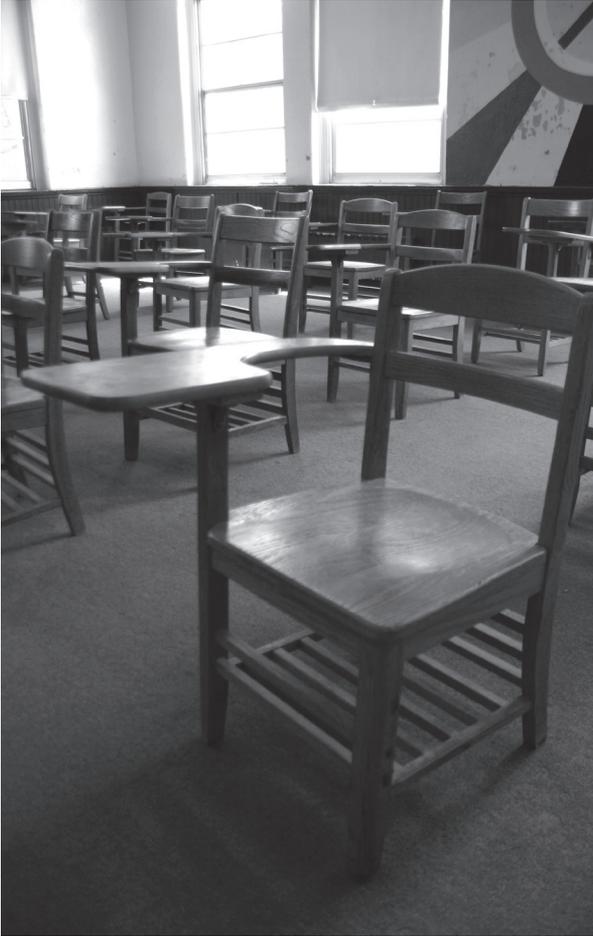


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Winners

2018 Poet Laureate Contest

First Prize :: Dior Thompson, “Music”

Second Prize :: Shaniece Holmes-Brown, “Blackify”

Third Prize :: Tadia Nicholson, “Mzungu Talk”

3rd Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Prize :: Kirk Henderson, “Record Players”

Second Prize :: Marcus Pierre, “Her”

Third Prize :: Janelle Castellon, “Luna Por Amor”

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A MATTER OF MOVEMENT

By design, chain links are connected,
Each being unique and individual.
So, I am a link and society is the chain.
Like the other links, I can move in my own place,
But each action influences them too.
Even my absence brought by death influences them.

Tell me, then, if my thoughts,
My actions,
And my opinions
Influence them too.
I can observe them
And study their reasons.
We are a single entity
Despite being apart.
I should consider our motives and our causes
And make a decision to support them,
Or act against the movement of our chain.

But I'm only a single link
Among so many.
What more can my voice do than make noise and provoke indignation
In those against me?
Perhaps it is better to not cause division.
Perhaps it is better to maintain peace through my silence,
Although opposition continues to grow in my mind.

Surely, I can live and act
And think for myself
Without much consideration for the other links in the chain.
Surely, I can live without an opinion
For the purpose of maintaining peace
And flowing with the movement of the chain.

Of course,
I would have to remain disturbed
By our obvious need for change.
Of course,
I would have to continue in disdain
And discontent for the movement of the chain.
Also, every night I would have to fight the shame
That comes with knowing that I destroyed a possible opportunity for
change,

But I would say nothing of my shame,
Because I would have accepted that I will be opinion-less.
I would continue in silence while I avoid acknowledging the possibility
That having no opinion is both the best
And the absolute worst.

C MINOR

It is Friday night. No, it is *the* Friday night. The moon is full, the stars are dancing, and the streets are chatting. Everyone is strolling through the French Quarter with a different mask on from the week before. The street performers multiply, all having a new and unique talent. The smell of cognac pirouettes in the air. The French Quarter is as live as ever, and yet between the cobblestones an orchestra struggles to find a stage.

A small group of crickets hops around looking for a place to play. Our friend Thomas is indeed a cricket, a cricket that has an intense love for all music. Now crickets are very mundane and simple. Every night Thomas and the others play their little violins for all to hear. And in their stiff tuxedos they play “Violin Concerto: The Stridulate.” Every night, the same song, the same way, at the same time. Every. Single. Night.

The conductor is the eldest cricket, John. John is the epitome of what a cricket should strive to be: simple. He is also the strictest. John makes Thomas carry the instruments in a grass-woven sack because Thomas is the runt of the group.

As they continue to look for a stage, Thomas is slowing down. Carrying everyone’s violin is starting to take a toll on him. Collectively they tell him to hurry up, but Thomas’s legs have begun to give out so he takes a moment to rest. He finds a street sign to sit under and catch his breath. Just across the street, Thomas notices a mantis and a fly walking into an alley. Thomas is confused, wondering what a mantis and a fly are doing together. To see predator and prey so comfortable together is strange. But then a strange sound begins to crescendo from the alley, catching Thomas’s ear.

He is mesmerized by the vibrant wail. Thomas whistles along to this new sound jumping through the air. Wrapped in this music, Thomas leaves the violins on the other side of the street. Never hearing anything this wild before, his heart escalates with excitement. He follows this strange sound underneath the alley’s only light, coming to a jazz bar called Crazy Legz. This hole-in-the-wall bar is as live as any jazz bar on Friday night. Thomas pokes his head in to hear the music, and gets more than expected. A vested moth is on the drums, a fly is playing the sax, his bow tie dangling from his neck, and on the piano is a spider wearing a smoky fedora. Thomas is surprised to see such a diverse crowd in such unison. And the music is so wild and free.

Then everyone starts screaming the name “Scat.” Rolling in behind Thomas is a roach. With just one look Thomas can tell this is no ordinary roach. When he walks in, the atmosphere changes. This roach looks over his shoulder at the curious cricket, and with a cool grin flicks his cigar out the door. His bowler hat is tilted over his eyes, sitting between his antennae. He pulls out his shiny trumpet with the name “Scat” etched on the bell. And when he begins to play, the room starts to bounce with the music, each note having its own purpose. This roach Scat controls the room, he owns the music, and everyone loves him. Scat plays jazz as if it is going out of style. He is no ordinary roach: he is a musician.

Thomas is in such awe, he doesn't know what to do with himself. He has never heard such music before. This music is so new and he wants to play along. Just as he decides to step inside, John grabs him by the arm, yanking him back across the street to the violins. Thomas is sadly taken back to reality. But Thomas has so many questions. Like what was that style of music, where was the conductor, and who was that mysterious pied piper? John is giving him an earful for leaving the violins unattended, reminding him of the cricket's long history with the instrument. But Thomas is blocking it all out, listening for stray notes of that enchanting music.

The other crickets wait patiently in the grass for John to return with the violins and the dunce. Thomas prepares to play, but can't focus. John sits him in the back, making him last chair for the umpteenth time. Thomas doesn't care anymore. His mind is still at Crazy Legz, dancing to every note played by that pied piper named Scat.

John hops to the top of the grass and sits. He raises his baton high above the grass, everyone anticipating the drop of his arm, signaling the start of their long dull night. Swinging his hand down and not a second later, he starts the song. Thomas looks around at the faces of his orchestra. He notices they all have the same face. Straight. Everyone looks exactly the same. No one is moving uncontrollably, and no one is listening. But most of all he notices the lack of soul. With every passing note he thinks of the endless possibilities that could be played. This monotonous style of music is driving him insane. Each note has the same purpose as the one before.

His frustration is building and building until he can't take it anymore. Thomas breaks out into a spontaneous violin solo, leaping over and around each cricket, playing with conviction and soul, better than any cricket before him. A crowd starts to emerge. Fireflies stunned by such behavior from a cricket, caterpillars inching over to this spectacle—even the frogs

can't close their mouths, frightening the other bugs. When Thomas stops playing, he sees the disappointment in the other crickets' faces, their snobby, mundane nature. But he no longer cares.

Thomas blasts through the grass like a freight train. He gets to the edge of the grass and is stopped abruptly by a wall of stone hooves. Towering over him is a jet-black thoroughbred. He looks across the hectic storm that is Bourbon St., the broken bottles and stumbling feet, and sees the sole light in the alley: Crazy Legz. With no way to move safely through the street without getting crushed by a horse's step, he knows what he must do. Jump, and jump high. He crouches down in a sprinter's start. Legs flexed back, he waits for the right moment and...Fwoom!

He jumps as high and as far as he can, landing on an officer's harness-gripping fist. Immediately a hand comes soaring towards him. Without a second thought he shoots himself forward to the officer's navy blue leg, and then forward again, landing on a dancer's hairy chest. He tries to jump off but his leg is caught in a hairy snare. Thomas must think quickly before he is seen. He grabs onto swaying beads and pulls himself from this chest of horror. He tries to hop away but the beads are too slippery and he can't get any leverage.

He is plummeting into a deep foamy pool. He's sinking, finding a thick lager hidden under the foam. Thomas tries to latch onto a wall but his grip is useless. He is sinking further and further down this into this red abyss, until everything starts to tilt. Thomas uses this moment to go with the current. Smack! He's met with guzzling lips and a pair of inebriated eyes. The cup lowers and Thomas notices he's caught by a more focused pair of eyes.

He rubs his feet on the stumbling drunkard's mustache. Beyond the focused eyes is the light; a few more leaps toward the light and he's home free. Timing is everything now. Thomas carefully turns his body towards this focused giant, looking at him like an equal. A hand is raised high, blocking the moon. Thomas is crouched in a sprinter's start once again, just waiting. A bell sounds throughout the French Quarter, signaling the turn of midnight. Thomas and the hand take off. The hand misses, committing friendly fire. Thomas jumps for the shoulder and then onward to the alley, landing on the cobblestone just a few feet from the light.

Dodging heels, jumping from shoe to shoe, and swinging from a fraying shoelace, he is flung into an empty bottle and then kicked into the red-brick wall above Crazy Legz. The music stops, the loud crash alarming Scat and the rest of the club. They all rush to the door to find a determined cricket entering the bar. A moth from the alley light flies

down and tells everyone what he has witnessed. They clean Thomas up with an old gum wrapper and get him a drink.

Scat walks up to him laughing and says, "What's up wit you, cricket? What's ya name?"

Thomas replies shyly, "T-Thomas. I want to know what kind of music you guys are playing."

Scat answers with a smirk: "It's called jazz, kid. You want in?"

Thomas is elated and stands up nodding his head.

"Well I'll be damned!" Scat laughs. "A cricket wanting to play some jazz. Ain't this a day to remember!?" Scat turns to the spider on the piano and yells, "Yuurrrp! Keys, the kid wants to play some jazz! What we got for him?"

Keys replies, "Can he play the bass?"

As if Thomas needs to be asked. He hops across the room and over to the bass, leaving his violin at the bar.

"I guess that's a yes!" Scat says, and runs back to the bottle cap stage. Without missing a beat, the drummer swings in the music like it never stopped. Keys runs his legs up and down the piano, singing any and every ad-lib that comes to mind. Scat fills the room with jazz once again, everyone bouncing and swinging, matching the same energy out in the streets. Thomas is holding the oversized bass, not knowing what to do with it, looking up and down this strange instrument, confused.

Scat turns to Thomas. "Loosen up, kid!" He plays a quick note. "It's jazz. You gotta let it flow through you!"

Thomas plucks an ugly chord, catching the attention of only a few centipedes and Scat. Scat leans over to fix him up a little. He unties his tie and unbuttons the top two buttons of that stiff tuxedo with his middle legs. He steps back, still playing his trumpet. "Ahh. There it is. If you're gonna play jazz, you gotta dress the part!" He plays a little improvisation. "Just take a deep breath and have fun with it! Oh, and lose the blazer!"

Thomas loses the blazer. He takes a deep breath and shakes his shoulders, looks at the bass, ready this time. But before he plucks another random chord, he looks over at the bar.

He gets an idea. He puts the bass down and sprints over to the bar with a lightbulb smile on his little face. Scat and Keys look at each other, wondering what the kid is doing. He picks up his violin and feels a tap on his shoulder from a long spider leg.

"Hey, kid," says Keys. "You're not thinking about playing that thing are you?"

“Yes,” Thomas says, smiling. “Trust me. I have an idea. I can feel it!”

Keys looks back at Scat, wondering what to do. Scat shrugs. Thomas gets back on stage and all eighty million eyes are looking curiously at this little cricket. Thomas gets a good *feel* for the music before jumping in. He tucks the violin under his chin, his bow at the ready. The crowd is still dancing but drawn in by the suspense. He can hear it, he can feel his time to come in: 1, 2, 3 and...BAM!

Thomas has the place *shook*, bringing a new sound to an already wild and innovative style of music. This is reckless and daring, yet bolder than ever. Scat's eyes widen out of amazement. Thomas is now leading the song. Scat and the band follow his lead. Scat then stops playing and watches how Thomas is controlling the scene right now. It is as if Scat were still playing.

Scat smiles, proud of the cricket's creativity. He scratches his head, confused, having never heard a violin in jazz. EVER! Thomas's love for music is shown and heard all through the night, bringing more and more customers. Even his own kin. Yes, even the crickets can't ignore this fascinating spectacle. They all just stand in the back, watching with open mouths.

Scat leans over to Thomas, presses his trumpet to him. They switch instruments. Both Thomas and Scat look at each other's instruments, not knowing how to play. Scat takes the bow and scratches it against the strings, while Thomas blows into the trumpet. Both sound terrible. The crickets in the back laugh and the band chuckles. Thomas finally notices the other crickets in the room and waves them over to find a seat. They get comfy and enjoy the atmosphere.

Scat returns the violin and Thomas returns the trumpet. And once again the music is back and kickin'. Scat and Thomas hit the crowd with an arsenal of runs, improv-style, conjuring a sound that would make your antennae tingle. John whips out the sheet music and crosses out the title, renaming it “The Stridulate Rhapsody: C Minor.” The music brings in more and more bugs. The streets of the French Quarter are beating to the same note. The lights are jumping, hips are bumping, and every thorax is shaking. A beautiful celebration of music and life. Every man and insect dancing, from Crazy Legz to Bourbon St., the night crystallized by the untamed notes of New Orleans Jazz.

Fin!

KILL THE ARTIST

I saw the artist in him die.
I saw the passion and the light
Leave his eyes, and as I watched
I couldn't help but cry.
Where was my beloved?

Wrapped up in this world that thrives on
Contradiction, they say follow your dreams,
Then crucify you for having your own vision.
They blinded him, silenced his ever-beating heart.
Oh, how I loved the rhythm.

Still he was my muse, my cosmic gift,
And so I promised him
That they will not have me,
They will not kill the artist
I was meant to be.
(I'll never understand this idea of
Artistry and conformity—
Sounds like apples and oranges to me.)
He understood that art is
The oxygen I need to breathe,
And that without it
It's only a matter of time
Before I lose my grip on sanity.

I don't know who gave them the impression
That being an artist is easy.
To create art is to visit those places
In our minds where most of you are afraid to be,
But go ahead and judge us for our sensitivity.

Continue to kill the artist
And I promise you'll regret it,
Because we are the only ones
Who take this pain and accept it,

Find beauty in these moments
And flip it like it's magic,
All the while still being
Completely disrespected.

But they'll always kill the artist,
'Cause they'll never understand it.

DEDICATION TO LU

A place, this place, a mixture of love and hate.
I've had some of my toughest moments here,
but I learned how to pull strength out of fear,
how to see blue skies in a way I never did back home,
but man I wish those turkey vultures would just leave me alone.

Some days the air smells of mushrooms and manure,
maybe a little Mary Jane,
and I can't for the life of me figure out why
ya'll still attend the football games.
Yeah, I can't lie, I don't always have school spirit,
but this is where I found my voice,
and even when it shakes, I still let them hear it.

Over these four years, I've grown to a woman from a girl,
slowly discovering my purpose in the world.
I guess it's okay that I changed my major so many times,
looking for the craft that stuck to my heart,
even when the facts wouldn't stick to my mind.

I learned how to love the flaws of my body
(except when the cafe food wasn't so kind to me),
To see myself as a queen, this melanined skin
a beautiful gift God has given to me.
I've never seen so many women wearing
natural hair as though it were a crown.
ALL these things I experienced HERE!

The closer it gets to our time being through,
The more I love the colors Orange and Blue.
It's bittersweet, and I say thank you, LU!
But as much as I love you, don't play games!
It's been booked: May 6, 2018 will be the day.
Gotta move forward, can't stay here,
ya'll got me chopped if you think I'm staying another year.

—Angel Wiggins

RECORD PLAYERS

Penelope's 43rd screenplay was approaching its 56th page. In the room next to hers, amid a family of empty cognac fifths, were Gerard and four friends, playing spades and staying awake on cappuccinos. In the living room, Kenneth, Hassan, and Dev sat before a platinum-colored, voice-controlled Sonos speaker, listening to a house-shaking rendition of *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. They all wore bomber jackets and confident smirks on weekends like this one and smoked out of vape pens because they couldn't risk failing a possible drug test. This group was called the Pink Panthers by everyone they went to Howard with but didn't speak to anymore. They used to record music together, but they'll never admit it. Every now and then, Dev would throw a tennis ball towards Penelope's room and say he dropped it as an excuse to talk to her, despite her room being a few car lengths away. The door knocked like the beat of a drum. Some interns working at the Senate, friends of Gerard's, stopped by to say hello and join the party. Penelope just got another idea for her script.

Amber, from the Senate, moved in slow-motion. She looked around the room and saw the well-kept apartment. She noticed that whoever decorated the place had a penchant for lighting and that they really knew how to develop—how would she say—ambience. In early July in 2016, Penelope had wanted to spruce up the place after Gerard, her roommate, decided that he wanted to spend his tax returns on obnoxious, but sonically pleasing platinum-colored speakers. Penelope was the hippie of the group. When everyone went to Howard, Morehouse, and Spellman, she went to Lincoln. When Gerard's friends went off to law school or to work for a Fortune 500 company before they got their MBAs, Penelope's friends worked full-time jobs while they pursued their art every weekend. They even loved differently. Gerard would have affairs with girls from Paris or Brazil who studied public policy at Georgetown. Penelope wasn't really looking for anything. Even amongst her colleagues at work she was different. They would talk, every time they met someone, about how someday they were going to live in Europe or Africa long-term, but right now they were paying their dues. Penelope just wanted to make her contribution to the world. Everything else was trivial. She pondered the differences between her classmates and theirs as she wrote.

The last synthesizers of Toro y Moi's "Blessa" rang through Penelope's headphones and took her writing to another stratosphere. Calypso, the protagonist of her 43rd screenplay, drifted through outer space. She wandered a path unknown, waiting for her life to be forged by the fire beneath Penelope's fingers, crushing the keyboard the way that gravity crushes life on Earth. She was on her 43rd screenplay, but had never finished one. There was always a limit, a glass ceiling whispering words of her work's futility in her ear. Penelope always had trouble finishing things. She used to identify as agnostic because she wasn't ready to call herself an atheist. Now, she believed in God but still had trouble expressing it or actually going to church. At Lincoln, she never finished her website for the mandatory First-Year Experience class and her essays always ended abruptly, although she always ended up with an A. She credits incompleteness to her incompleteness.

"There's beauty in the unknown," Penelope said aloud as she scripted a line for Calypso, now speaking to her robot sidekick on a sea-covered planet. Calypso prepared her spacecraft for a deep-sea plunge and Penelope's eyes flickered with thoughts of everything her life could be upon finishing this story. The acclaim, the celebration, the awards. The love she'd always wanted to find, but hadn't. Calypso submerged toward a starry, Atlantis-like palace and noticed how its walls were made of glass and the lights shone with the sparkles of a diamond.

"Hey," Penelope heard as Outkast's lyrics lobbed down the hallway through her door. Penelope spun around in her chair to bear witness to the person who had singlehandedly ruined her screenplay.

"How's it going?" the man asked.

"I didn't know you'd be here," Penelope said, looking at him in poorly concealed frustration.

"Nice to see you too, Pen."

His name was Jared and he was born in South Africa. His skin was on the darker side of caramel, and he stood at six feet, five inches tall. He graduated from Harvard. He worked at Vice with Penelope, producing documentaries on culture and lifestyles throughout the world, although Jared got to travel a lot more than she did.

"Sorry, I'm being rude. I was just working on my screenplay," Penelope said and got up from her chair.

"Oh, I don't mean to interrupt," said Jared.

"No, no. It's fine. I was just finishing a scene anyway," she said, knowing that the scene wasn't actually finished. "How's the party?" She sat down on her bed and he sat in her chair.

“It’s good,” he sighed. “Better now, I think. Especially since Kenneth and the rest of the guys stopped playing that same Kendrick album.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” she laughed. There was a pause. Penelope and Jared looked at each other, smiling. Penelope was attracted to Jared. The inverse was true and both of them realized that, especially considering that there were only two things that Penelope would stop writing for: Jared and food. But in her love, Penelope was ambivalent, maybe even scared. There were moments she approached the feeling of love, but like a faint trail, she lost sight of it. The truth is that she felt incomplete. Not through lack of a relationship with someone else but through lack of one with herself.

“I’ve been feeling kinda’ nostalgic lately,” Penelope said, resuming the conversation.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know, I just...”

“Just what?”

“Okay, don’t make fun of me,” Penelope said.

“What?”

“I miss college,” Penelope exhaled.

“I wouldn’t make fun of you for that,” Jared laughed.

It was two in the morning and Kenneth, Hassan, and Dev were freestyling over the beat to an old Biggie Smalls song, although they’d deny it the next morning. Jared shut the door, drowning out the lyrics but keeping the beat. Penelope felt lost, even amongst her own people—like they were all forgetting something, although they seemed to remember everything. Life had taught Penelope how to be a woman, but Lincoln had taught her what it meant to be black.

“It’s like I don’t know who I am anymore. I spent so much time writing, and writing, and writing. Planning my future, applying for jobs, networking—all for me to do the same exact things today. I feel like I missed out on college. When I was at school, it felt amazing being at the first HBCU, but now I think I forgot what that feels like.”

“Why do you feel that way?” Jared asked.

“You know the people we work with. The people I live with. We all come from really interesting backgrounds, well-known schools, and have really cool ideas for the future and exciting stories to tell, but there’s nothing...really...there.”

“There?”

“I don’t know. It’s late. I’m just rambling,” Penelope concluded.

“How are you?”

An hour of small talk passed before Jared realized he wasn't getting laid. He then decided that he had to get up early the next morning and Penelope walked him out. Kenneth, Dev, and Hassan were singing the lyrics to songs from *Take Care* while party conversations played lightly in the background. Penelope returned to her room and stared at her computer screen, hoping words would spawn despite the absence of her typing them. As if she was staring Calypso in the eyes, she reread her drafts, understanding the inflections of the character and finding herself in a reflective, glossy image. Calypso's character was not a reflection of herself, but a blurred distortion, a parallel of what she could be.

Solace found Penelope as she looted her memories. Calypso and her intergalactic journeys were part of an ongoing set of ideas conceived during her time at Lincoln. There was a particular moment of revelation. Roland Martin was on campus doing a speech and she remembered skipping it and going to the library to write—she thought it would be a better use of her time. Plus, she thought his attitude was too unpleasant to experience for an hour. Penelope had this attitude about everything. She was a loner with a lot of friends. This never really changed, even into adulthood, but during school she was intensely focused, so as to not attract too much attention or waste too much time—there was too much to do. Penelope wasn't competing with her peers; she was competing with legends.

Her inspirations were Scott-Heron, Hughes, Marshall. The embodiment of black excellence, their footsteps paved the path she walked. Even as “We Almost Lost Detroit” played through her ears post-graduation, their paths were illusory, evading her with every word she typed. Penelope's surroundings suffocated her as she glanced into the products of her soul, surveying the remnants of long-lost scripts while Andre 3000's verse from “The Real Her” echoed throughout her apartment.

It was five-thirty now and the party hadn't slowed down. Penelope lost herself in thought, moving to her bed and shutting her laptop. She knew she stood on the shoulders of giants. Tears ran down her face, as excitement and anxiety filled her heart, her imagination running free, reminiscing upon freshman week to graduation.

She returned to her memories of community, love, and life. The feeling of alienation condemned her life in DC, no matter how interesting her cohorts were. Despite this, she felt safe. Her talents

were gifts from her family, her education, God. And with that she would get through.

“Thank you,” she said as she closed her eyes, removing her headphones. There was silence for the first time in hours.

“Hello,” Penelope asked as she opened the door. Everyone was gone. Stepping lightly on her tiled floors, she entered the living room, unclean but still refined. There was only one sight: the sunlight reaching towards her through the balcony. There was only one sound: her steps. One feeling: her smile. Penelope wasn't sure who to thank for the morning. This feeling was a gift, not from herself. From her family, at Lincoln and beyond. At her graduation, the president of the university wished Penelope and her colleagues much more than luck. Putting her pen to paper, she had finally received it.

MUSIC

music *n.* *vocal and instrumental sounds combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony and expression of emotion.*

His voice was a melody
Consisting of a baritone of the broken.
He let the bass consume the very basics of his thoughts,
Allowed the tempo of her body to consume his heart.

Hollow and holding onto a beat he could no longer synchronize to,
He changed his symphony to fit hers,
Created notes in a song he couldn't sing,
Changed his walk when he changed his tune,
Developed a stutter in his vocal chords,
Moving to an assemblage of white noise he couldn't escape from.

He found a song in every bond,
A sermon in every smile,
And healing in every touch,
Every notation, every line she'd ever written,
Composed of her clefts and her chords.
But he only understood how to strum her cleft,
Never knew how to cater to her tone
Or the strains in her sequence,
Her pitch of personal progression at an all-time low,
The prelude of her story told in crystalline blues.

He wasn't meant to be a rainbow;
The product of his father's storm and his mother's sunshine,
He tampered with the rhythm of the rain.

I slowly began to see a song in him,
Slowly began to sing again.
Each tune that his tongue produced was music to me,
And built in the image of a symphony,
It was bittersweet.

I was told to never underestimate the beauty of a black man,
Never be fooled by the sensuality in the walk,

Or how much he'd cater to you when he'd talk.
But I can't help but fall victim to the dimple in your cheek,
Or how each time you open your mouth,
I fall in love when you speak.
It's funny how I never meant to meet another rainbow,
Never meant to bend at the whims of those panes.
Somehow I got lost in the shadows beneath your lashes,
Stuck synchronizing myself to those pools of dark brown,
Parting my inhibitions like Moses did the Red Sea.

I'm stuck making my prayers to you,
Watching how my backbone begins
To bend like a willow tree.
I am covered by your beautiful
And kept tucked by your kindness.

I let him toy with me,
Let him twin tower over me,
Allowing both creatures called our egos
To counteract the sunshine in me.

Maybe one day he won't be the sun that I still see in him,
Or maybe he won't be able to take
The pain that I've been breathing in,
Or reciprocate each hymn I hum to him,
Residing deep within the depression I find myself in.

I haven't seen myself in anyone for a long time,
But I found that I love me almost as much as I love him,
And I'm starting to understand how they say
Falling in love can create an echo of you.

I'm nothing but an echo of you.
One day you'll stop seeking a sermon in me,
And when that day comes
I'll have to pray for my gravity back.

I hope one day you'll be able
To understand how much has changed in me.
Some people were never meant to transition into fall,
But somehow I fell for you.

FLASHBACK

It's interesting how the sound of a certain melody
can take you back in time.

Growing up, music was always playing in my house,
old tunes from the playlist of my parents:
Mom in her sewing room, listening to 105.3,
Dad with his eclectic tastes, playing a little bit of everything,
But never anything that wasn't quality.
My youth was filled with the sounds of
Carlos Santana and Lauryn Hill,
Seal and Jill Scott,
James Brown and Minnie Riperton—
a collection of musical legends with
lyrics that are etched into my soul.

Sometimes I'll catch a song playing,
and if I close my eyes I can almost see her,
a little girl with plaits in her hair,
singing about love she's too young to understand,
dancing like a ballerina,
whirling and twirling, spinning in her socks,
until it all falls down and she falls down,
but when she *breaks* down,
she is a miasma of insecurity,
sadness and pain,
filled with self-inflicted wounds.
When she cries,
her tears leak down her cheeks
like rivulets of rainwater on the window panes.
She burrows her head in a pillow
so that her cries won't escape,
sobbing in her dark room like there's no tomorrow,
but her eyes remain open.

Her heart was always wide-open,
joy and sorrow like two sides of a silver dollar.
She wore her emotions like a badge of strength,

whether the line between her lips tilted up or down,
never ashamed to show the depth of feeling
flowing inside her soul,
never afraid to let people see inside her.

I miss the days when I was her,
before the lashing actions of others
forced my heart closed.
As I open my eyes and the familiar tune fades,
my chest still aches with the phantom pain
of a core long since frozen over.

LIFE IS HARD

Growing up, the words “Life Is Hard”
were like a mantra drilled into my psyche,
so when life got hard for me
I just assumed that was the natural way of things,
kept my problems to myself
and did my best not to complain.

Heart on my sleeve, I grew a high tolerance for pain.
Those trickling tears when the lights went out
were just my secret shame,
because I was also taught that weakness
is not *meant* to be shown.

And yeah, sometimes
my chest would *ache* with the storm of emotions
battering my insides,
and when the turmoil grew too hard to ignore,
I'd simply sit alone in my room until the tremors faded.

Every time someone hurt me,
every time life almost broke me,
when people lied to and betrayed me,
I was convinced that it was all
just my burden to bear.

I tried telling myself
that what doesn't kill me
will only make me stronger,
but the battle scars criss-crossing
my heart were silently
Screaming.

How much longer do I have to be strong?!
How much longer do I have to be strong?!
How much longer do I have to be strong?!

Somehow, I've grown so sensitive
that even the little things
leave me bleeding from old, unhealed wounds.
I'm consumed by an agony
I no longer have a name for.

Those tremors on lonely nights
have become full-blown *quakes*,
and I'm ashamed to admit that sometimes
I wonder how much more of this I can take.

But *still*,
I endure.
I move forward.
I keep on.
I stand tall,
even though I'm breaking under the weight
of my *own* expectations.

I smile and nod and hold onto this façade,
but all I really want
is *someone* to see the sadness in my eyes,
to hug me and whisper in my ear
that sometimes it's okay
to just break down and cry.

To tell me it's okay
to *not* be okay,
because
I'm not okay!
I'm not fine!
Stop asking me!
because the truth is
I'm just trying my best to get by.

Aren't we all just trying our best to get by?

—*Bahijah Hassan*

BROKEN

Broken people are the best people in the worst kind of way.
A broken person will find a way to see the good
in other broken people, no matter how bad they hurt.
Not everyone is broken—but me?
I am broken.

This is how I knew:

I knew I was broken when I found myself
loving men who told me that I was “mad for nothing.”

How dare you dictate my feelings!

But maybe they're right; am I overreacting?

I knew I was broken when the heartbreak
from my father took over who I was
and made me who I wasn't.

Oddly, I loved men just like him,
or maybe that was my broken self
loving those kind of men.

I knew I was broken when I kept loving
everything and everyone who was bad for me
JUST to feel loved back.

It wasn't love, though, it was convenience,
but not for me, only for them.

I knew I was broken when I'd cry because
I felt unappreciated no matter
how hard I tried to be appreciated.

Don't you see me trying?

I'm coming to grips with what

I THOUGHT was broken,

Picking my head up, no more crying.

All this time it was myself I was broken by,
Simply because I let everyone make me feel broken,
when, in reality, I was only a little bent.

THE HOOPTY

A roaring engine,
Squeaking brakes,
Rusting paint,
Dull windshield wipers,
A trash bag for a window,
Missing hubcap,
Faulty transmission
And a donut for a tire.
Stained seats,
Coins tucked in cushions,
Hanging ceiling fabric,
Old fries under the seat
And a busted sound system.
Taking me on first dates,
Getting me to work,
Bringing me safely from school
And taking me on
One-hour road trips—
You've been great.
But now it's time to upgrade.

SATURDAY

Every Saturday I wake up at 8 o'clock in the morning, take a shower, eat my favorite ham and cheese sandwich, put on my old white hat, and go to the market. This Saturday isn't much different from my other Saturdays: the same flower on the windowsill, the same toothbrush, the same ham and cheese, and the same old hat. I always go to the market by foot, because I like walking on the city streets at such an early time: not many people prefer to get out of their beds at 8 o'clock in the morning and go somewhere on a Saturday. I can understand that: having a routine of waking up so early for five days a week, you'd like to spend more time with your lovely blanket. It has already been nine years since I retired, so Saturday morning is a special time for me. It's the time when I can discern every brick of each house I pass because nobody disturbs me, and when I can make small talk with the vegetable sellers.

My wife Kate and I used to love going to the market. This was when I worked as an English teacher, before Kate passed away. Kate always needed a lot of time to buy the vegetables for our family. That's why we would spend half our Saturdays there. Now, there's nothing I would rather do than spend half my day at the market, as it was before. Sadly, my legs aren't strong anymore, and it's much more pleasant to buy vegetables with someone you love.

Minsk, the city where I've been living all my life, keeps so many memories that sometimes I feel like one day it'll spit them out because of being overwhelmed. I love this city, probably because I love my memories. My only son Dima lives in Brest, which is four hours from Minsk if you take a train. But my granddaughter Diana moved to Minsk because she's studying music here. She's not only studying, but also works at a restaurant where they make sushi for 24 hours. Diana doesn't want me to know the name of this restaurant, because she thinks that if I find out the name of the restaurant, I'll go there and leave lots of tips that I don't have. This is true; I will certainly leave them. All I know about the place she works is that it's not Sushi House, Manga, or Sushi Noris. I've already checked them. For my last birthday, Diana bought me new, black-framed glasses. Big, rectangular, black-framed glasses. She said they are in fashion and all her friends wear such glasses. Unfortunately, I don't know any one of her friends.

At the market, every vegetable seller recognizes my face, and some of them even know my name. It's not so difficult to remember a wrinkly old man with a goatee in a white hat. It's always pleasant to see their smiling faces and hear someone shouting from afar, "Hey, Alex, you gray head! How much parsley do you want today? One kilo, or more?" And after that everybody starts laughing, because they know I hate parsley. Actually, I don't understand what's funny, but I always laugh with everybody. I remember how on the second day after we got married, my Kate baked potatoes and decorated them with large amounts of parsley. I looked at that dish and thought I had probably chosen the wrong woman. But now, I would do anything to see that dish again.

Usually I buy all my vegetables from Andrey. Gosh, this stocky, red-haired man always knows how to talk to customers, so that they come back to him again and again. Andrey is not only a vegetable seller, but also a friend of mine. I met him two years ago, when I moved to a smaller apartment and started visiting another market which is nearby. There're two things Andrey loves talking about: his family and vegetables. He always tells me how much he's proud of his two sons, how much he loves his wife, and how many calories squash has.

"Could you please weigh one kilo of tomatoes and one kilo of cucumbers?" I ask. "And 300 grams of dill. Oh, and one head of cabbage too."

"Why are you buying so many vegetables? Are you gonna' feed the Belarusian army?" Andrey can't go a minute without making an unfunny joke. After every joke, he looks at me, smiles with his 32 crooked teeth, and expects me to react. It isn't difficult, so I give him a smile.

"Maybe Diana will come visit me today. I have to cook something."

Andrey stops smiling and responds with the serious voice I always hear when we talk about Diana. "Alex, she hasn't visited you for six months, maybe even longer than that. Last time you saw her was on your birthday when she gave you these glasses with a stupid caption that such glasses are in fashion now."

"They are. She studies and works hard. She's got no time."

"Listen. You know what people say? If you have a desire, you'll find a time. Measly excuse."

"You haven't given me my tomatoes, cucumbers, dill, or cabbage."

Andrey takes out a package and with his strong arms puts my

vegetables inside. One of his arms is covered with a big tattoo of a Belarusian oppositional flag. Three stripes: white-red-white. He hands me the package and smiles sadly. “Three rubles, man.”

I am surprised it is so cheap, but when I look inside the package I realize that Andrey has put in fewer vegetables than I asked, as he always does. He thinks I shouldn't buy so many vegetables all the time. But I love vegetables.

I talk a little bit with Andrey and go home. On my way back I always observe other people's faces. I like noticing how different people are. There's the woman with short, boy-like red hair who is walking straight towards me. She's arguing with someone on the phone. She's probably talking to her son, who is a loser, or to her husband, who is worse than just a loser. One teenager with big headphones on his head is passing me on the right. Why doesn't he like listening to the sounds around him? On the left a young lady and her small, six-year-old daughter are passing me. Judging by the violin on the girl's back, I would say they're going to a music school. The girl has a big smile, but her mum doesn't, which is very usual for Belarusians. I always look at people's faces and think that someone important must die every day in this country, or that during childhood nobody taught them how to smile. They usually don't smile in public when they're alone, but they do it with people they love. As for me, I smile all the time. Well, I don't smile when the army of snow and wind starts to attack me, or when I feel really upset after getting my pension. But other than that, I always try to melt people's hearts with this simple thing—a smile. I also love when Diana's smiling, because she has really beautiful white teeth and when she starts smiling, one dimple on her left cheek tells me that it exists.

Typically, after I come from the market, I sit on the bench at the playground near my house. By that time some mothers with their children come. I like watching the kids riding on the swings and sliding down the slides. If they see that I'm smiling, they start riding even faster. Kate and I used to watch our Diana when she was small. I remember one day Diana was running near a swing that was being ridden by a boy. She didn't notice him and the boy kicked her head. She looked at us, and we started laughing so loudly that everybody could hear! We knew she was waiting for our reaction, so that she could react the same way. But her pain was louder than our laugh, so she raised a howl.

“Today is a good Saturday,” I start to think while watching the children. “I have to cook something. Baked potatoes? Fried chicken?”

It'll be nice to pay for an apartment tomorrow. Cause they could turn off the electricity, and I'll be starving. And I have to call my son Dima. He's probably waiting for news from me."

"Grandpa! Here you are!"

I hear a familiar voice and turn around. Diana is standing right in front of me. My beautiful Diana at my favorite playground. Last time I saw her she had long dark hair. Now her hair rests right above her collarbone. She is wearing her new red dress with new black sandals. Probably not new anymore. The only thing I remembered was her brown eyes and lean body.

I silently walk towards her and open my arms to hug my little 22-year-old Diana.

"I knew you'd come. I knew," I say, hiding the fact that I've known it for half the year.

"Let's go up to the apartment. I bought a chocolate cake. We could drink some tea."

While we are moving to the porch, going upstairs to the fourth floor, Diana doesn't stop talking: "Dad said you call him so often that sometimes he doesn't have time to work. By the way, do you know they bought a cat? They say he walks everywhere and pees. But they don't want to bring him to the pet shop because they already love this little varmint. And they're going to come to us on my birthday! They asked me to discuss it with you, by the way. Dad probably told you already that they want to stay in your apartment. That's why I..."

She stops talking when we enter the apartment. I look at Diana and then look at what she is staring at: my apartment. My apartment isn't that big. It has only one bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom. I used to have a larger apartment when Kate was alive but then Diana needed money for her university and I didn't need so much space so I sold that apartment and bought this one. The bedroom here has a small but cozy couch with a blue blanket and yellow pillows. The walls of the room are hung with lots of pictures. Our marriage, Diana's school graduation, Kate in the park, Diana on the swing, Dima's marriage, Dima and Kate playing football, Diana eating a banana, Dima on the bicycle. On my desk there is a picture of me holding Diana when she was a baby. I have one flower on the windowsill and two more flowers in the kitchen, which is also not so big. A thick red carpet leads to my kitchen.

Diana continues staring at everything, and then steps on the carpet and moves toward the kitchen. "Grandpa, what's THIS?" she

asks. “Why do you have shells of sunflower seeds scattered all over there? Why do you need so many cucumbers and tomatoes? Who made this mess? Why does it stink? Grandpa, are those potatoes? Grandpa, for how long have these products been sitting here? When was the last time you cleaned your apartment?”

Diana asks these questions perplexedly, one by one, and I don't have time to respond. To be honest, I don't know what to respond.

She stops asking questions and starts walking around my apartment, keeping quiet. From kitchen to bedroom, from bedroom to bathroom, from bathroom to kitchen. I stand still and listen to her fast steps.

Then Diana stops abruptly and looks at the picture in my hands. It is the one from my desk. She starts weeping.

I come to her and say, “Let's cook some vegetables before eating a dessert, okay?”

She looks at me with eyes full of tears and smiles. The dimple on her left cheek tells me that it exists. The dimple I love so much.

BLACKIFY

Hue, according to Google, has three meanings:

1. A color or shade.
2. Something about wavelengths.
3. Character.

“With this faith, we will be able to hue out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

But where could I find it?
How can I make people see the beauty of faith
When their hearts have been blinded
By hatred, representing a flag that should be tattered and torn
But instead uses media to brainwash our children
From the very moment they are born?
Society condemns them,
Causing them to deny
that they were born to a people who taught them how to fly.
Every day they are told to rip the sky apart;
You may not notice our wings,
But angelic are the minds who have done such amazing things.

Dr. King, our royalty and high honor,
not forgetting those before him,
no titles meant to dishonor the legacy of a people
who just wanted to drink from the same fountain.
But to reach the peak of the simplest of pleasures,
We must all be willing to climb the mountain.

Blackify.

We make the barren our own,
Turning the ugly and meek into
Sophisticated and grown,
Heartaches into beats and cries into songs,
Look to music for inspiration in hopes of righting wrongs.
We have violence in our communities
Where every prayer is for it to stop,

Then face scrutiny from outside sources
who want to blame it on hip-hop.

Blackify.

This is now our people's signature, style, and culture,
Which continues to be captured and devoured by vultures.
You criticize hip-hop but are ignorant to your own hypocrisy.
There must be a source of innate motivation:
Borrowing a style and calling it your own seems original,
But I believe we still call that cultural appropriation.
The point of hip-hop is not to glorify the streets,
But to represent the lives that are affected,
Yet you still bump it,
Never left Eminem neglected,
Until he voiced his opinion and sided with the opposition.
He wasn't supposed to speak for the minority;
I'm sure it wasn't his intention.

Blackify.

How can we cope and heal our scars
Without reds and blues,
Dribbles and bars?
We bleed our passion, leaving ourselves on every street and screen.
Constantly our voices and opinions are overlooked,
But it doesn't matter as long as our talents supply you with green.

Blackify.

We come from a people who overcame every journey:
Triangular trade, families stripped away,
Bodies hanging and burning,
Holding onto a dream of equality to call our own,
For our children's children to use as the foundation
To cement their existence
And build a home.

Raising ministers, philosophers, and artists alike,
Who switch from building skyscrapers
To spittin' hard on the mic,
Who showed us not to use a sharp blade,
But a sharp tongue to win a fight.

When told to shut up, they shut it down,
Putting an end to what's not right.

Blackify.

This monumental idea which seemed an inconceivable theme
Was bestowed upon us to create the new American Dream.
Not one of delectable apple pie and white picket fences,
But one in which blacks could own property
But couldn't sit on the same benches.
Because negroes are contagious—isn't that outrageous?
It's not too far from reality; take a look at the textbook pages.
Our history is four pages long,
Despite everything that we have contributed to this country,
Feeding them our brawn AND intellect so strong.
Even with equal opportunity, we are still left hungry,
But not for long.

Because Dr. King cultivated the knowledge,
and stuck his foot in the ring,
Told us to push forward, to be triumphant,
and not worry about a thing,
Because through the injustice we face now, only victory it may bring.
Yes, we blackify this country, and give thanks to Dr. King!

MZUNGU TALK

We see the wealth of this potted power plant,
let us help, help you divvy up wealth,
matter fact, help us steal your wealth, I mean,
let's share the wealth, or just take it all for us,
brother.

We see these women, furious-flowered and nubian-powered,
running on the energy of the sun, let us take them,
well, not take them, make them choose us, unbreast them
from their bodies and recode their babies, show them reason,
because we will take them, oh yes, surely take them
from these men of darkness,
brother.

We see it, the roads of rebelled royalty. Mighty kings
swelling with warrior stink, you are strong, built not to break,
come work with me, right beside me, okay, now next
to me, now under me, but is this where you're supposed
to be? 'cause you're stronger than me, got the fighter decree,
so much more spirit than me, but beneath my feet,
brother.

We see it, the creator and diviner, come align yourself,
so you may be saved, yes, he is me and we are we,
except in regards to day-to-day humanity, take this book,
read it, use it, or I'll use it to use you, but I'm simply showing
you the truth, saving your black ugly soul, but we are love, I love you,
I loved you, I love what you do for me, this is what's expected of you,
boil your bastardized pagan practices, and trust in me,
have faith, trust in me, it's safe, trust me,
brother.

FOR MY BROTHERS

Hercules, can you please let him breathe?
Crucified, an unlawful homicide,
Hardened pain on his back and brain,
Unyielding man, oh man,
I cannot stand
Looking at my broken men.
Pent-up tears, drowning in fears commonly unheard,
Unknowingly repeating the same cycle that got him here.
A rough pain, a tough rain, dark clouds
Invading his internal space,
Cold space,
Unwelcoming,
A charred darkness to the fourth degree.
Beneath the flesh his pain resides,
Never willing to let it cry,
A mask cemented on a fearful man,
Cold hard face to replace what once was.
Hurt and revenge, the Algedonic duo,
But how pleasurable is it really?
Once he realizes it's all a game,
Created in the image of someone else's pain.

THE SILENT MAKEOVER

That beautiful complexion:
Perfection.
Her face
Her eyes
Her smile
Her love,
They were all lies.

You tried to care
But you shouldn't dare
Because you sold your heart
To perfection.

His face
His eyes
His smile
His love,
They were all lies.

You start to believe
That it is real,
So you give yourself the silent makeover:
Heavy makeup
Washed away by the soapy residue of acceptance,
Revealing a lost beauty of imperfection.

I'm giving you this medicine,
Injections of Excedrin.
His black face
His eyes filled with conviction
His soulful smile
His temporary love.

The shea butter on her Hershey-kissed skin,
The wild roots of her 4c mane.
She looks for the window of his soul and
The love he begged for.

They were all lies!
Pore by pore,
Unveiling the raw flesh
Of authenticity,
Crease by crease,
Highlighting a smoky spirit
That brings a contrast
To the dark shade of fear,
Opening a fresh set of eyes
To a makeover
Sadly unseen.

Now and forever
She was taken.
Her fucking soul was taken
By that
White face.
His blue eyes
His thousand-dollar smile
His bloody love.

Her soulless eyes
Her broken heart—
They were all the truth.

For all she was
And would be,
She still adored herself
In all her flaws and beauty.

And how silly it was
For it to begin
With a simple suggestion
That her bad habit

Was what drove him crazy about her,
Enough to rush her
And kiss her small lips,
Before the morning was up.

HER

I awoke to the sound of sirens blaring through my ears, accompanied by a bright light being flashed in my eyes. I fought to keep my eyes open as more and more noises were introduced. As my eyes slowly began to close, I saw an image of a little girl. The girl was around 5-years-old with jet-black hair that glistened in the sun. The girl was wearing a white sundress and a tiara made out of flower petals. I could hear her laughing as she played in a bed of flowers. The entire time I'm picturing this girl, I was never able to see her face. Out of curiosity, I began to walk toward the little girl, but with each step my body grew heavier and heavier. When I was inches away from her, the laughter suddenly stopped. The girl stopped playing and began to turn towards me. All the air left my body as I began to feel a cold chill run down my spine. The girl's head slowly turned over her right shoulder, but as if my body was defending itself, my eyes sprang open.

I tried to gather my other senses. Soon I began to hear voices all around, and one in particular stood out. It was a strong, hearty voice that kept repeating, "Ma'am, can you hear me?"

"Yes," I replied, turning my head in the direction of the voice.

To my right stood a tall man in a long white coat holding a clipboard. He was wearing glasses with thick black frames that engulfed the top half of his face. As he flipped through the clipboard, he started to say, "Hello, my name is Dr. James, and I am your attending physician at the moment. Would you be able to tell me your name?"

"Hello," I replied as I repositioned my body. "My name is Janet. Janet Walker."

"Okay, Ms. Walker," he said enthusiastically as he rolled a stool next to the bed to sit, "Do you think you would be able to tell me the last memory you can recall?"

"The last thing I remember was walking from the bus stop towards my apartment building after work when a sharp pain suddenly struck me."

"Okay, it seems that you collapsed right outside your building. Your landlady, Ms. Gertrude, found you on the ground, clutching your head. She's the one who called the ambulance." The doctor continued, "Looking over your chart, you seem fine now. You were probably under an immense amount of stress."

“Oh,” I said. “I’ve been working everyday nonstop for the past couple of months.”

“That’ll do it to you,” he said with a smile on his face. “But after reviewing your blood test results, I have to tell you that you—”

As I was listening to the doctor, my attention began to drift. I could understand what he was saying, but there was no sound. Everything went silent as if time had stopped and the world had frozen in place, and then I heard it. The last word he uttered: pregnant. When he was finished telling me everything he had to, he asked, “Do you have anyone you can talk to about this. If not, the hospital has many—”

“It’s okay,” I said, cutting him off. “There is someone who absolutely must know this information.”

“Good, you are free to leave in the morning. Is there anyone you can call to pick you up?” the doctor asked with a worried look on his face.

“No, I’ll just take a taxi,” I answered quickly. “Besides, there’s somewhere I have to go tomorrow anyway.”

“Make sure you get plenty of rest for the time being,” said the doctor as he left my bedside.

The next morning I was awakened by the rattling of the machines and cabinets caused by the thunder. The sky was bright with flashes of light caused by the lightning. It was as if a photoshoot was taking place above the clouds. As I was being discharged, all I could think about was that I had to see him again, and how he has to know what I just heard. Thinking about him, I began to feel groggy. I felt a little lightheaded as I rushed out of the hospital. After leaving the hospital, I quickly hailed a taxi and put in a request: “3 Thorn Lane, please.”

“Sure thing, miss,” the driver replied.

On the way to him, I thought about how we hadn’t spoken in three months. It had been a while since we had been together. He didn’t need me when he had his liquor. We weren’t always like this, though. There was something that kept us together, and always brought out our best qualities.

“That’s right,” I began to think, “there was her.”

Just as I began to think about her I was greeted with an intense headache. I grabbed my head in pain and looked out the car window. Standing on the sidewalk was the same girl in the white sundress, her jet-black hair covering her face.

“Why do I keep seeing you?” I whispered.

“What was that?” the driver asked.

“Nothing. I was just talking to myself.”

“Oh, okay. Anyway, we’re here. That’ll be—”

Before he could finish I pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to him. I hurried out of the cab, not even waiting for my change. And there I was, standing in the rain in front of his house.

The house itself had seen better days. The lawn was unkempt with grass reaching up to my waist. I made my way up the stairs and when I reached the door a fierce odor filled the air. The smell was so strong I thought I was approaching a landfill. I lifted my hand and knocked three times. Each knock only made my headache worse. No one answered, so I decided to jiggle the handle. To my surprise the door opened to reveal a mountain of garbage and empty liquor bottles. The rancid smell snuck into my nose and I quickly threw my arm over my face.

As I walked through the house, there were a lot of photos, many of which had someone torn out. I was making my way to the stairs, heading up to the second floor, when she appeared once more. The girl was standing at the top of the stairs with her face still covered. As I looked up at her, my head felt as though it was expanding, like it was about to split open. I slowly put one foot in front of the other and climbed the stairs, ignoring the girl.

Finally, at the top of the stairs, I trekked through the filth to the master bedroom, his room. I opened the door and found him passed out drunk on the floor at the foot of the bed. Infuriated at the sight of him, I began to shake him vigorously.

“Wake up! Wake up! LARSON, WAKE UP!” I yelled as my hand flew across his face.

“What? Oh, it’s just you,” he said with an annoyed look. “Why the fuck are you here?”

He put his back against the frame of the bed and I dropped to my knees to face him. “Larson, I need to talk to you about something very important.”

“Why should I listen to anything you have to say, when you’re the one who walked out on me, or did you forget that as well?”

“What do you mean? What did I forget?”

“I can’t believe this,” he said, a smirk on his face. “I can’t believe you forgot about her.”

“Are you talking about the girl with the black hair?” I clutched my head from the pain while trying to gather my memories.

“That’s right. How could you forget her, your own daughter, Lily.”

Lily, Lily, Lily. The name repeated over and over again in my head.

The girl appeared once more before me, standing right next to Larson. This time her face was fully visible, revealing a beautiful young girl with the widest smile. As if I were possessed, I lunged towards the figure, only to grasp air.

“That’s right, Lily,” I said to myself, lifting my hands from the floor. “How could I ever forget my own daughter?”

“You know, no one blames you,” Larson said. “No one could have predicted the truck driver falling asleep at the wheel.”

As soon as Larson spoke about the truck, I recalled that night as if it were yesterday. That evening Lily and I were on our way home after her soccer game. Larson couldn’t make it because he was preparing something special for our sixth wedding anniversary. I remember letting her sit in the front seat because her team won. We went out for ice cream, then on the way home a truck driver dozed off and struck the car on the passenger side. The tears began to flow from my eyes just as fluidly as the memories began to form. I remembered every birthday, Christmas, loose tooth, and doctor visit. I remembered having a daughter.

“You know, we both had our ways to cope with the stress,” Larson said. “I had my liquor, while you decided it would be better to move on.”

“Stress,” I thought to myself.

The word stress was like another trigger that reminded me of my sole purpose for being there. I wiped the tears from my face and looked Larson in the eyes. “I have something important to tell you,” I began, trying to look composed. “I just came from the hospital because I collapsed outside my building. From stress. While I was there, the doctor ran tests on me and found out something.” I hesitated.

“Well, out with it,” he said, growing increasingly more irritated with my presence.

“Larson, I’m three months pregnant.”

He looked at me as if it was the first time he’d ever seen me. His eyes wide and sparkling, tears ran down his face. He put his head in my lap, and in a bowing position he began to cry his heart out. Coming to Larson made me finally accept the fact that I had lost my baby girl. As I was finally coming to terms with Lily’s death, the apparition before me began to dissolve into light. At that moment it occurred to me that she was there to help me return to who I was, to help me become a mother once again.

SAND

Heated by the cool rays of the sun,
Then cooled and hardened by the waves,
Washing away the footprints of those who came before.
Sand.
Covered in rocks of all sizes,
Seaweed and twigs.
Seagulls blaring overhead
While hermit crabs fight over new shells.
The salty sea air kisses the inhabitants
Above abandoned glass bottles,
Shards of glass without
Hope, hidden beneath the
Sand.

LUNA POR AMOR

She was beautiful. A sight like no other. When sunlight shone upon her skin, she was kissed by the heavens. Looking up at her was all I looked forward to during the day, though I could only be blessed with her beauty at night. She shone brightest when the world was at its darkest.

Yes, the island my soul chose to dwell upon was also a blessing. The *flor de maga* always bloomed so beautifully around that time of year. The island would come alive with shades of pink, red, purple, orange, and yellow. Every lawn, every store parking lot, and the forested areas where the animals lived were smothered and sanctified with these lively flowers. Festivities were in constant swing and always appeared to brighten the island as people came out to celebrate with whomever was willing. My favorite festivity was *Congreso Mundial de la Salsa*, where people all over the island engaged in salsa dancing for about two weeks. I would fly above and see dancing competitions in the streets. That was always a fun and sentimental sight to see.

My home was nothing compared to her. Her. I would never sleep if She was out. Blinking was a sacrifice that I could barely manage. Many would ask if I ever grew tired of staring. I could never understand why they were not mesmerized by She. The way she glistened like a million diamonds struck by the sun—magnificent. And Her beauty never aged for she was in timeless motion. I adored Her every change but when she was in full guise I could appreciate detail without exception: every curve, crevice, and pore.

“I wouldn’t call it staring,” I would say. “I’m gazing.” But of course they didn’t appreciate Her as I did.

“Can you sleep with the rest of us? You know, for once!” a little bird asked me.

Marcos was a very small bird for his kind, an Amazonian parrot like me. His feathers were a brighter green but he carried softer reds and yellows around his scalp. I was an average bird; I didn’t stand out physically. But all the birds knew me for my alleged peculiar ways. I was young and misunderstood.

“And miss the most important part of my day? Well...night,” I replied.

“*Al garate*. I swear. I think you need a female in your life *mano*. There are plenty out there for you among the forest. Just take a look around. Open your beady eyes!”

He was right. Many of the females in the trees nearby could be considered potential mates of mine. The color of their feathers drew attention and their movements yelled invitation. But I couldn't be their mate because I didn't have room for another love.

Marcos's beak stayed wide open, waiting for me to immediately search for the feathery love of my life. His disappointment as he realized that this was not in my agenda is a crystal image imbedded in my memory. Yet it was nothing out of the ordinary. I was used to the sad look in their eyes, the eyes of my family, friends, and all the birds in Puerto Rico. I sometimes thought that animals of all shapes and sizes judged my nature.

“*Mano*, let's go *janguiar*. I'll make a deal. If you come hang out with me...”

Night had finally taken its full course and there She was. The most stunning sight there was to see. I believed that She appreciated my loyalty and affection for Her, but I was not sure if the feelings were mutual. My father was right about women being complicated creatures.

“So, what will it be *mano*?” Marcos asked.

I had forgotten he was speaking to me. “Sure, I guess?”

“Oh, you won't regret it!” He flapped his wings imprudently with a familiar excitement. I knew then that what I had foolishly and blindly agreed to was a bad idea. He flew away, humming his favorite song, “*Dos Gardenias*.” He told me he would come looking for me shortly. Whatever was coming for me, I was not mentally prepared.

I took a break from gazing at Her and looked down from the trees at the people and their celebrations. They were colorful people, beautiful human beings, rich in culture. They swarmed the streets and danced *plena y salsa* in vibrant clothing to the boom bam boom of the vivacious drum beats. Their smiles and laughter echoed a great distance; this gave me a warm—yet sweet—chill that ruffled my feathers.

I imagined how their lives must be, dancing carelessly with one another in a colorful night full of appreciation. I thought about what it might feel like to be part of a community, to feel wanted rather than disregarded as the weird one. I thought back to what Marcos had said about a female in my life. Maybe *that* was the key to simplicity and acceptance. Yet my heart was entirely Hers. She had all of me and I

wanted to believe that I had all of Her. But maybe I could be more open and give this—

“Faabbbiiiiiaaaaannnnnnnnn!” a familiar voice yelled out in the middle of my thoughts. I didn’t usually curse but there was always an occasion for it.

“¡Maldita sea la madre que te parió!”

“Fabian! I want you to meet someone,” Marcos said. “Fabian, this is Camila. Camila, this is Fabian! Okay, *adios!*”

And just like that he was gone. The inspiration of young love was a derivative of all the Latin soap operas Marcos would watch through living room windows.

“Um, hi,” Camila said.

“Hey.”

“You want to go for a fly?” she asked. “It’s a nice night.”

I looked up at the sky, as if asking for permission, from Her. After a moment of silence that seemed to be everlasting, I answered, “That sounds great. Let’s fly.”

And off we went, soaring above the treetops in pleasant flight. Some time passed in awkward silence and when we were far enough from all the loud celebrations, I could hear the rustle of feathers as we flapped our wings. I began to pay closer attention to Camila’s physique. I will not be deceitful and neglect to mention that Camila was in fact a beauty. Her feathers were a perfect shade of emerald green. The yellow feathers under her eyes looked as if they had been kissed by the sun. But what impressed me most was her understanding. Camila was the braver one to finally fill the emptiness of conversation.

“So, Marcos is something else, huh? Too much eavesdropping on those radio stations if you ask me,” she chuckled softly.

“Nope. I think he gets his ideas from those soap operas,” I said.

“You’re right. It’s both!”

We laughed and the awkwardness eased. We started to talk about the festival and expressed our appreciation for the colorful people.

“Yes, I love when they play that music. It makes my feathers rise up and I feel my head bop up and down on its own! I love it!” I said.

“Yeah, the rhythms are the best!” she said.

I noticed that she would look up at the sky from time to time and I wondered what she was so focused on. “What’s catching your eye, Camila?” I asked.

That’s when she spilled *los frijoles* about Him.

“He shines so beautifully as night falls. Like nothing I will ever see in my lifetime. I can never miss a night and if I ever were to, I would be devastated,” she said.

I didn’t realize it, but we had stopped flight and settled in a dry tree near some *flor de maga*. We continued the conversation with our heads tilted towards the night sky.

“I know *es raro*, but that’s just how I am. I wait for him to show his feelings for me too,” Camila confessed.

She said near exactly what I had been pondering in my mind for a long time. Believe me when I say how caught off-guard I was as she continued to confess what seemed like a secret that no other soul knew of. At that moment I thought to myself how amazing Marcos had done. I never had thought that someone would be in the same situation—and here she was.

“I understand,” I said.

And that was all I had to say, the conversation was carried no further. Looking back at that moment, I do not think that I had to say anything at all; it was clear we understood one another like no one else could ever. It was exquisite. Until dawn we gazed up at the sky, wing in wing, in an atmosphere neither of us had ever felt before. We became one, for she was in love with the North Star and I was in love with the Moon.

BE SMARTER, LITTLE SISTER

I don't usually do this, but...
Little sister, little sister,
Why do you talk to that man?
Knowing good and well that what he wants
Doesn't come in the form of a conversation,
Just a delivery wrapped in lace.
Little sister, little sister,
Don't be like the rest.
Don't fall for his tired lines or
Swoon over his saucy lyrics,
Because baby, you won't be the first,
Nor will you be the last.
Little sister, little sister,
Don't let that man play with your intelligence.
I know you feel something inside of you
Telling you that this is wrong,
Telling you he's full of shit,
So listen, sister, hear my plea.
I only want what's best for you.
That man ain't no good, and if you knew better,
You'd do better.
I just ask that you promise me this:
Next time, you'll be smarter.

SILVER BULLET

The more I drink, the less I think of you.
As I bring the glass to my lips,
It's like a gun down my throat.
The cold bullet zips down
And implodes in me,
Causing a state of looseness which isn't foreign to me,
And I can finally forget for a moment
What it feels like to have you in my arms,
A feeling that is unmatched.
The coldness in my bed brings to mind your absence,
The smell of your cologne on my sheets
A reminder of how quickly you cum and go,
The faint kiss on my lips
Left from your last haunting.
I can finally forget those late replies
And your disregard for my sanity,
But I don't want to forget.
But I *always* forgive.
This isn't a suicide, only an attempt.
I'm still trying to "give up your ghost,"
But like a fool, I'm still consumed by you.

EVERY OTHER NIXXA

He came with a plan:
Fuxk her
& Flee her,
Just like every other nixxa.

Play the game
Until he get the drawls,
Then dip,
Just like every other nixxa.

He was the epitome of a fuxk boy.
You know, the ones that know they look good:
waves as deep as any blue sea,
eyes as gray as a rainy day's sky,
& his teeth: bright, white, and blinding.

Kinda like his personality before he dipped.
Fuxk nixxa shit,
Just like every other nixxa.

But it didn't work out like that,
Not this time.

On the prowl for temporary love,
He found himself lost in her sea.
Shipwrecked by the storm of her eyes,
He needed her. That caught him by surprise!

He didn't know she had a plan of her own:
Make that nixxa love you,
Then leave him alone.

She took an oath after the last nixxa:
Never let a fuxk boy try to play you!
Get him before he gets you,
Just like every other nixxa.

The days for crying are over,
'Cause see,
The karma for a nixxa like him
Is a bitch like me.

THE SUBWAY

He hated the subway, yet everyday with street-scuffed shoes he took it, especially late at night on his way home. The screech of the trains seemed to hit a new pitch when it was dark out. Something about it stayed on his clothes, lingering far past his coat on the hook of his apartment door, far past the warmth of his girl, half-awake, waiting for him and breathing softly. He remembered the dirt-designed platforms that cluttered people, usually tired or in a rush. He was most often both. Every night the once-brightened graffiti hung dingy on walls that seemed to carry secrets. And the silence of the train was enough to remind you of the place you lived in, an odorous dark city, with every other streetlight blinking frantically.

“Where’d you go?”

Her voice struck him, softly though, as she snapped him from the void of his own mind and thoughts. He remembered she was draped over his chest like silk curtains and that she was in fact naked. He noticed the closeness of their complexions, a rich brown that lingered around black and came back peeking bronze. He noticed her, yet he said nothing close to it.

“I was just thinking.” He spoke quietly, the rumble of his own voice unconvincing. Clearly, something was being kept.

“About what?” She lifted her upper body this time. So they were eye-level. But the words drained from him in swift rivers and he could not speak to her, could not possibly explain to her. So in turn he crushed himself up and tied his tongue.

“I was just thinking, nothing big.” His eyes wandered to her. The weight of her. The weight of her thighs that were thick and delicate, of her hands that shifted when she touched his chest, of her breasts that hung like ripe mangos in damp sun, the weight of her eyes as she for a brief moment touched them to his. The weight of the world.

“You always do that,” she said half-heartedly, more hurt than angry.

He didn’t say anything. She resumed laying on his chest, not saying anything for a long time, so long his legs had become numb before she spoke.

“I just want to know you,” she whispered, more painfully this time and he felt it. He felt warm droplets on the hairs of his chest and seeping into his heart, only briefly.

“There’s nothing to know,” he said, and meant it. Because deep down he knew he could not share with her. He could not fabricate words that matched his insides. His arms tightened around her in an effort to comfort her, and most fretfully himself.

“Wouldn’t that mean that you aren’t here?” she asked.

“Yeah. Can you pass me my pants?”

He got up, lit the remaining piece of his spliff, and dressed. He left her with a kiss and a somber posture in the doorframe. Her perfect silhouette was draped in one of the silky robes. He felt her tears long after he stopped hearing them. She’d be all right tomorrow, he thought. She’s strong like that.

The subway was a mass of slow anxiety. There was always a chance to see something strange or sinister around this time of night. The windows were smudged with brown, making it hard to see out as the train moved through the city.

It’s cold tonight, he thought, pressing the folds of his heavy coat into himself. Cold, though he was warm inside, from thoughts of Raelle and his own frustration—frustration with himself and his choices. Such as the one he was making now.

He rode the train all the time, mostly for its intended purpose. But tonight he was looking for someone. Himself essentially. He noticed the clouds and their wispieness in the dark city sky. He looked at himself: the sharpness of his jaw that extended up into deep-set, angry brown eyes, the flatness of his nose, and the wildness of his breathing. He knew these features had belonged to someone, had been passed onto him by someone. He squirmed in his tennis shoes as that unanswerable identity swarmed him on those cold, hard, plastic subway seats.

He saw him sitting by himself a few seats over, burnt and brown, as his clothes consisted of only dark colors and dirt. A man of great extension sitting with hooded brown eyes and a perfectly pressed brown bag that outlined sin. The man breathed in deeply, as if detached from the rank smell of piss and sweat that cloaked the transit car. He had a swarm of black hair that clung tightly to his head, as if hiding his thoughts. Some days he mumbled to himself, other days he sat completely silent. But always a window seat, always on the left.

He watched for this man on every passing train, in every passing moment on the slick streets and railroads of the city. He watched him in an attempt to see some piece of himself, some piece of his own humanity. But this man was not human to him, was not clearly before him as a well-known acquaintance and confidante. This man sat merely feet from him and was his entire identity, the other half of his quiet war with himself. The war he lost over and over again to understand what exactly his place was.

He knew this man, covered in grime and indifference. He knew this man, a quiet replica of himself. He knew this man. Yet he knew none of his mannerisms or the reasons for his actions. He just watched him, seeking desperately, passionately, achingly, to get on with his life. Yet he couldn't because this man sat pityingly on the train, drinking cheap alcohol and giving up.

His fucking father.

The young man was in a rage, but he knew not what to say. He knew not what to ask, though the asking burned incessantly in his mind. He was a grown man caught up in the myth that his identity played no part in who he was. Yet here he was, shadowing the man who had made no attempt to knock on the door all those times in his youth. His absence had not made the feelings absent. It had just left him unable to place those feelings inside himself, unable to truly open up the wings of his chest and escape the dark cell of his lonely mind. He couldn't do anything but question, tug at the loose ends of his past to see whether the father remembered his son, or cared to note him. But he didn't speak for he was embarrassed of not knowing this man, or attempting to know this man, so essential to his understanding. He hung his head and lidded his own eyes to find the hands of darkness on his way home.

When he entered, he looked again for his herbs, crushing them under the cliffs of his fingers and twisting the paper with finesse. He felt conflicted. Should he call Raelle and give her another apology, promise his love and commitment? He contemplated not speaking to her at all in an effort to force her to accept him, accept his manhood and all the complications of it. In his conflict, he decided ignorance was best.

He called his mother. He knew she was awake despite the late hour. "I went to see him again," he said when she answered.

"You must stop this, Ivan." Her voice was concerned and weary, tired of this topic and the emotional clean-up that always followed. She had said his full name, which irritated him. It was condescending.

“Stop what? He is my father.”

“Not anymore.” She said this, but it did not change anything; it did not change his identity or his ties to him. It meant nothing because she had renounced him, it meant nothing that he had renounced himself. He was still there and he had still created him.

He was angry again.

“I’ll talk to you later.” He hung up, not bothering to argue. He wanted to know where his destiny lay. If his father did not exist, how could he, in turn, exist?

Days passed until he saw his father again. He had searched on the trains and in the late-night city hustle, but had not seen that movement in the crowd he remembered.

It was Sunday night and he was riding the train. He was in a good mood for once, smiling to himself at thoughts of Raelle, the woman who was working to make him happy.

He noticed him, because he had been watching Ivan. With grime and glee, he smiled a big toothless grin from across the aisle. “Aren’t you my boy?” he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, excitedly beaming from ear to ear.

Ivan was startled, almost surprised to be called out so blatantly, so publicly when he had been stalking this very man for months.

He cleared his throat, as onlookers began to look at him speculatively. “No. I don’t think so, sir.” He averted his eyes from everyone but his own reflection in the window.

The man frowned, his face in deep concentration, calculation across his brow. “I was sure you were,” he trailed off, shrugging. He returned to that pressed brown bag and silhouette of sin.

In that moment, as he watched this figure caked in grime and hysteria, the young man melted away from his father. He shed himself of the man. In the moments up until they had spoken, his father had been mighty. He resembled Ivan but had come from another place and had passed through many different seasons of feeling and suffering. The father had never known the son, and in turn the son had never known the father.

Just another man on the subway.

He dialed Raelle shortly after, telling her, “I’m on my way home.”

BLOOD AIN'T THICK

Most learn that blood is thicker than water,
Never reminded that it's still a liquid,
Which is why some families never remain solid,
Parted like red seas.

Most divisions start with absentee fathers
Who once kissed moms into sunsets then
Treated them like acid rain—
Painful growth. Not watering seeds
Explains why trying to bond with siblings
That don't want to be touched is
Exhausting. The roots are too weak.
Nothing ever grows out of papa's rolling stone.
We stretch like clay but would rather
Break someone else than take
The chance of breaking ourselves.

And the only way to find peace
Is to agree to be broken into pieces,
To hear stories stemming
From faulty research,
To listen to the bullshit lie
(From siblings who have no
Intention of following through)
That one day we'll all meet.

Actually makes one miss the days
When rejection was blatant,
When it wasn't hidden behind
Short calls and "Let's catch up" texts,
When invites were answered
With a "No" and not a "We'll see."

Bite me!
I can still bleed, still feel.
But your stabs in the back

Are no longer worthy,
Your slaps in the face are too weak.
Our blood ain't thick.
It's watered-down after all that
Beating around the bush.
Like leeches, ya'll can take the rest.
I'm done.

Donald Allen

HAIKU

I'm a nasty dawg,
The nastiest of them all,
But that's my downfall.

