and shaky breaths escaped her lips. She rushed to her car and drove to the witch doctor’s house.

“What do you mean you want to reverse the spell?!” The witch doctor raised her voice at Jola.

“I don’t want that kind of love.”

“You should have thought of that before you came banging on my door last night.”

The witch doctor slammed the door in Jola’s face. Jola cried, begging for the witch doctor to help her, but she was met with no response. She had trapped the soul of the man that she loved, and there was no turning back.

THE NEW NORMAL

Is it normal to want to break down and cry all the time?
Is it normal to fight to ensure they're indicted for their crimes?
Is it normal to develop agoraphobia after watching the news?
Is it normal to have to run for your life on cue?

Is it normal to lose your life at the drop of a dime?
Is it normal to run out of shrine-making supplies?
Is it normal to feel like a dark gray cloud?
Is it normal to knock down a nigga and feel proud?

Is it normal to almost always give a damn?
Is it normal to feel your body vibrate after being slammed?
Is it normal to be slaughtered on the news like cattle?
Is it normal to only bring fists to a blade battle?

Is it normal to see black bodies treated as commodities?
Is it normal to live in a country that cares more about monopoly?
Is it normal to create a new hashtag almost every single day?
Is it normal to dig so many black graves?

So when I ask these questions,
And your answers are no,
You're lucky you haven't been exposed,
To the generators of genocide,
And the land without hope.

THE DISEASE I CAN'T SEE

You stuffed my ears with Brillo pads,
So when I heard my own voice I wouldn't recognize it.

You blinded my eyes with the darkest of shadows,
So when I saw my reflection I saw a stranger.

You cursed my dreams with night terrors,
So that I could never see my light at the end of the tunnel.

You segregated and malnourished me,
So that you could leech my soul.

You confiscated my confidence,
So that I may never calculate my worth.

You borrowed my livelihood,
So you could live inside me.

And when I pleaded on my knees for a gift long-deserved,
You spat in my face and tightened your grip.

WHAT'S SO DIFFERENT?

You're not just sad,
You're not just down,
Blasting music and prancing around,
Sitting in the dark, not uttering a sound,
Pillow-weeping and random rebounds,

Making decisions that don't make sense,
Dangerous behavior at your own expense,
Living in an empty house but paying too much rent,
Looking in the mirror at someone you've never met,
Making bread yet still in emotional debt.

The pain we carry isn't always physical,
The wounds we share aren't always visible.
You would go to the hospital if you cut your leg,
You would go to the doctor if you couldn't sleep in your bed,
So what's so different about your head?

TIRED IS NOT THE WORD

Tired isn't the word,
When you can open Instagram
On any given day
And witness black death.

Tired isn't the word,
When we have to 'celebrate'
Convictions and mourn black death.

Tired isn't the word,
When I see transwomen of color
Being murdered in cold blood,
But can turn on the news and not hear a word.

Tired isn't the word,
When 1,068+ black people
Have lost their lives at the
Hands of police

Since George Floyd was killed,
But we all need to
Come together
To #stopasianhate.

Tired isn't the word,
When I have to fear for my life
Every
Single
Time
I step
Outside
My house—
And inside.

Tired isn't the word,
when I'm scared to be
A Breonna
A George
A Trayvon
A Sandra
A Daunte
A Rayshard
A nigga.

—*Matthew Ashley*

RESILIENCE

Hardship comes and goes.
With God, we can face it all.
Stand tall, keep going.

