

SIMBAA

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Department of Languages and Literature

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WINNERS

2021 Poet Laureate Contest

First Place // Gianna Moon, “In the Morning”

Second Place // Giovanni Casson, “Uncle Sam, Did You Love Me?”

Third Place // Tiffany Ashwood, “Where I’m From”

6th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Place >> Serene Watts, “Self-Reflection”

Second Place >> Janelle Castellon, “The Pinata’s Turn”

Third Place >> Gianna Moon, “A Certain Mystique”

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THE PLIGHT OF A NATION WITHIN A NATION

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are a rare possibility for me,
In a country where I'm supposed innocent until proven guilty,
Though in fact, it is the exact opposite in almost every case—
Everyone ought to know that guilty doesn't mean a black face.
Black people have been beaten, raped, and brutalized
So that white America could be immortalized,
And somehow we continue to rise.
We are flourishing and thriving,
While inhabiting a country we were never meant to survive in.
Black people have bled for this nation,
Yet it's absurd when we demand liberation.
From its oppressive sensations that we were forcefully placed in,
Our eyes become accustomed to the violence we see,
And it's up to nobody but us to heal the country.

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE

As my vision snaps back to me,

Submitting to the mirror,

I look at the woman who is the most desirable.

I use the cream of the tiring work of our sisters:

Blood, sweat, and tears – all hard work.

I take the soft glaciers of my locks by the power of my hands

And part them in the middle as the red sea.

I massage my valleys, focusing on the rhythm

Of my fingers going through the strands of my locks.

I think about the long path our sisters have taken.

We are because they were.

Every strand reflects every chocolate-skinned woman on earth.

And we say, we did it, and we're still striving and thriving.

THE WOMAN BEYOND THE MOON

All she thought about were the good times.

And bad times.

There was no in-between.

Two extremes.

All the bad and all the good intertwined like the invasive Kudzu,

Lining the trees of the east-coast highways.

Without help, there was no separation between the two,

And the trees, soon to be lost, were taken over.

But was it over?

It was a constant back-and-forth,

Like two personalities fighting over who got to be the primary,

The face of the body they inhabited.

And the individual just standing by, watching.

Her mind was torn over what was and what wasn't,

And only she could decipher.

But decipher what?

Her pain or her happiness?

The truth or the lies?

His words or his actions?

What!

Like the World Wars re-enacted at the same time on a single stage,

Exploding,

Bloody,

Chaos.

The good and the bad struggled for power,

Every little thing examined and placed.

I love you, he said, over and over again,

Until he realized that those words

No longer meant anything to her.

She became desensitized to his words

After all the lies and fabrications to keep her

From knowing the truth turned into daily language.

I care about you.

I want you.

I wouldn't do anything to hurt you.

I wouldn't lie.

The words were like a bag in the wind: empty.

She tried to find the why.

Why did he hurt her so many times,

Willingly sacrificing the kingdom they were building together?

She was done fighting for them,

Done trying to understand him and his reasoning,

Done putting aside her worth to supplement his ego.

Like a dying ember,

Her patience faded into a ghost,

Yet a small voice kept saying,

Is it over?

She didn't know.

Strength!

It lacked to the point of no return.

Then again, she was strong enough to leave the first time.

The thought engulfed her like fire because...

...their forever didn't last very long.

But could it start again?

No one would ever know if the Big Bang happened once before.

Stop!

This hopeful thinking could stunt her personal growth.

A little hope was okay, but it should never

Surpass what is warranted.

She needed to make sure the Kudzu vines

Did not cover more than they should.

What a journey this was to be.

At least she was finally beginning to realize

She was worth more than what was beyond the moon.

And yet, she catered to what she didn't deserve.

SELF-REFLECTION

She sat on the edge of her bed. Her hands were trembling, her heart was racing, and her breathing was uncontrollable. As she looked up from the foreign object in her hand, she caught a brief look at herself in the mirror. She was always told that she looked so mature for her age, and that she carried herself as if she was. She was often mistaken for 21 instead of only 17. Her face was slim and her eyes held no trace of innocence, as if she'd seen things, things that made her grow up fast, too fast. She had a nice hourglass shape and her coily hair was cut short, adding to her more mature look. But now, as she looked at herself in the mirror, she saw a child, a scared, tiny child. Her tears by now had dried up. The only evidence that she had been crying were her red, puffy eyes.

She felt the heat of his body as he sat beside her, unmoving. They'd only been dating for six months, and yet they were stuck in a situation that bound them for a lifetime.

Not even a week ago, in this same room, they were laughing and fooling around. Erica's mind drifted back to that day. Back then, her small room felt so full of life. Instead of them sitting rigidly on the bed, as they were now, they were both comfortably plopped in the middle of it, their bodies still intertwined. He had been coming over to "study" every day for the past week.

"What are we?" she had asked him, as the laughing had simmered down.

Daren was a big guy. He stood 6' 4" and had very broad shoulders. The combination of his small, dark-brown eyes, round, full lips, and the beginning traces of a full beard made him the type of man you couldn't take your eyes off, not that you'd even want to. His smile was intoxicating, as it blinded you with the whitest and straightest teeth you'd ever seen. But when she had asked him that question, his charming smile was nowhere to be found. He looked at her and then turned to the wall. It was covered with strings of lights and pictures that she had taken over the years.

"Erica," he said, "it's only been a couple months. Look, this is fun, but it's way too early to put a label on it. We're having fun, right? Still just getting a feel for things."

They'd had this talk more than once and every time he did his best to avoid it.

"Okay," she said, "I get it. I'm moving too fast. It's not like you're putting a baby in me any time soon," she said jokingly. But as soon as she said it, she regretted it. She saw his face turn cold and it looked as if the life was sucked out of him.

"That's not funny," he said. He turned away from her wall of lights and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He looked big and tough, almost like his father.

Erica came back to herself and tried to refocus her mind on the current situation and not the past. She noticed the complete shift of energy in her room. Everything appeared duller. Well, this isn't fun anymore, she thought. She carefully looked at Daren, but he wasn't meeting her gaze. She couldn't tell what he was looking at or what he was thinking. His stare was just blank, and it started to scare her a little bit.

Daren was also having trouble focusing on the current situation. His eyes were open, but they were unable to focus or really see anything in front of him. He couldn't help but think back to the very first time they had met.

When Daren first saw her that day at the mall, he was drawn in by her body. It was nice, to say the least. Everything sat where it should sit, and her jeans hugged her in ways that left little to the imagination. He had come to the mall with his friends simply because he had nothing better to do, but after seeing her, the hour-long drive in his friend's cramped car was definitely worth it. She was laughing with her friends on the other side of the fountain that separated them. He walked over to her in a confident stride. He felt the calculating stares of his friends as they closely watched him.

"Hey," he said. "I'm Daren."

He liked how she had to tilt her head almost all the way back to meet his gaze. From the moment she parted her lips into a huge smile to the moment she gave him her number, he knew he had her wrapped around his finger.

Erica had never experienced a situation where a man had left her speechless. It was usually the men fumbling over their words as her unwavering and piercing eyes left them weak, but with Daren, something was different. She admired the confident way in which he carried himself, and how he had to look down on her.

It didn't make her feel tiny or helpless, but rather like she was the most important thing to him at that moment.

And she was. Daren never expected that meeting her would surpass the first time they took it all the way. This wasn't supposed to be the plan. This was new and strange to him.

Now, as he sat on the edge of her tiny bed, in her tiny room, and looked at himself in that same mirror, he looked just as tiny as everything else.

She had called him about an hour ago, saying that she had something important to tell him and that it had to be in person. Since he had arrived, no words had been spoken between the two. He had opened her squeaky bedroom door and saw her sitting on her bed, staring blankly at her hands. When he noticed the object she was holding, a shiver went through his body and he slowly sat down next to her.

"It's positive," she finally said, after what felt like hours of silence. The tears began welling up in her eyes once again.

"How is that possible?" he asked. What a stupid question to ask, he thought.

"That's a stupid question to ask," she said solemnly.

He nervously began to fidget with his fingers and felt like he was sinking even deeper into her bed. She let out a strange, squeaky noise as she struggled to keep her sobbing under control. What a mess, she thought. What are we supposed to do?

He sat there, unsure of everything. He figured that he should hug her or tell her that everything was going to be okay, but he remained there, frozen.

"We're just kids," she said. She knew it was too soon, but she loved him and was scared that this would have him running for the hills. "Daren, are you going to leave?" she asked him quietly.

The question hung in the air for a couple of seconds. He wasn't going to tell her this, but he loved her, too. That's probably what scared him the most, and why he was never able to have that "What are we?" conversation with her.

"No," he said, after a few moments. "I'm not leaving you. I'm staying right here. It's better to have two of us dealing with this than just one, right?" He surprised himself with how easy it was for him to commit to that lifelong decision. They sat there together, looking at their reflections in the mirror. He grabbed her hand and suddenly everything felt calm and steady.

Daren suddenly jolted up out of his sleep. The room was dark and quiet. In his head he knew the room was cold, but his body felt hot and his hands were clammy. It took a minute for his body and his mind to come back together. He realized he wasn't in his own bed; he wasn't even in his own room. He turned over and saw Erica sleeping beside him, curled up in a fetal position. He carefully slid his arm from under her head and quietly made his way into her bathroom with his phone in his hand. He didn't want to accidentally run into her mother, who probably thought he had left hours ago. He wondered if her mother even knew what was going on.

The light in the bathroom was blinding, and his eyes were the last part of him to get adjusted to this sudden jolt into consciousness. He looked at his phone, first seeing that it was four in the morning, and then, as his eyes travelled lower down his phone, that he had five missed calls from his dad.

"Shit," he quietly whispered. He quickly texted his father to let him know where he was and hoped that was enough for him to not lash out when he returned home. He set his phone down and splashed his face with cold water. He let his hands fall to clutch either side of the sink as his head hung low. After taking a few deep breaths, he finally met his own gaze in the mirror. Though his body was slightly hunched, he still towered over everything in her tiny bathroom. The toilet and countertop barely passed his waist. He couldn't even stand up straight without hitting his head on the ceiling. The longer he stared at himself in the mirror, the more his face became distorted, until he didn't even recognize the man staring back at him. Everything began to blur together. He couldn't define where his nose started or where his lips began; it was all just a blurry mess of a man.

His mind drifted back to all the promises and plans for the future that he and Erica had talked about after he had grabbed her hand earlier. He talked of being there for every doctor's appointment, every birthing class, how they'd name the baby Jazmine if it was a girl and Jabril if it was a boy. He had even mentioned marriage. Everything had happened so fast, and it wasn't until now that he remembered everything that he had promised her. How could he promise all those things when he couldn't even look her in the eyes and tell her he loved her? His head began to spin, and he knew he had to get out of this confining space. As he stumbled

out of the bathroom, he locked eyes with Erica.

She was now sitting up in her bed with her covers wrapped around her. She couldn't see his face too clearly, but the tears welling up in his eyes glistened in the low light. A cold fear ran over her body and tears stung the back of her eyes as she felt his unwavering stare piercing into her. She was so tired of crying and being tossed and turned by these waves of emotions. She felt like she was drowning, and right now she was struggling to catch her breath.

"Are you leaving?" she asked. The weight of this repeated question got heavier every time she asked it.

Daren let out an exasperated sigh and took a few steps closer to her. He opened his mouth to speak, but his mind and physical body lost touch once again and he stood there frozen.

"I love you," she blurted out. Her heart was racing but she knew that she had to say it. "I don't know when it happened, but it did, and I know that everything feels like it's happening so fast and I know that we're only 17, but it's true." She opened her mouth to continue, but the look on his face stopped her cold. His eyes were barely open, as if he hadn't the energy to hold his eyelids up, and his lips were pressed together so tightly that they could no longer be seen. She quickly bit her lips and turned her eyes away from him.

Hearing those words sputter from her lips made his heart flutter, but judging from how quickly she had stopped talking, his face must not have matched the warm feeling those words had brought. However, the uncertainty and fear of expressing vulnerability just wouldn't let him speak his own truth. Instead, he said, "I care about you a lot, but I'm tired, and this is just a lot right now. We can talk about it later."

Erica couldn't believe that she had just poured her heart out and that was all he had to say. That was not the response she expected or wanted at all. She wanted him to rush over, engulf her in his arms, and tell her that he loved her with everything in him. But he just stood there in the doorway. For a second, she wanted to punch him just to see if he was capable of feeling anything. I'm carrying his *baby*, she thought.

He slowly crawled back into the bed and drew her close to him. She reluctantly let her body go limp, not exactly fighting him, but not necessarily making it easy for him to pull her in, either. She felt the warmth of his chest and almost wanted to

slap herself for how she naturally sunk deeper into him. They lay there in silence, Erica hating herself for the words she had spoken, Daren hating himself for the words he had not, and the mirror above the dresser capturing everything for what it truly was. Together in the dark, their bodies almost appeared as one. The separation between big and small, child and adult, scared and brave, man and woman—it became indistinguishable in the mirror. In that moment, they simply just were.

DISTANT LOVE

Days like these, I wish you were here,
when I'm feeling down and out of space.
And I wonder all the time what you think of me now.
Are you disappointed?
You think I'm lost?
Am I becoming the woman I'm supposed to be?
Or is something holding me back?
Only you and god know the answer to that.

I don't know what my calling is,
and I don't know if I have a passion.
You probably know more about me than I do.
You already see my future,
and I'm afraid,
because I see no future.
Is it fame, happiness, money?
Or is it depression, loneliness, regret?
I'm not sure,
and I don't think I'll ever have the answer.

God creates a new path for me every day.
He controls my life story,
and sadly, you weren't a part of that story.

I wish you could be here,
to be next to me physically,
to watch me grow.
Hold me on my bad days,
when I have no energy to be myself.
Smile with me on my good ones,
when everything seems to make me laugh,
to experience a father's love.

I miss you.
I want to go home with you.
I wish you could come back home to me.
Help guide me.
Maybe I'd be a better person.
It would be easier to find love,
easier to show affection.
I would be happy.

One day we'll be reunited again and start off where we finished.
I won't have to love you from a distance.

HOMEGOING

It rained every day that you were gone,
On my face and on the earth.
I watched you go,
And still I saw you every place I went.
You were in the sky, on the page,
And even in the mirror when I walked by,
But I looked away all the same.

Honeysuckle sweet and sandpaper rough was the voice of you,
Drawn as the pen to paper was the face of you.
Saturday night isn't right without the swing music on TV,
Or the left hook saved just for me.

I told your name on the mountain of tears,
Built the bridge and came to you.
Lips pressed to your forehead, I parted,
And the world made peace with the space between us.
Not goodbye,
But until we meet again.

IN THE MORNING

Our love is sunlight through the curtains,
Kind as a kiss,
Warm and inviting on your face.

Sunbeams from you to me,
Staring across
One end of the world to the other.

Dappled light in your eyes,
Soft palms and silken hair,
All the wonders of being with you.

—*Gianna Moon*

GRATITUDE

It's there for you after a family dinner,
Or tucked in a blanket to get warmer.
Some sips while sitting by the window quietly,
Or while watching a movie.

One, two, three cups, and many other ways,
Morning, lunch, evening replays,
After long and stressful days,
Swooped in ordinary details.

It gives you comfort
When you've been through a lot;
And it gives you warmth and peace,
To know you can always count on this.

It's reassuring, it's serenity,
It's sweet, creamy, sugary,
Knowing that some people are there for you,
Just like a cup of tea would.

THE MIDDLE

I am from the protection of the Alpine mountains,
And the lively rhythm of the city.
I am from this in-between and grew up in the middle.
In the middle of an older sister
And a little sister.
In the middle of a French mother
And an Algerian father.
I am from this in-between of two cultural identities,
Forever leaving me wondering which one to follow and how to be.
I am from long car rides and reading corners,
From the comfort and escapism only words can offer,
A borrowed space where we are all invited,
A validation that I pursued in Lyon.
I am from contradictions.
I am from an endless yearning for movement;
It creates damage in my head, but change is a constant.
It is what kept me walking,
And what pushed me forward,
What kept me growing,
And birthed resilience inward.

—*Anissa Bounouara*

THE END OF THE ROAD

Saturday's the day of the Battleground Rap League, where all unknown rappers get the opportunity to display their skills in front of a live audience. The League is where many young artists go to get exposure and try to impress mainstream rappers and producers. This helps artists get a jumpstart to their careers.

Ezekiel Jackson was a four-star recruit coming out of Archbishop Carroll, where he was the Philadelphia Catholic League MVP three times and a four-time, first-team All-Catholic player. He decided to go to UCLA because his favorite basketball player, Jrue Holiday, went there. He was awarded a full-ride and averaged 18.3 ppg in his freshman year, but at 19-years-old he dropped out of UCLA to pursue his dream of becoming a famous rapper.

Zeke has known about the rap league since he was a freshman in high school. He was introduced to the League by his long-time friend, Tyler Murray, when they both attended an event in their hometown of Philadelphia. This Saturday is the first time that the rap league is returning to Philadelphia, and Zeke is excited about going out there and proving to himself that he made the right decision when he dropped out of college.

Wednesday

With the battle just three days away, Zeke is starting to get anxious, as he doesn't have anything written down. This is starting to make him a nervous wreck.

"Bro, I'm really starting to freak out," Zeke says to Tyler.

"Listen, man, you got three days until that jawn happen. All you gotta' do is relax, take ya' time, and write some hot shit down like I know you can."

"Bro, it's not that easy. It ain't the same feeling as shooting a free-throw in front of 30,000 fans screaming you suck."

"But it *is* like going into enemy territory and dropping 40 points to get the dub, like you did against the Wildcats."

"Shit, ain't the same though, bro. I don't know. I'm just nervous for real."

"All right, how 'bout this: let's go get some food and we'll get back to it later."

As Zeke and Tyler make their way to get some food, they pass a flyer that has been recently stapled to a telephone pole. Tyler takes notice.

“Yo, Zeke, you might wanna’ check this out.”

“Aw shit. You gotta’ be kidding me.”

The flyer shows that there is a cash prize of \$5,000 for the best performer at the Rap League. This is the first time the League has decided to give out a cash prize. This adds pressure to Zeke, whose anxiety is now starting to get the best of him. Tyler tries his best to get Zeke to relax, but Tyler has other obligations to attend to.

“I’m bouta’ dip, bro. Gotta’ go handle some business real quick.”

“Come on, Tyler. You need to stop hanging around those guys, bro. They ain’t nothin’ but bad news.”

“I hear you, bro. I promise imma’ stop soon. I’ll hit you up later tonight. We’re gonna’ start working on ya’ lyrics.”

“Ard, bro. Be careful out there, man, and please stop hanging around them.”

“Bro, I promise. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As Tyler walks off, Zeke heads home with his burger and fries, silently praying that Tyler will be okay. Back in high school, both Tyler and Zeke were teammates on the basketball team, and this is where their friendship began. Tyler grew up in the street life, seeing gangs run in and out of his neighborhood, and was very close to some members of the Bloods. Although Tyler was a highly recruited player his junior year, he was kicked off the team for bringing gang members to school to beat up a student that was bullying someone. After his dismissal from the team, Tyler became a member of the Bloods, and following the death of his mother, Tyler looked to them as the only family he had.

Thursday

As another warm spring day gives life to the people in Philly, Zeke wakes up with a somewhat dead feeling, knowing that he didn’t hear from Tyler the night before. Zeke is worried about Tyler, but he knows he has to focus on getting his lyrics ready. He takes a walk around his neighborhood with his headphones in, listening to plenty of instrumentals and trying to put the right words together. Just as he’s finishing up the first verse, his phone rings. It’s Tyler.

“Damn, bro. Where you been? Thought you was gonna’ hit me up last night. What happened?”

“Bro, I’ll explain everything when I see you. I’m in bad, bro, like real shit. I really messed up.”

“Yo, relax. Meet me at my crib. I finally think I got some lyrics and I want you to hear them.”

“Ard, bro. I’m on my way. But like I really messed up. I’ll tell you when I see you.”

Zeke makes his way back to his house. Since his grandparents aren’t home, Zeke can play instrumentals through the speaker. As the music plays, Zeke hears banging on his door, as if the police are looking for him. Zeke runs down to the door to see who it is. He looks through the peephole and sees it’s Tyler. Zeke opens the door and Tyler bursts through as if he’s taking off for a relay race.

“Damn, bro. What you runnin’ from—ya’ chick?”

“Naw, bro. I messed up with my gang, man. I should’ve listened to you a long time ago.”

“Woah, woah. Relax, bro. What happened?”

“They sent me to off this guy from the Latin Kings, except I missed the shot. Now we got beef with them and they seen my face, so I know they gonna’ send someone after me.”

“WTF, bro. I been told you to stop being around them. I knew some shit like this would happen.”

“I know, bro. I know I messed up. Can I stay here for a little bit? They know the area I’m from. Just until this settles down some.”

“Ard, bro. You already know you’re welcome here. Now help me out with these lyrics. I think I got something.”

Zeke and Tyler spend the rest of the day working on Zeke’s lyrics, getting them ready for Saturday.

“Play the beat I just sent you by Drake,” Zeke tells Tyler. “That’s my favorite one.”

“Do Not Disturb” drops and Zeke begins to rap what he has so far. Starting off, he gets nervous. But as he continues, he becomes more comfortable with what he’s saying:

Broad and Vine

Heading up there e’rday was like a 9 to 5

Them cafe lunches used to always get me sick

That lil’ flower shorty tried to get me hit

Then we had our sister school, they was somewhat cool

That lady Jordan used to put me in my fucking mood

*Everyday all the time used to do the most
Thinking I was first class I was riding coach
Played me like a violin, damn I was a fool
When I sit and think about it, it was kinda' true
I swear to god that my mind be playing tricks on me
My pride and dignity is what you'll never take from me
High school taught me many things that I didn't know
I was done with getting kicked like I was fucking snow
How I lose both of y'all over the same thing
I was blamed by both of y'all, that's a damn shame
Tryna' discipline me but u not my mom
So what the hell made you think that we could go to prom?
I'm glad that we fell off, you made that clear to me
I was sentenced for life, but now you let me free
Now you got me flying high I'm feeling like a bird
And you the dirt in the ground living with the worms*

With each bar he says, Tyler is in the background hyping him up, letting him know he's killing it. Zeke finishes his rap and begins panting, just waiting for a response from Tyler on how he did.

“THIS IS WHAT YOU NEED TO DO ON SATURDAY! I've never seen you so poised when you rap. You got this, bro. We gonna' practice again tomorrow.”

Friday

Zeke has committed this day to making sure he is well-rested and well-prepared for his opportunity of a lifetime tomorrow night. He goes into the guest room to mess with Tyler, but instead he finds a note on the bed, which reads: *Sup, bro. Had to step out for a little bit. Auntie having a little get together, but imma' be back around there when I'm done hanging wit' her. Remember to keep practicing ya' lyrics. You gonna' be ready for tomorrow. Peace.*

Since Zeke is home alone, he decides to lay low and relax. He spends the morning rolling and smoking some blunts while reciting his lyrics. It turns into a very slow day. The sun is out, but it is very quiet in Zeke's neighborhood. Later, he takes a trip to surprise Tyler at his aunt's house. He walks up to the door and rings the doorbell.

“Ezekiel? Is that really you?” says Tyler's Aunt Brenda.

“Hey, Aunt Brenda, can I come in?”

“Sure, sweetie. What brings you around here?”

“Nothing, really. I heard Tyler was coming over and I was bored at home, so I decided to come over.”

“Tyler’s coming? He usually calls me when he comes over here, but I ain’t get a message from him all day.”

“Wait—if he’s not here, then where did he go?”

Zeke and Aunt Brenda ponder the question, then Zeke leaves and heads back home. The nervousness about Tyler slowly comes back to him. The worry starts to take over as he tries to contact Tyler through texts and calls. He gets no answer, and this makes Zeke feel overwhelmed. The sun begins to set and he knows he must get his rest for his big day tomorrow. Zeke prays that everything is okay with Tyler before he lies down to sleep.

Saturday

“This is it. The big day is finally here.”

There isn’t a sense of excitement in Zeke’s voice, but a sense of calm, as if the world and time itself have stopped moving. The outside world is another sunny spring day, but Zeke’s world is gray, no emotion, no feeling. The confidence that Zeke had on Thursday when he practiced with Tyler has gone out the window.

All contestants for the Rap League had to be at the arena by 5 p.m. As Zeke begins his long walk to the arena, his world still feels numb, since he still hasn’t heard from Tyler. The look on Zeke’s face isn’t one of nervousness; it’s the face of one who doesn’t know how to feel. Zeke arrives at the arena and his phone dings. He takes out his phone and a smile breaks across his face. It’s a message from Tyler: *I’m on my way to the arena now.*

Zeke puts his headphones in to block out the outside noise of the audience entering the arena, and to help block the nervousness that he is starting to feel. The arena is nearly full, the contestants are all on the stage, but Zeke, while definitely feeling the pressure, is more confident than ever about his rap. Participants walk up, spit their raps, and go back to stand in a semi-circle with the rest of the contestants. Finally, it is Zeke’s turn, but right before he steps up to the mic, another buzz hits his phone. Again, it’s Tyler: *I’m here, bro. Knock ’em dead, my boy.*

Zeke, who throws up a little bit on the inside, is about to prove to himself and everyone else that he can rap—until an announcement is made.

“Attention, everyone. The arena is on lockdown right now. We just received word of a shooting that happened right outside the arena.”

Zeke's eyes shoot wide open and he runs for the entrance. At the front door, he is blinded by red and blue lights and deafened by police officers telling him to stand back. Zeke can do nothing more than sit down on the sidewalk and look up to the sky, as he knows this could possibly be the end of the road.

FLOWERS IN THE ASHES

The world in my eyes—
It is a scary place out there,
But there is also exquisite beauty.
Benevolence—
It shows in the people that you would never expect it from,
And pocket-sized acts of kindness can change a person's life,
Forever.
In a world of ash and gray,
A flower is not granted a life.
But when it is provided sunlight and water,
It has a chance.
For every act of gentleness,
A flower may blossom,
A soul can learn the art of graciousness.
Yes, the world is a scary place,
And though all the world is not covered with flowers,
At least we have enough people
To make a garden.

DEAR WEEPING WILLOW

You have brought me solace,
A true escape from this crumbling world,
Where I spent many days and many nights alone,
Tears falling onto my pillow.
A thinking place, a space to define clarity;
A resting place, where my thoughts aren't running rampant in my head;
My safe place, my haven.
Your branches, like human arms, surround me
In a warm embrace, this feeling everlasting.
My fortress.
My thoughts,
My fears,
My Everything—
Protected by you.

But tonight it's something new.
I'd never compared you to sadness
Until I saw how the moonlight made you blue.
Your roots, still deep-seeded, but the cold chipped away at you.
Your leaves, shaking loose of your branches, stripping you
Bare and naked.
Your trunk growing weak tonight,
Ready to fall to a lumberjack swinging his axe at you.
Rain running down into your roots like
Tears from a crying face.

So, I'm not going anywhere, Willow.
We need each other, Willow.
I'll be sunshine when there is rain.
I'll shoo away the birds when they pick at you like loose scraps.
You see, we are each other's constant.
Both giving and receiving,
Love and Safety.
Always,
Your Truest Friend.

—Ayana Harris

DOLLMAKERS

Crafted on delicate details, like intricate papers, deeds, and two rings,
Raised up to symbolize duty, stark beauty, and feminine things.
Two greedy eyes size me up, while four scowl and stare.
Oh, how two mouths always haunt me! When open in prayer, I sit in despair.

Where is the fruit of our labor?
What is the root of our disdain?
She is not in the light or our favor.
Our clients want dolls without stain.

The ungrateful doll so undeserving.
Don't make her aware. Don't make her aware!
She is not a model worth buying.
Please, grant her repair! Don't make her aware!

Heavy and hard to maneuver,
Damaged by falling from height,
Painted far darker than others,
This doll's lifeless eyes gleam with spite.

This ungrateful doll so undeserving.
Don't make her aware. Don't make her aware!
She is not a model worth buying.
Please, grant her repair! Don't make her aware!

A CERTAIN MYSTIQUE

The rain poured.

From her head to her toes, she felt pain. The heat was leached from her body and sucked into the ground where all the garbage and grime of the alley lay. The woman's body seized with a wet cough, limbs heavy with the same pain that put her down.

As black filled her vision, she had one thought: *What am I doing here?*

72 Hours Earlier

"Baines!"

Valerie jumped in her seat, knocking papers off her desk in her surprised state.

"Yes, Mr. Miller?" The woman looked up from her desk, adjusting herself as if nothing happened.

"Where's that cup of coffee I asked for?" Bob Miller demanded, sweeping across the room, grabbing at everything and nothing, as if knowing what he was looking for and not.

Valerie plucked one of the file folders from her desk and offered it to her boss. "Brewing, sir."

He snatched the file from her hands, mouth curled into a frown. "Can the smart talk, sweetheart. I don't pay you for that."

You barely pay me at all.

She fancied she could be as good a detective as stately old Bob Miller, with his stupid hats and bottomless cups of black coffee. Hardboiled detective? More like a great big helping of hardtack on a cold day. However, at 26-years-old and five feet tall, the sad truth was that a trilby and a cup of joe wouldn't do her much good, and neither would her degree in criminal justice. One look at her was all it took to land her under the employ of the private investigator who made her life equal parts interesting and exceedingly difficult.

"It'll be ready in a few ticks. Have a muffin in the meantime."

"Heh, I'm not so easily bribed." But still he shuffled over to the plate of sweets.

"That doesn't mean I can't try," Valerie chirped, picking up the papers and arranging them on her desk. She tapped away at her letters, watching her boss carefully for the next part of their daily routine.

“Quit starin’ at me like that. I’ll give you the skinny on this case when I’ve had my morning coffee.”

“Whatever you say, sir.” She said this as if she agreed, but if the hard click of the keys on her typewriter was anything to go by, she was definitely waiting for him to hop to it.

Bob sighed. “It’s a buddy of mine, Eddie Fong. His daughter thinks that somebody’s got a hit out on him.”

“Why does she think that?”

“Well, the mail’s been pretty nasty. There’s also been a few bricks with notes through the window.”

“You sound like you don’t believe her.”

“Well, I don’t. The girl’s a bit of an airhead, a good daughter, but she’s a penny short of a nickel if I ever seen it.”

Val pursed her lips. “But you’re still taking the case?”

“Y’know, she’s got him wrapped around her finger, daddy’s little girl and all. Figures that if he can ease her worries without digging in his pockets too deep then it can’t be much trouble to come in and see an old friend. He’s a good man. Met him in ’42 during Stalingrad. Saved my butt a few times. Then he did everything he said he was gonna’ do when he got back to the States. Owns a fifth of all the property downtown.”

“Wow.”

“Now, if yer done prodding me, can you get me that coffee I asked for? I can’t run on muffins, Miss Baines. I ain’t made of the same sweet stuff as those hippies at Berkley. Just put it on my desk. I’m gonna’ sort through those files.”

At that very moment, an older Chinese man and a younger woman stormed through the doors, arguing in what Valerie assumed was Cantonese. She had seen *The Chinese Connection* enough times to know that there was a difference, eight tones worth. The woman was clad in silk, her lips done in an exquisite shade of red and her dark hair coiled around her shoulders. She had a certain mystique, the sort of beauty that didn’t so much supersede her own as it carved out a space in a completely different category. Valerie Baines was all polyester and velvet, her fro woven tight into a bun at the back of her skull and make-up done in a way that invited a “Good day, Miss,” and a little more if the fella was trying to play Casanova and put the moves on her. She was a stone-cold fox in her own right, make no mistake about that.

Valerie clasped her hands together on the desk, offering a smile to the newcomers. “Bird’s Eye Investigations, how may I help you?”

“Is Robert in?” the man asked with a sniff. The woman at his side crossed her arms and huffed, looking around the office.

“He’s in his office. He’ll be right with you, Mr...”

“Fong. This is my daughter, Florence.” He gestured politely to the woman beside him.

“Hello,” she said primly.

“Pleasure to meet you both. I’ll go ahead and get him. You two can have a seat if you’d like.” Val stood from her chair, walked to the office down the hall, and knocked.

“What is it?” Bob demanded.

“Mr. Miller, your client is here.”

He came out of that office quicker than Val had even seen him. Before she knew it, he was clapping the man on the back. “Ed, my boy! How’s it been?”

“Oh, you know, busy as always!”

The two men laughed, engaging in what Val assumed was a middle-aged man’s greeting ritual.

“All right, now down to business. Tell me what you’ve got for me.”

“You are in luck, my friend, I brought a fresh one. Florence, if you will.”

The woman handed Bob the letter. The paper was firm with the slightest bit of weight. At the top there was today’s date, stamped with a time, followed by a bit of neat scrawl below. It read: This is when you die.

Bob whistled. “That’s a doozy. Did you make sure you weren’t followed?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re taking this seriously. I get these all the time. It’s probably just one of my rivals trying to push for re-negotiation. I am in the real estate business, you know.”

“Torrance—”

“It’s Florence.”

“Did you check and see if you were followed by any chance? That’s cutting it close. You realize that it’s almost...”

“I had our driver loop around a few blocks. There was a car following us.” Eddie nudged his daughter and scolded her in Cantonese before regarding Bob again.

“She had to be seeing things.”

“Miss Baines, what time is it?”

“It’s 10 o’clock.”

“It was nothing. I’m sure no one followed us,” Mr. Fong said with a wave of his hand.

The telltale screech of tires on asphalt said otherwise.

“Get down!” Bob yelled, reaching for his gun.

CRASH! Glass exploded in a shower of fragments as bullets littered the walls and windows of the office. Bob had his revolver out in the blink of an eye. He could hear the sound of an engine spewing gravel, and took it as a cue to duck and run through the rubble and straight for the door.

“Stay down!”

Onto the street he went, firing rounds like a madman at the car, a Buick, speeding away. Over the ringing in her ears, Valerie heard nothing but screams. She didn’t need her ears to take note of Eddie Fong’s body sprawled out on the wooden floor, blood leaking from the back of his head in a shallow puddle as Florence held his hand, mouth open and tears running down her face.

The gunshots ceased and everything went quiet. Bob shambled back into his office, eyes raking over the damage. They locked onto Florence’s, still shining with tears. They both knew what had been done.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, kneeling beside his fallen friend and the daughter he left behind. He took off his jacket and laid it over the body, obscuring the worst of the gore.

“I’ll get right to work. Valerie, tend to Ms. Fong over here.” He then climbed to his feet with a labored sigh.

Valerie climbed to her feet shakily, offering her hand to Florence. The woman hesitated, looking between the body of her father and the assistant before taking Valerie’s hand. Florence wiped the glass from her dress, now stained with blood, and took a breath.

“May I use your phone?” she asked, voice shaking. “I need to make funeral arrangements.”

“Um, yes. Sure thing.” Valerie directed her to the rotary on her desk, before moving to sweep up the broken glass. Her hands were shaking around the framed picture she’d plucked from the floor. A few moments earlier, there had been a man in the picture with a smile that mirrored hers.

“Baines,” Bob called, causing her to put the frame down. *Back to work, then.* “Yes?”

“Get me another one of those muffins for this coffee. It’s gonna’ be a...”

“A long day?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” The ceramic cup shattered against the floor. “Aw, hell.” He fell to his knees, hand clutching his chest.

One Day Later

The heart monitor beeped steadily, fluorescent lights casting a sickly glow over those who entered the hospital room. Valerie, carrying a “Get Well” bouquet and her exhaustion, was no exception to this rule. She moved about, trying to find a proper place for the flowers.

“How’re you holding up, Mr. Miller?” she enquired.

“I’m hooked to a bunch of tubes in a goddamn hospital room, but I’m alive after a stroke and a shootout, so I suppose I could be worse off. How’s Ms. Fong holding up?”

“She was pretty shaken up, but otherwise all right.”

“Probably had to throw away that nice dress of hers.”

Valerie stopped cold, staring him down.

“What?”

“That lady just watched her father, your good friend I might add, get shot in the face. You may be my boss, but you’re bein’ a real turkey about this. I’ll need you to get over whatever’s got you in a funk if you don’t wanna’ lose another assistant.”

He held up his hands in defense. “All right, sheesh. Be cool, Valerie. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

She breathed deeply, shifting the subject for her own sanity. “What are we gonna’ do about her case?”

“There’s no ‘we’ here this time. What happened earlier got me thinkin’ real hard. Eddie was one of the best guys I knew, but I haven’t got it in me to do this. I’m too damn old, and the nurse over here threatened to pump me with enough drugs to down a bull if I try to sneak out again. So, I’m gonna’ do something I really don’t wanna’ do. I’m leaving this up to you.”

“What?” Valerie was shocked. Never had he explicitly trusted her with something so important, at least not in a way that recognized that she could actually do the work.

“Baines, I think you’re awful green and liable to get yourself killed with how thirsty for justice you are. It’s what happens when you get into this game for personal reasons, and yours is as personal a reason as any. You’ve seen as much blood as I have and connected the dots a great bit more, so I haven’t got much choice but to trust you can do it. I gotta’ do it for Eddie. I can’t find his killer, but you can.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Her heart was pounding. She had been at this for as long as she could remember, getting coffee and pouring over endless documents, making connections and planting them in his periphery. She had schooled her indignation into a pleasant smile, foregone a seat at the table for a seat at the desk, all the while sharpening her skills. Now she had this opportunity, the moment she’d been waiting for all these years. A chance to prove herself. No. She’d already proven herself. This was just the chance to get out of the office, to be an active participant in the dogged pursuit of truth. A case on her own terms.

“My gun, where is it?”

“I put it in your drawer back at the office.”

“I need you to go get it and keep it on you. You’ll need it. Take the ammo, too. It’s yours, if you know how.”

“I do.”

“That the product of an Oakland education, or just downtime?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh. You’re gonna’ give me another stroke.”

Valerie grinned wickedly at him. “Thank you. I mean it.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. Just try not to get shot. Now git. It’s not every day I get to sleep in a bed.”

Later That Evening

Gravel crunched underfoot as Valerie made her trek up the driveway to the front of the estate.

The complete grandeur of the house was one thing, the bodyguards waiting for her when she got to the door was another. They were both much larger than her, with matching crew cuts and muscles bulging almost comically under the black suits they wore. The one on the left stared down at her, eyebrows raised.

“Name?” he asked, all business.

She handed him her ID. “Valerie Baines. I work with Mr. Miller.”

The two guards exchanged glances, steely gazes shifting between the piece of plastic and her. They nodded in agreement. “You’re all clear, Miss,” said the one. He handed back her license and the two men parted like the red sea, allowing her access to the door.

Valerie approached it and curled her fingers into a fist to knock. She heard the shuffle of footsteps before the door was opened.

The newly christened P.I. was greeted with the bare face of Florence Fong, dressed to the nines, even for something as trivial as bedtime. Her nightgown was a patchwork of satin and lace, golds mingling with blacks and deep browns, topped off with a robe made of the same material. Very beautiful, very expensive. Valerie stuck her hands in her pockets, feeling rather chilly.

“Hi, Ms. Fong. I’m Valerie Baines, Bob Miller’s assistant, from the office. May I come in?”

The heiress opened the door, allowing Val to escape the cold night and transition into the woman’s cozy abode.

“I know that this is a really bad time, with the arrangements going on and all. But I need to know who your father was talking to before he died.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

Valerie frowned. “And why can’t you do that, Ms. Fong?”

“Contract confidentiality,” she answered, tight and quick. “We have many high-profile clients.”

“You know, for someone whose father was shot in front of her face earlier, you’re awfully calm,” noted Valerie, not raising her voice.

“You are in my home, Mrs. Baines. I would appreciate it if you didn’t do me the disrespect of making assumptions about my emotions and expecting me to play into your interrogation tactics.”

“One, it’s ‘Miss.’ I’m not married. Two, I don’t expect you to do anything, Florence. I just want the truth.”

“Truth? No, you want me to slip up. That’s all the cops want, that’s all you want. I don’t know what it is you think I’m doing, but I’m not in the business of murdering family to amass wealth. Catch my drift?” The brief silence that followed was heavy and hollow.

“You done?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just tired of being accused of things. I’m not an idiot and I’m not a mastermind, either. I have more interests than money and finding a wealthy husband! For god’s sake, I have a degree in business. Business! And I didn’t murder my father!” Florence dabbed at her eyes, biting her lip hard enough to bleed. She was trying not to cry again.

“Hey, it’s okay. I get it, I really do. But I can’t find a lead if you don’t tell me who your daddy might’ve pissed off enough to kill him. We can’t rely on ol’ Bob to jump out of the hospital bed and crack this case open. What you see is what you got. You have to

help me to help you, all right?”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I...” She burst into tears.

“Hey, hey. It’s fine.” Valerie navigated her to the nearest chair, her voice as calm as it could be under the whirlwind of emotions. “I’m sorry for what I said. This case just hits a little close to home for me is all.” She breathed deep, the explanation locked tight behind her lips. Phantom flashes of a gun and the man in the bullet-riddled picture frame made her clutch the edge of the table.

Florence’s hand touched hers. “You know what it’s like, don’t you?” she asked carefully.

“Yeah. My father...” Valerie swallowed around the knot in her throat.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. But this is right now, and I have to understand why you’re fighting me so hard. Why don’t you wanna’ give me any information?”

“I’m just scared of what could happen. I got another one of those letters this morning.”

“Can you get it for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

Florence got up from her chair and retrieved the letter, handing it to Valerie. The weighted paper was smooth in her hands. *High-grade stuff*, thought Valerie, *not the usual pulp the lowballers use*. In that same neat print from before, it read: You’ll end up like your old man if you don’t pay.

“What did you do?”

“I paid the money.”

“How? And how much?”

“Two-thousand dollars. I dropped it in a trashcan in the alley.” Florence handed her the page with the instructions.

“Smart move, but never a good long-term option. They’re gonna’ keep making you pay the sums, bigger and bigger, until you can’t afford it anymore. Then they’ll kill you.”

“What if I go to the police?”

“They’ll probably kill you.”

“What do I do then?!” Florence cried.

“I’m still figuring that out. How frequently did they send death threats to your father?”

“At first it was weekly, then they started coming in every three days.”

“And you just got yours this morning.”

“Yes.”

“For your own safety, go on like nothing’s wrong. I’ll give you my number, and if you see something, I need you to call me.” Valerie reached into her pocket and pulled out her business card, handing it to Florence before pulling her into a hug.

“Thank you.”

“For what? Taking you seriously? You don’t gotta’ thank me, Flo. Can I call you that?” Florence, no—*Flo* nodded, hugging her tighter. Valerie rubbed her back in soothing circles.

“I miss him,” murmured Florence.

“I know, Flo. I swear I’ll get to the bottom of this.” Val wouldn’t promise ease with time, she knew better than that. She pulled from the hug, turning to leave and get to work.

“Ms. Baines?”

Florence took her hand, making her freeze in place as she looked to her companion for an explanation.

“You can call me Valerie, or Val. It’s only fair.”

“Do you think you could stay the night, Val? I’m not sure I want to be alone.”

“Sure thing. Now I’m warning you, I’m not much of a protector. That’s not on my resume.”

“Of course not. I have bodyguards for that. I just want some company.”

“I’d be glad to keep you company, Flo. Maybe we can get to know each other a little better now that we’ve got something in common. In the meantime, I’ll need the names of everybody your father was about to enter into a contract with.”

The Next Day

She stood in the phone booth, waiting for the person on the other end to pick up.

“What is it?” Bob answered, no less curmudgeonly over the phone than in person.

“It’s me. I’ve got a hunch.”

“Words of a burgeoning detective. What’ve you got?”

“I visited his daughter, and it turns out she’s been getting notes, too. I checked out the list of Fong’s business affiliates and rivals. Turns out all the leases were signed months ago except for one. The one for John Lantom, owner of the printing company and Fong’s business partner. They have a good rapport, but something’s bugging me. Why would his contract be up for negotiation if everything was fine? The paper those letters are on isn’t

cheap, either. It has just the right amount of weight to it to be from a specialized printing press.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ to me for then? It sounds like you’ve made up your mind.”

“Guess I just needed someone to bounce this off before going in half-cocked.”

“Why do I feel like this is a reference to something?”

“Be cool, Mr. Miller. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I always knew you were a wiseass, Valerie. But you sound like you’re doing fine for yourself, so what the hell. Come see me with the verdict later on.”

He hung up, leaving her to the booth and her thoughts.

“Lantom Printing Company,” she muttered to herself. It was time to pay Mr. Lantom a visit.

Three Hours Later

“Thank you again for agreeing to see me, Mr. Lantom.” Valerie offered her hand to the man, a smile gracing her lips.

“How may I help you, Mrs. Baines?” Lantom took her hand, smooth and crisp, as one would expect of an executive.

“I just need to ask a few questions for my employer, Detective Miller.”

“As in ‘Bob,’ Mr. Fong’s friend?”

“That’s the one.”

“Listen, any friend of Eddie’s is a friend of mine. Whatever information you need, I’ll give it to you. I can’t stand what happened to him.” He bowed his head and she followed suit.

“Thank you so much,” Valerie repeated, reaching into her purse to retrieve a few of the letters. She passed them to the man, clearing her throat. “Here, take a look. Mr. Fong had been getting these up until his death.”

“My god.”

As he flipped through the pages, she took a cursory glance at his desk. It was spotless, not a thing out of place. *Damn*. She averted her eyes when he handed the threatening pieces of paper back to her.

“What can you tell me about the material these were made on? It’s not just craft paper.”

“Well, that much you’re right about. It’s cardstock, for Polaroids.”

“Why would the person writing the ransoms use it?”

“That’s the tough part. I have a few guesses, but it’s nothing

your boss would be interested in, being an expert and all.”

“I mean, you can tell me. I barely ever get out of the office, anyway. This is really a wonderful opportunity for me to learn. And that paper looks pretty durable.” Her hand waved as she said this, her tone sweeter than it had been before.

“Sure is! I’d have to say that it’s ideal for keeping stuff off it. Cheap paper has little catches in the grain. It picks up stains and fuzz much easier,” the man explained, moving to his desk to pick up a piece of paper from one of the stacks. “Get a load of this: anybody tries to do anything and the police get a hold of it. They’ve got all sorts of tools and tricks to figure it out. It’s the 70s, doll. Modern science has really taken us a long way.”

“It sure has, Mr. Lantom,” she responded, a tight smile on her face.

John looked back at her, cordial as ever. “Say, how is Bob?”

“Oh, he’s doing just fine.”

“I’d hope so. A man his age shouldn’t be chasing Buicks.”

“He wanted more than anything to be on this case. But the doctor had the last word.”

“It’s a shame. But I’m glad to hear he’s doing all right. Eddie wouldn’t have wanted this for him.”

“I don’t think so. One more thing, sir?”

“Of course.”

“How did you know it was a Buick?”

She didn’t expect Lantom to go barreling through the open window in the office, or for her to jump out after him. Her body acted ahead of her mind, pursuing the man in the rain, water splashing and boots sliding against unforgiving city terrain. He weaved through alleys like it was nothing, Valerie close behind. In her frantic pursuit, she hadn’t realized that he led her right to where he wanted to go. Lantom slid into the Buick, revving the engine as she stood in the middle of the alley, gun drawn.

“Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

She held the revolver tight in her hands. Tires screeched as the car shot in reverse, heading straight for her.

Valerie pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

Her body went flying.

Later That Night

What am I doing here?

Valerie shot awake in a panic, eyes darting wildly about the room.

“Calm down! I’m not going to hurt you.”

She was laying in none other than Florence Fong’s bed, her body covered in a luxuriously lush robe. The other woman put her hands on Valerie’s shoulders, easing her back onto the soft pillows.

“Shit. What happened? I feel like I got hit by a truck.” The detective looked down at herself, noting the bandages wrapped around her.

“Close, but not quite. He hit you with his car.”

“Groovy. Real groovy.” She sat up against the headboard with a grunt of pain.

“Why did you do that to yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“You knew that you couldn’t catch him when he got to the car.”

“I had to try.”

“You could’ve died!”

“I know, Flo. I know. But I was right. I even have a hunch as to where he’s going. I didn’t go to Lantom’s office until I was sure I had enough to keep track of him. How’d you find me anyway?”

“I followed you.”

“What? Why?”

“Somebody has to look out for you. I didn’t know if you had a gun, so I tailed you and took pictures of the license plate when I saw the car rolling out of the alley. I even wore a disguise.” She beamed proudly.

“Florence Fong, you are one cool cat.” Val grinned, unable to help herself. Her new friend smiled back.

“You’re extremely brave...and pretty.”

It was at that moment that Valerie’s eyes were drawn to the lavender pin that adorned Florence’s hair. “Why thank you, Ms. Fong. Say, how do you fancy the idea of cruising?”

“I’m open to it, but not with just anyone.”

“How about with someone who is notorious for getting hit by cars and chasing people on a hunch?”

“Let me think about it.”

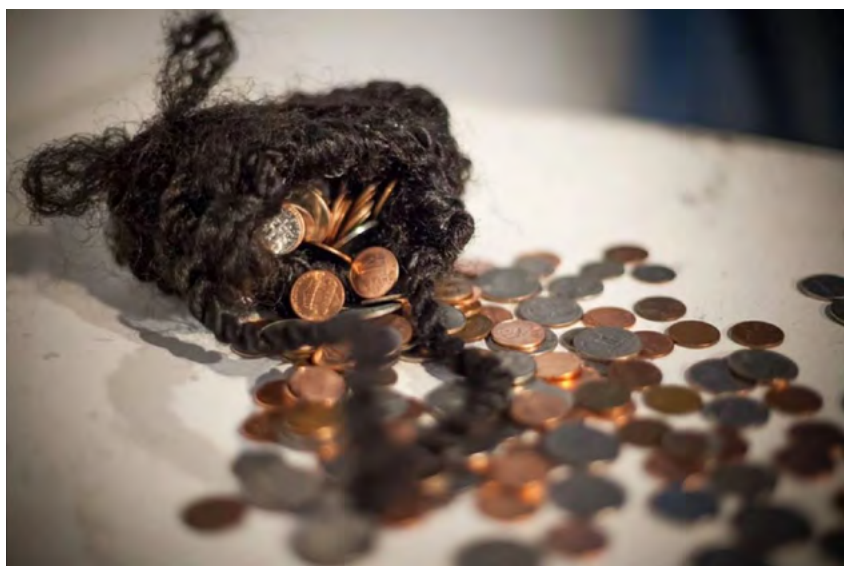
Florence leaned over and kissed her right on the lips. “You could use a partner,” she said rather coyly.

“I think we’ll get along real nicely, Flo.”

Valerie pulled her close and kissed her again.



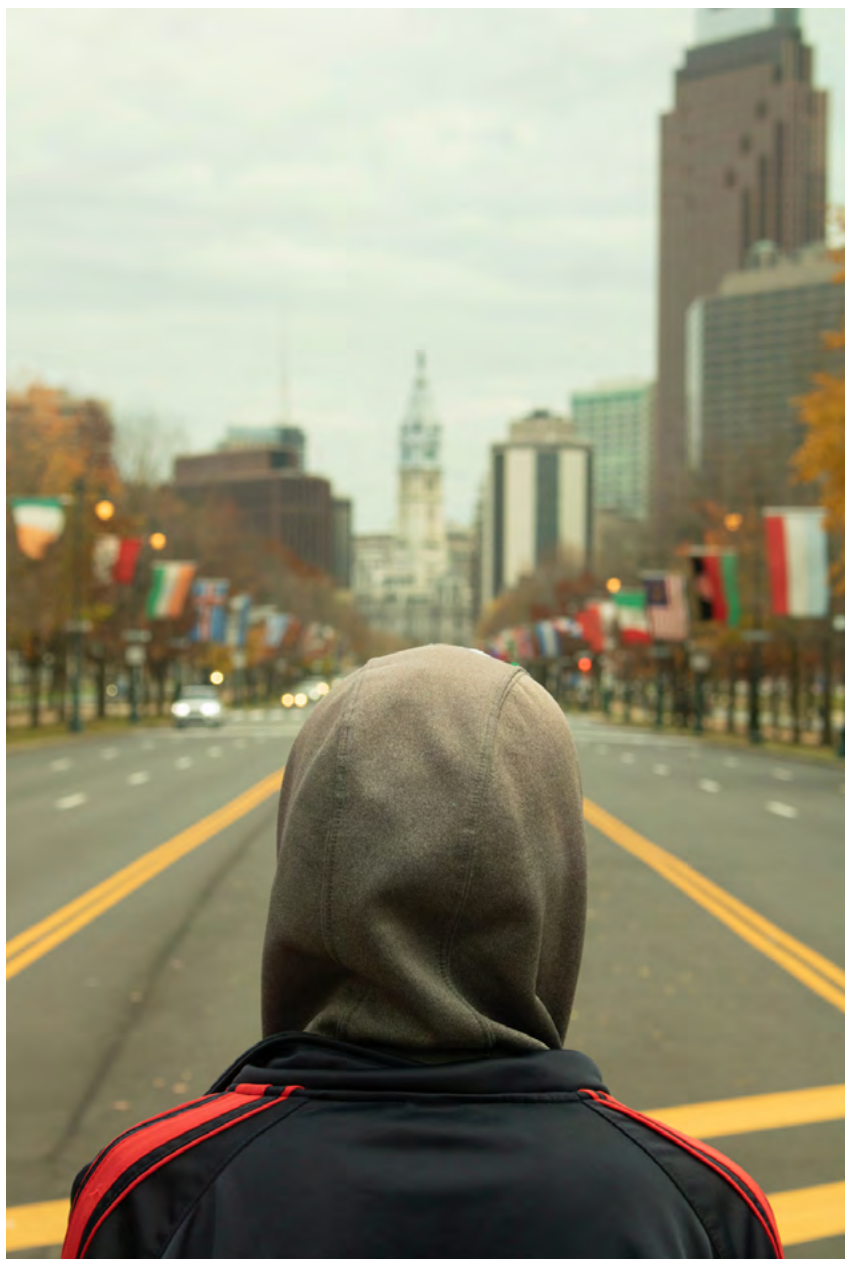
Jeffrey Holmes/*Seventeen*



DeJeonge Reese/*Know Your Worth*



Ronald Shipman-Scott/*Boy Wonder*



Ronald Shipman-Scott/*The Lens Between the City*



Gianna Moon/*Non*



Gianna Moon/*(I'll Love You) in This Space and Time*



Jonathan Gordon/*Nipsey Blues*



Jasmine Mendez/*Bando*



Jasmine Mendez/*Untitled*



Khalil Dowdy/*Broken Skull Child*

Phillip Divon, Jr.

THAT G NOTE

One strum is equivalent to a soul's voice.
Guitar strings sound so divine, I have no choice.
Second strum turns up the heat.
Guitar strings make me tap my feet.
Third strum helps to relieve my angst.
Sounds of sweet guitar strings might make me faint.
That G note she plays makes me visualize
The joy and pain she hides in her eyes.
Gripping her guitar with such passion and love on par,
I hope one day she'll hold me like she does her guitar.

ONE WISH

An orchard,
Trees full of apples,
Is what we sat under.
A pitched tent,
Blankets we sat on:
This is what we used for cover.
Nice open air,
Sandwiches we ate,
Seeing you blush.
Look up at the sky—
All the stars light up,
Both of us sit there and hush.
These bright red apples,
Along with these red roses,
Only thing missing is a dove.
We snuggle up together,
Kiss on one another,
Enjoying our love.
We could do all this,
If I only had one wish.

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?!

*“Freedom or jail, clips inserted,
A baby’s being born same time a man is murdered,
The beginning and end”*

—Nas

These words describe what Blacks in our neighborhoods do to one another,
But little do you realize, more violence comes from your white fathers and mothers.
Your children look up to you as role models to show them how the world works,
Teaching them to treat my community like shit is what really makes this hurt.

These men in blue live by a code to “serve and protect,”
Yet we don’t get the protection you speak of and now my people start to protest.
All we want is justice, to be treated as equals and all that.
Why is asking for equality more difficult than preparing for your LSATs?

George Floyd’s death was just one of many encounters.
The fact that I just said that line is truly the big downer.
Black Lives Matter is a movement, not a phase,
So why is there an issue with us fighting back nowadays?

This man in the white house sent military personal to “not go easy on us”—that’s ass.
Now my people’s peaceful protest has to end up with them ducking from tear gas.
These fumes are making my asthma act up, now I need my inhaler,
And please don’t forget to arrest the cops that killed Breonna Taylor.

Everyone thought Colin Kaepernick was disrespecting the flag when he took a knee,
So he gets judged and penalized and blackballed by the league.
Roger Goodell now sees the error in not listening to the man,
But didn’t offer one apology to him when the NFL made their public stand, damn!

Let me break this down: we are either *free* roaming the streets or are put in *jail*,
But why is it that every time we get pulled over, it’s like we’re living in hell?
We’re scared to reach for our ID, ‘cause the *clips inserted* might be released upon us.
My life *ends* just ‘cause I rushed to see my *baby being born, the beginning and end*.

I can only hope and pray that my people will get their wish somehow.
After all this, I’ve got one thing left to say: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?!

—*Kristopher McClendon*

OCTOBER, 31 2020

Yep, everything is messed up. 2020 has been such a shitty year. I guess you all agree with me. Millions of people have passed away because of COVID-19. And the truth is no one knows how many more will. You know, when you think life can't get any worse, BAM, it painfully can. Every single day. Every week. Every month. Every fucking year.

While I am staring at the most breathtaking full moon I have ever seen, I am going to tell you why I, Dakota—all of us, in fact, are messed up. It's the story of my life and I am pretty sure it will turn your stomach. Well, if you are a decent person. Most people aren't.

It all started on Halloween night. The moon that night was as bright as it is now. It was a stunning Blue Moon. 17 years ago, I was living in Kensington, a tough neighborhood in Philadelphia. My neighborhood isn't a safe place. Shootings are commonplace; it is dangerous for outsiders, but it wasn't for me because I lived there, and everyone knows that when your family is from the place, you're safe. Well, that's what I thought. We had a small house there and we barely made ends meet, but it was okay. I can say I was a modest girl.

It was 11 p.m. and I was studying for an exam when someone knocked on my door. It was Liam, my boyfriend. Liam was such a loving man! And he was handsome, a trim, well-built man. You know, the kind of man one falls for easily. When I met him, I must admit I was dazzled by his charm and good looks. Since then, we had been seeing each other for a few months.

"Hi, my love!" he said cheerily while giving me a sweet kiss. "Do you want to come with me to the hut?" he asked.

"Hello, honey. What's up? I don't know what to do because I'm studying and it's actually late." I looked at him doubtfully.

"Come on, babe! Let's chill out together! Don't worry," he added, hugging me to his chest. "I'll walk you home."

It was quite late and I had to study, but I accepted his invitation. Hanging out with him at the hut was always a blast. Besides, Liam knew how to turn on the charm when he wanted something from me, so it wasn't difficult to eventually give in.

The hut was nearby in the neighborhood, but it wasn't sur-

rounded by other houses, which made it the best spot to chill out and spend some time with friends. We usually met there after school and on weekends to have some fun, drinking, listening to music, and smoking weed.

Though it was springtime, it was quite cool. Liam gave me his jacket, but I don't know why I was still feeling cold. Thank God it was just a few blocks away from home. We had just got there when our friends—Alexander, Victor, Ivan, and Andrew—arrived. I guess the girls decided to stay home. We prepared some drinks, but I didn't have much alcohol since I had a test the following day.

I was a sixteen-year-old teenager who was keen on rock music and art and I had been lucky enough to be admitted to Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. I wanted to have some fun, but I had to keep up the hard work. I didn't want to be tempted to drink or smoke during the week, so I decided it was time to go home. I wasn't enjoying the meeting, though they were always fun.

"You know, guys, I think I'm going home," I told them.

"Don't be such a killjoy, Dakota!" Victor cried.

"Victor's right! Let's have some fun together," added Ivan, offering me a glass of wine. "Have some!"

The atmosphere became quite tense. The guys were being pushy. I meant what I said, so I approached Liam across the room and asked him to take me home, as he had promised. "Liam, can we go home now?"

Instead of listening to me, he became as pushy as the rest and offered me some weed. Again—even though I had told them a thousand times I didn't want to smoke that night, he insisted.

It was 2 a.m. when I put on Liam's jacket to head back home. All of a sudden, I felt as if I was hit by a heavy rock on my head. It was a glass bottle. One of my friends had just smashed it against my head. I started bleeding and fell abruptly to the ground.

I didn't lose consciousness. I wish I had. The worst night of my life had just begun. One by one, they violently raped me. No need to say, "I didn't *want* to be raped," but I was unable to resist the attack. They bound my arms and placed a gag over my mouth. I was in shock. Tears started slowly falling from my immobile eyes. I swear I tried to fight them off! Damn, I did, but it was incessant. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. Were my friends going to end up killing me? I wished I was dead during the assault.

Liam watched them rape me, burn my eyelids with cigarettes, punch me in the nose and the head, and then it was his turn. My

boyfriend raped me. My boyfriend, the guy I was in love with, the guy I had given my consent to when I had lost my virginity to him a few months before. My boyfriend raped and killed me. Why did he destroy me? Why did he betray me?

By the time he grabbed my hair and dragged me out of the hut to the street, I was already dead. He had asphyxiated me. And then he and my friends were gone.

It was 6.40 a.m. when a passer-by found my body. Half-naked. Brutally beaten. My face maliciously gashed by the sharp pieces of the broken bottle they had used to torture me.

It was 7.00 a.m. when the police came and covered my body with nylon. At noon, investigators already knew the identity of my attackers. My friends. They were my friends, my gang. We grew up together in the neighborhood.

They all denied being involved in my rape and ultimate death. They haven't been punished yet. 17 years have passed. Can you believe it? I bet you can't, and I get it. I have been a victim of a miscarriage of justice for 17 years. It's unbelievable that the forensic scientists washed my body twice before taking samples of bodily fluids. To make matters worse, they donated my clothes to charity. I was raped and killed with sickening cruelty, and yet here I am, hopelessly waiting for justice – for me, and for every single girl who has met a similar fate.

And for my mom, Sara, who has been tirelessly fighting for me, despite a corrupt system of justice. She has spent all these years marching through the streets to demand justice. She has spent countless hours in the courts, on TV, on the radio. I hope she can have some relief at some point. I can see her sitting at the desk in my room, staring at the full moon through the window, and I wonder what she is thinking of. Is she thinking of me? I miss her every day and I wish I could tell her how much I love her. I wish I could tell her it's time to let go. I stopped wondering whether the five brutes will someday be punished. I stopped asking, "Is justice delayed or is justice denied?" But I guess if it still matters to her, it still matters to me. I'm just tired.

PERSEVERANCE

Cracked concrete, rose bud dying,
Storm cracks in the distance,
Cold raindrops come flying.

Despair hits like a deep wound tearing the skin,
Spiraling defeat, not knowing what's next,
Aching on the inside, I just cannot win.

Purest feelings pouring out like water in a lake.
Sniffles turn into weeping:
This is something one cannot fake.

The bright hope is fading like a dim light;
The sun sets behind the horizon.
There is no more will to fight.

But.

Keep your head held high, stay strong.
The calm after the storm is coming,
And it won't be long.

Move gracefully and swift.
The fear dwindles.
As you come forth, use your gift.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

My Pandemic Year

In March of 2020, as concerns about the Coronavirus pandemic began to heighten, Lincoln University made the difficult decision to send its students home and finish the spring semester virtually. The abrupt switch from in-person to remote learning proved a challenge to both students and faculty, forcing them to quickly adapt to new technology amid the wider stress and uncertainty of the pandemic. Staff members Gianna Moon and Serene Watts conducted interviews with two Lincoln students to gain insight into how the switch to virtual learning affected their academic performance, and the ways in which the pandemic has shaped their self-concept, social lives, and plans for the future.



Kristen Schenck

Major: Criminal Justice

Hometown: Baltimore, Maryland

What was your first reaction when you found out that we were being sent home in March of last year?

I was highly upset because there were several events that were supposed to happen, yet they were cancelled. In addition, the time frame was an inconvenience. We were alerted on Wednesday that we had to move out by Friday.

With everyone being at home with their families, have you found it harder to focus and get things done? Do you think there's a discrepancy between your productive capacity and the workload the university has asked you to take on?

Yes, being at home has definitely been a distraction from my studies. I have been less motivated to complete assignments, and more motivated to start my own business and help at home.

Has Lincoln done an adequate job of tending to the mental health of its students, faculty, and staff during the pandemic? If not, what could the school have done to change its response?

No, Lincoln has not been understanding of individuals' schedules. I chose to continue my education online, not only due to the pandemic but also because of personal reasons. I was under the impression that the online learning environment would be more flexible for my lifestyle, but I was wrong. The university has issued strict policies regarding Zoom attendance, which is an inconvenience for students who have multiple jobs and other duties aside from school. Lincoln should not penalize students who have other commitments and are not able to attend Zoom meetings.

With the amount of social distancing in our lives, have you come to any conclusions about yourself in the last year?

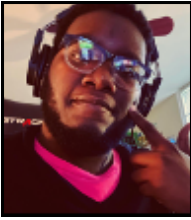
This year I have come to the conclusion that I am an introvert. I would rather stay at home with close friends and family than go out in public. Now that things are opening back up, going out in public can be a bit overwhelming. For most of this past year, I have been practicing social distancing, and I am highly cautious of those around me.

How has the pandemic affected the manner in which you create and maintain both personal and professional relationships?

Due to the pandemic, I have been relying on e-mail for communication, which can be a negative. For example, one of my teachers is not technically savvy, so communicating with him is very difficult. There has been a lot of miscommunication throughout the semester. As far as personal relationships, I surround myself with the same people. It's meeting new people that is the problem. Due to the uncertainty of their whereabouts and hygiene habits, I am highly skeptical of new people in my life.

Do you feel like the pandemic will help or harm your future endeavors once you graduate from college?

I believe that the pandemic will have both a negative and a positive impact on my future endeavors. The pandemic has made me more cautious and less open when interacting with new people. This can have a negative impact on my social skills, since you meet new people every day, and that's how you network. Yet, the pandemic has also made me realize the importance of self-care, mental health, and family.



Danny Davis

Major: Mass Communications

Hometown: Philadelphia, PA

What was your very first reaction when you found out that we were being sent home in March of last year?

Relief. The night before it happened, I was on the phone with my mom and I said, “Mom, I think this pandemic’s gonna’ get bad. I don’t think we need to be here.” I was freaking out, and then, bam, no school. So, honest answer: relief at that moment.

With everyone being at home with their families, have you found it harder to focus and get things done? Do you think there’s a discrepancy between your productive capacity and the workload the university has asked you to take on?

The first semester, I felt a load was taken off. We had less work that we needed to do. I felt super-nervous that I was secretly failing all my classes because my teachers were tied up in so many other things that we couldn’t finish. I’d wake up in the morning, type a few things on my computer, read the book. The only class I consistently went to was French. Every other class I didn’t feel like I was in school. I’d wake up and be like, “Yep, I think I’m in school.” Then there was the second semester. That’s when it felt like I was in school. I couldn’t just opt out mentally. This semester is a weird in-between. We have it under control and we know what this idea of school is now. We understand it. It feels like the same amount of work I was doing at school, but I don’t have to go anywhere to get breakfast or dinner.

Has Lincoln done an adequate job of tending to the mental health of its students, faculty, and staff during the pandemic? If not, what could the school have done to change its response?

The only thing the school could’ve done was stop the pandemic, and they didn’t have the power to do that. Lincoln could not do anything to save my mental health. The one thing Lincoln did do to help my mental health was to give me options. They didn’t force me to go back. They never forced any of us to go back. They allowed us to have a schedule and a rhythm.

With the amount of social distancing in our lives, have you come to any conclusions about yourself in the last year?

Oh, so many. Before the pandemic, if I was in a stressful situation, I would stay in it. I wouldn't do anything about it. I would say, "I have to absorb this. This is life." The pandemic taught me that you can walk away. We all need a moment. We need time to just say: I don't want to look at anything, I don't need to do anything, I don't feel like any of this right now. I did that. I left social media. I left Twitter, I left TikTok, I left Instagram, even. Another thing I discovered about myself is that I can make it. I can do it. I can get through things. Things are hard, but I've been there. And no matter how bad it got, I hung on, and I survived to the best of my abilities.

How has the pandemic affected the manner in which you create and maintain both personal and professional relationships?

I have gotten way closer to my high school friends than I ever thought, because for a while we were doing that thing adults do. We had separate lives, but when I got back home, we all had the same schedule again. It felt like the old days. We hang out and we talk more. Professionally, I have not seen hide nor hair of my professors, and it feels weird, because I'm used to seeing them on campus. I also feel bad because I don't talk to my college friends as much as I used to. That's why I got back on Instagram. I want to see what everybody's doing.

Do you feel like the pandemic will help or harm your future endeavors once you graduate from college?

The pandemic has aged the *garbage* out of me. I was an 18-year-old boy this time last year, still fresh out of high school. Now I feel like an adult. I feel like a 20-something after this. But no, for me, I was always going to go to grad school after college. Nothing changed. There was just this chunk of time in the middle of it where I grew up. It's weird: I grew up more at my own house than I did at college.

THIS PEACE

Why don't you think about your dreams sometimes?
Why don't you think about how your soul shines?
Why, when you look at the sky, do you ignore the light?
Take some time, immerse in the breeze,
Remove all the thoughts, except to breathe.
You are the gift, you are a prize,
A blessing never in disguise.

Look into the sky,
And take a minute to realize
This is the moment to feel alive.
Strong contact with the air—
The problems don't even feel like they are there.
There are no problems at all.
Feel the pressure fall.

Think about your dreams more,
And how your soul holds allure.
Choose to always see the light,
Breathe and breathe until it feels right.
Let the air wrap and comfort you tight.
You are the gift that will always be.
Never forget to have this peace.

WHERE I'M FROM

From sun to sand,
Coconut rum in my hand,
Steel drum playing in the band.
I long to feel the island breeze,
With cocoa, mango, and palm trees.
Oxtail with rice and peas:
Make sure the plantain is nice and crisped, please.
We point with our lips,
We cuss with our hips.
We have a native tongue,
Montego Bay, Portmore, and Kingston.
Our flag is black, green, and yellow,
Strangers always greeting with a “Hi, Hello!”
Some say it’s gold,
But I say Usain Bolt.
The town’s busy, cruise ships are in,
Tourists are coming and the spending begins.
By the beach is where you’ll find me,
Water flowing between my feet.
Can’t wait for you and my country to meet.

THE EDGE

I'm naked and the waves are kissing my feet. The same way she did. The stars are bright. No moon, just light. I'm fumbling in the sand, trying to remember where the ocean was the night it happened. The deeper I go, the more I remember her touch. I have her favorite drink in my hand.

Champagne. The ice is melting and so is my desire to live. There's only one cube left. I don't have that much time. The breath left my body the night Michelle overdosed. She had an addiction and so did I. I know she didn't believe me, but she was my addiction. Her touch, her love, her presence—all of it was my addiction. I couldn't handle the symptoms of withdrawal, so I've come to the place we cherished the most. The place where we made love for the first time. I replicate the motions. She placed my hips on a pile of sand. It felt like silk as she kissed from my hips to my inner thighs. I use my fingers, but tears fill my eyes when I realize it will never be the same. The ocean tickles my feet, but can't compare to how wet I was. Her tongue was like Atlas, she carried Heaven on her shoulders.

I close my eyes and bite my lip, trying to remember how she rocked and writhed me into a toe-curling orgasm. I never got to return the favor, and I want to do it tonight. I take my time retracing our steps. The deeper I go into the ocean, the more I remember her touch. I get waist-deep and my body begins to tremble. I look up and see her face: orgasm instantly. Let me return the favor. I kiss the waves and tell the ocean to open up for me. I put my head beneath the waves and make love to her.

I hear my mother screaming. My father is swimming towards me. It's too late. I've overdosed on alcohol. I'm drunk and I'm drowning in the ocean. But if you asked me, I was just drowning in her love. Now our parents can see both of our faces in the stars.

“It was just some minor injuries. Nothing she can't recover from.”

Light filled my eyes and all I could smell was alcohol and medicine. My back was sore from the stiff mattress and my cheeks were cold. I didn't feel it when my father pulled me back

to the shore. My heart fluttered when I heard a familiar voice. It was just above a whisper.

“Josephine. Wake up.”

“Michelle?”

When I heard what sounded like her voice, I was immediately brought back to the moment we met. A lot of people didn't understand why we became friends in the first place. We were so different, but I believed we filled a void for each other that nothing else could. If I knew what the void was or an appropriate way to fill it, I probably wouldn't have been drunk in the middle of the ocean. No one could understand how I lived in such a beautiful place and still managed to conjure up such misfortune.

Everyone loves talking about being from the islands, but I promise it's better to live there. I went to sleep to party music, rolled over to gun shots, and woke up at the cock of the crow to go to school. My uniforms were ironed the weekend before, and my socks were normally drying on the laundry line in the backyard. Outside the grills on my porch, which looked like jail bars, was an oasis of school children that represented different parts of the island, depending on the color and design of their uniform. I lived near a popular high school, and anytime I walked around the crevices of the premises, I smelled creamy musk and tasted sweat. It was there that I met Michelle, my best friend.

I was walking home from school when I saw a guy emerging from a crevice I frequented for a shortcut home, and he seemed extremely upset. My inquisitive nature led me to retrace his steps, where I found a small girl. She was smirking and seemed to be counting money. Her face lit up when she saw my face. She gave me a warm smile. I took it as an invitation to cure my curiosity, and so I did. “What happened?” I stuttered.

She blushed. “He didn't have enough, so I left him on the edge.”

She was in her school uniform. The pattern of her polka-dot threads resembled mine. Why had I not seen her before? She intrigued me. “What's your name?” I smiled.

She looked at my lips, then stared into my eyes. “You can call me Michelle.”

She was still on her knees. I was flushed. “I'm Josephine.”

I can still remember that look of lust—as intense as turbulence in a snowstorm, 30,000 feet above the ocean. How can someone's voice annihilate my inhibitions? She spoke as if she had never left

her bed, or had never quite woken up. When she moved, it extinguished all my senses. How could I distinguish between morality and vice? Where was my judgement? I was like a puddle in her presence. She smiled and stood up. We were the same height.

“I’m starving. Do you want some jerk chicken and bag juice from up the street?”

“Yes! I’m so hungry!” I was exaggerating.

I surprised myself by agreeing to hang out with a stranger, but you know, you’re not yourself when you’re hungry. She had an “after kit” in her bag. Two toothbrushes, toothpaste, wipes, soap, deodorant, perfume, aspirin, a bottle of water, and a blunt. She didn’t have a lighter, though. That’s how she got the guys. She freshened up at the outside sink near the cricket field, put the money she had counted into a little black purse, and shoved it into her pocket. She didn’t have a bookbag, but I was too nervous to ask any more questions.

We walked down the street to the jerk spot, only inches from each other. She paid for my meal and we sat on the sidewalk and ate together. She told me her story while we laughed at the school children hanging from the taxis and minibuses on their way home. Ever since then, our hearts only had one beat. She seemed so innocent, like a criminal with no record. She explained to me that you can’t have a body count if they can’t find the bodies. I found it profound how she described her body as a temple. It’s not a temple of God. It’s a temple of flesh and blood. She also only let strangers in her temple. She let strangers in because they don’t bring the baggage of their emotions. They can only enter a certain part of her temple. They come and go as she pleases. She taught me the biggest lessons in life. She always said, “We all look the same when we’re naked. Their perception of you is what will make them fall in love.”

Her mother was a burlesque dancer in America, and she visited twice a month. I met her when she came down for Christmas a few years ago, and she had to be the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her eyes sparkled like diamonds and her smile reminded me of the sunset. When she walked, her hips swayed like feathers floating in a light breeze. I was amazed. “There has to be a secret,” I said. “What is it?”

She smiled. “The way you think about yourself unconsciously reflects in your actions”

I kept that quote in the back of my mind, and when she would come down to visit, we would have deep conversations about confidence, self-worth, self-love. She would teach Michelle the secrets of seduction and show her new moves from her workshops. She also gave her daughter some pills. The first time I saw them I thought they were aspirin, but Michelle explained to me that they were “seduction pills” and that she should always take them.

She never stopped taking them.

BETWEEN THE SAND AND THE SEA

A baby sea turtle emerges from the sand
Like a flower bud on the first day of spring,
Popping up into this world knowing nothing,
Nothing except for the fact that it must make it to the sea.
So much stands between it:
The scorching sun and mountain-like sand dunes loom ahead,
But the baby sea turtle with its little flippers and tiny smooth shell

Only minutes into this world
Has already set its goal:
Make it to the water, swim, and never look back
Until it is time to return to birth its own,
Not even fully knowing what's beyond the crashing waves on the shore,
A sweet, simple, swift walk for others from land to water,
But an extraordinarily life-changing journey for this little one.

A seagull lurking in the distance keeps a careful eye on this baby turtle.
It watches and calculates its every move
Like a child excitedly watching its mother cook its favorite meal.
The seagull waits for the right time to strike,
Wanting nothing more than to keep the turtle from reaching its destination,
While simultaneously satisfying its hunger.

But this moment of satisfaction is brief.
Soon enough, the seagull will be in search of another prey to gobble up,
But for the little sea turtle, this moment is everything,
Either signifying the beginning or the end.
As the baby sea turtle fully emerges from the sand,
The seagull spreads its wings in preparation.

So let me ask you: in this story,
Are you the seagull or the turtle?

BOREALIS SPACE VACATION

Space, the vast, cold, dark wonder forever unconquered by human ambition, at least until now. The Borealis Hotel corporation rose to prominence following the great panics of the new 20s. After society had reckoned with its ills and people started to make sacrifices in their pedestrian lives, the need to escape our planet's slowly unbreathable atmosphere was needed. There was no sunrise or sunset, only variations of the smog-covered skies that transformed through different shades of red and yellow throughout the day. It didn't help that the air was also host to a number of lethal pathogens. Borealis sought to be a solution to these ills. The resort's claim to fame was its use of the experimental Airfeel™ technology, a process by which artificial oxygen is made to feel like atmospheric air, as well as its artificial beach technology. Through a stellar marketing strategy and affordable rates, people lined up across the country to get a taste of what it was like to live in the old world.

The time was 4 a.m. when Jack Lee woke up suddenly from another strange dream, which was becoming routine on this trip. He felt the stickiness of sweat accumulating on his back and a heavy panic shooting lightning bolts through his body. His long black hair stuck to his temples. The hotel bedroom was silent outside of his heavy breathing, the soft snores of his girlfriend, Millie, who slept beside him, and the rain-sleep soundscape they had picked. The walls of the room imitated a house's master bedroom, complete with a window view of whichever city you wanted. Jack walked to the kitchen to get himself a glass of water while trying to shake the dream images of his girlfriend walking hand-in-hand with another man. The dream was always the same. The sky would be an orange haze and he'd be walking to his favorite coffee shop before work, then he would spot his wife's smile across the street as it clung to another person. The dream usually ended as a dust storm knocked him off his feet, breaking whatever form of breathing mask he had. To shake off these feelings, he threw on some better shorts and made his way to the gym.

Jack stepped silently out of his door and into the labyrinthine halls of the resort toward the shuttle. The resort was straight from the wildest dreams of Gene Rodenberry and Frank Gehry.

When they first arrived, the phrase “state-of-the-art” had been used so much it had lost its original meaning. Borealis was shaped physically like Saturn, a sphere with a tire-like ring around it. The ring, or the tourist section, is where the guests stayed. It was divided into three main areas for guests of any budget. The lower end suites were similar to normal hotels/motels, with a standard two-bed setup for conventions and conferences, whereas the higher-end suites resembled the high rises in the big cities or one-floor country villas. Jack and Millie were staying in one of the mid-range suites, which were geared towards couples and families looking to get away.

He walked past multiple children dressed in pool clothes and shouting French at each other before arriving at the shuttle to the Health and Wellness section of Central Plaza. Jack selected the destination on the keypad and swiped his room key and a shuttle car instantly locked into place. The single automated car was one of the best ways to get a view of the man-made planetoid, with its LED signs in every imaginable language and skylines that projected images of the grandest skyscrapers. The car rattled like the subway trains of the old cities, and on its way into the health district it stopped alongside an emergency shuttle. Inside, doctors and nurses were frantically trying to aid a young girl whose sunken eyes and bloodied nose painted her as someone in pain. She slowly turned to Jack and mouthed the word, “locusts,” before the vehicle suddenly sped off.

“Now arriving at the gym area,” the speaker box announced before pulling up to the strip of gyms. There were three types of gyms at Central Plaza. The first was more of a traditional gym with weights, treadmills, and ellipticals. The second prioritized a modern workout with livestreamed spin classes, virtual/customizable yoga instructors, and full combat scenario workouts. Jack’s personal favorite was the VR gym, an environment that mimicked the feel of hiking up a mountain or jogging along the beach. Jack swiped his hotel card to both open the door and pick a private running room. After wiping down the equipment he planned on using, he picked a trail in Pennsylvania to run. As he began his jog, his head became mangled with thoughts of the week that had passed. A trip to the stars that was supposed to rebuild a long-dormant relationship had been stymied by their rut. The change of scenery hadn’t done anything for them. Jack began to replay the week as it occurred: they did a spacewalk, watched a

film in the OmniPlex theater, and even did a wine-tasting, all at Millie's request. "What am I doing wrong?" was a question he often asked himself as he tried to remember the beginning of their relationship.

Millie Lucas was by all accounts one of the most beautiful women in the world. Soft features, rounded face, sharp mind. In her world, Jack was just a man she had met and stayed with for five years. She met Jack her senior year of college on a blind date set up by a family friend. She was told Jack was respectable, kind-hearted, and, in some lights, not the worst to look at; more importantly, he was on his way to having a stable job. At first their relationship was very solid. The first and second year they were practically smitten with each other. Their troubles came in small, little needles throughout the five years they were together. Sometimes it was the way he would use the last teabag without telling her. Other times it would be him blatantly ignoring her when she asked to leave a party early. The worst needle was his unhealthy obsession with the old world. She never understood it; she never wanted to, either.

Millie was known for grinning and bearing it, especially within their relationship. The relationship was akin to a job that someone has worked for ten years: it's simple but mundane, and, despite its benefits, you always feel that there is something else out there. For as much as Millie maybe loved Jack, the passion wasn't there. Millie had thought about calling it quits for months but would backtrack in a "you'll lose your benefits" kind of way. At this point she thought it would be better for Jack to break it off. At least it sounded better than, "I'm leaving you just because." She bet on him not being happy as she became more despondent. Much to her surprise, Jack was willing to hold onto their relationship regardless. The space trip was the biggest sign of his willingness to stay together, even when Millie could be as cold as the Arctic before the re-frosting era. She thought the trip might've helped her to find some dormant hunger for him. Alas, from the day of their arrival, this need for sustenance was deeply diminished.

Millie woke up at 10 to find Jack had gone out early. She rose from her bed with a splitting headache and turned off the rain simulation. Same headache she'd been having since they arrived, same signature small buzz in her ear that would gradually dissipate.

“Connect to phone, please,” Millie grumbled.

The system connected to the wall, transforming the flat white paint into a minimalist phone screensaver.

“Any emails, Eliza?” Millie queried, patiently waiting for an answer back.

“One e-mail from James Thompson,” Eliza answered in a pleasant voice, more like a secretary than an OS assistant. “Hope you are having a lovely vacation. The forms are due the Tuesday you get back.”

Millie fell back on the bed. The wall returned to its original state, only this time it pictured a bright sunrise over the Paris skyline. She heard a door click; it was Jack.

“Hey, hon. Brought you some pancakes from the breakfast counter.” He sauntered into the bedroom, holding the container out to her. “They’re blueberry, your favorite.”

After muttering a quiet thanks, Millie walked into the living room to share breakfast with Jack. The silence between the quiet chews was deafening.

“So, last day,” Jack said, devouring the silence. “You have any big requests?”

“No, I think I’m requested out,” whispered Millie, staring sullenly at the empty pancake tray. “Maybe we could see another movie?”

Jack digested her sullen looks and responded, “Hey, I heard that the artificial beach is in orbit today.” He moved closer to Millie and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“Artificial beach?” downplayed Millie. “I don’t know, babe. I’d rather relax on my last day of vacation.”

“Oh, come on. Beaches are wonderful places. People travel across the world to get a glimpse of a great beach. The cruiser is leaving for it at noon, if you’re up for it.”

Jack pulled Millie in tighter, practically forcing her to look at him. Millie faked a smile and agreed to go.

They waited for the oncoming cruiser with a full bag of supplies. Millie wore a sundress that held the Rubenesque curves of her body, and Nick wore a classic pair of swim trunks with a Hawaiian shirt. Artificial Beaches were originally an earth invention made after beaches were declared unsafe on earth. However, when Galactic Hotels started to take off, multiple groups of orbital

artificial beaches were developed. Jack and Millie were inundated with multiple videos on the subject. The videos promoted the usual rentals of jet skis, parasails, and umbrellas. They also showed ads for the various multicultural cuisines they had to offer.

When they arrived, the beach was more like a complex wave pool. There was no boardwalk, just a small plank of wood near the docking area. The smells of the sand weren't properly mixed, so the air had a tinny odor that made some patrons nauseous. It was also overcrowded. The water itself was filled with people sitting on jet skis not moving. The most you could do was sit on the beach and drink the disappointment away. However, Jack tried to place a bit of optimism on the situation. This was his last day of vacation and he wanted to enjoy it. After a solid hour of trying to secure a spot to lay their towels and chairs, they sat in their usual blend of awkward silence and the continual wonder of why.

Millie abruptly got up to go to the bar, asking if Jack wanted anything.

"A scotch would be nice," he answered.

Millie saw the long line and used it as an excuse to claw herself away from Jack for just a minute. There were so many better things she could be doing at this point; it was like she was a prisoner to him, and she was only there out of obligation. It was tragic. For as much as she hated it here, she understood the beach. It was filled with people like Jack who clung to the past like stubborn children.

She waited in line for the promise of a drink to numb the pain. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder. Almost out of thin air, a marble sculpture of a man appeared behind her. In his hand he held her unneeded sunglasses.

"You dropped these," he said in a seductive voice.

"Thank you," she whispered, almost unable to speak.

Due to the long line, they talked for the next several minutes. She found out his name was Ryan and he lived in Palo Alto. When she ordered, she forgot all about Jack's scotch, not surprising considering Ryan's pure magnetism.

Meanwhile, Jack sat in between naps and the pleasant sounds of the beach. He would normally be thinking about his nightmare, but now he got a flash of the girl in the shuttle. He never mentioned it to Millie, partly because he thought it was a mirage, and partly because he didn't know what to do with the information. Jack decided to wade into the water among the other swimmers and static jet ski riders. As he stood in the cool water, his

thoughts became clear, his mind settled, and he stared at the painted sky. It dawned on him that it was because of greed and hubris that he had never spent a day at the beach. This was a failure of humanity, made plain by the parody before him. What shook him from this thought was the shouting of an older man wearing a shirt from the hotel. He looked like an employee.

“THE LOCUSTS!” he shouted. “THE LOCUSTS ARE IN YOUR BRAINS! ALL OF YOU.”

Soon after, a few lifeguards surrounded the man to calm him down. Concerned, Jack began looking for Millie, assuming the worst. He saw her standing at the bar, plain as day, chatting with another man just like in his dream. He almost didn't recognize her: it was the first time he had seen her with a slight smile.

“Millie!” Jack shouted, rushing toward her and grabbing her by the shoulders.

Her smile faded. “Hey,” she weakly mustered. “I thought you were going to wait over at our...”

“I think we should go,” Jack interrupted, pulling her away from the line. “This beach is not what the brochure advertised.”

“Hey, man. She was in line,” Ryan commanded. “Just let her get her drinks.”

“Who are you?” said Jack. “Why are you talking to my girlfriend? This is none of your business. Forget about the drinks, Millie. Let's go.”

“No,” Millie snapped. “You said you wanted drinks.”

“Well, plans change. We need to leave.”

Millie quickly said goodbye to Ryan and they returned to their area and left. The silence between them persisted until they got to the room to pack. As Millie angrily folded her clothes, Jack told her about the weird goings-on at the Artificial Beach. He mentioned the old man and the locusts.

Slightly miffed, Millie responded, “I didn't ask for you to take us to such a dump.”

Jack was taken aback, as she had had no objection to going initially. He began a line of questioning that came from the core of their issues, to which Millie replied, “Why did we come here?”

“I beg your pardon?” Jack puzzled.

“Why in the fuck are we here?” Millie continued more angrily. “It's a fakey expensive garbage hub in space. You claim that you want to get us out of this rut, despite bringing the rut everywhere we go. You can't even give me the courtesy to let me leave this relationship.”

“Listen, if you want to break up, at least let me know where we stand and don’t just hate me silently. At least try to work with me.”

“Why in the world would you ever try and be with someone who doesn’t like you?”

“Because I know I can’t do better,” Jack bellowed.

The silence returned. Millie walked angrily out of the room, slamming the door. Evening turned to night as Mille roamed the halls of the resort. She knew that Jack would refuse to let go if she didn’t first. The halls began to overlap, and Millie was overcome by a warm sensation. The hall’s dim lights transferred from the standard yellow to a hazy pink and red. Out of the haze stepped Ryan, almost glistening and glowing in her eyes. She was drawn to him as a moth to a flame, pulled by his aura. Ryan caressed her hair and face, bringing her into a kiss. They were instantly transported to a bedroom and Millie was thrown onto the bed. In another flash, her clothes were gone and Ryan held her and made her feel protected and seen in a way that Jack could never. In this moment, she felt selfish. No one cared about what she wanted, no one asked. A blind date had turned into a lifelong relationship. Not anymore.

As Ryan peaked in their moment of passion, it didn’t feel normal. The pinkish light of the room turned red, and she felt as if there were millions of bugs crawling inside her. Wait, she thought, this doesn’t feel right. Wait, wait, wait. Was she in her room, the hallway?

Meanwhile, Jack sat silently in the kitchenette of their room, between calls 11 and 12 to Millie’s phone, drinking from a bottle of wine he planned to gift to his co-worker. Their bags were packed but still no Millie. Everything was silent until he heard a loud, repetitive banging at his door and familiar voices screaming, “Arrêter ça! Sil-vous plait!”

“Eliza, who’s at the door,” Jack asked softly.

Eliza pulled up the video feed of two French boys writhing in pain on the hallway floor, their sunken eyes and bloodied noses reminding Jack of the girl he had seen earlier. As he walked out to help them, a strong pain stabbed through his head. Suddenly, a low rumble was heard, and Jack went looking for Millie. Outside, shuttles crashed into the main plaza as the parasitic locusts—churned by the Airfeel™ technology—began to take hold of people’s brains. Jack eventually found Millie lying in the hallway. Millie could only form half-sentences and her orifices were

dripping blood.

“The locusts,” she whispered. “You were right about the locusts.”

Jack held her hand as emergency shuttles slammed into various compartments of the ship. WHAM! CRASH! BOOM!

Millie urged Jack to go, leave her, save himself. Jack wouldn't leave. In a world filled with consistent lies, the fraught inconsistent truth of their romance was all he had.

And so he stayed.

UNCLE SAM, DID YOU LOVE ME?

You came to every cookout,
Ate all the food,
Carried take-outs home.
You came to every reunion; you and Aunt Beth didn't get along.
She bickered about old days and old dead songs.
Could you have been a bitter ex?

You picked on me at recess and took my favorite swing.
You watched me cry and pout and still you did not help me.
You came to mom-mom's birthday and told us many stories,
All about the same plight.

Whites and darks did not seem to matter to you.
You said Law is Just. Justice is Honest.
Honesty is America.
Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam, did you lie?

THE PIÑATA'S TURN

Every night and day he hung in the corner of the room, watching plain life happen before him. Not being able to take part in the daily happenings, he slowly drove himself into a deranged state. He was not always like this. There was a time in his life when everything was great, amazing even. He was born in a Mexican candy store. The proud owner made all the piñatas by hand with cardboard and papier-mache. Each one was special and unique. An array of sizes, colors, and shapes filled the little store and gave it life.

He was shaped like a donkey with stickers for eyes, rainbow paper for fur, and confetti string for a tail. Hung in the darkest corner of the store, the piñata had a special view. The other piñatas lined up alongside him, stretching across the rest of the walls like crown molding. Everyday there would be parents and children in and out of the store, buying candy, gift bags, balloons, small toys, party supplies, and more. The piñatas never knew what any of these items were for except that they were meant for an exciting occasion. The children especially excited them the most; they would never want to leave without a toy or a piñata, and most often they got their wish. With every passing day, the donkey's excitement lessened. All his friends got chosen and he was always left behind. Was he not colorful enough? Big enough? Sturdy enough? The missing spaces his friends would leave behind were filled with new piñatas within days.

What was special about them? He had begun to think he lacked whatever the children and parents wanted. He always wondered what happened to them once they passed that door. The donkey had started to lose hope when the owner noticed how long he had been hung there. One day, the man grabbed the donkey and it panicked. He thought he was about to be thrown away since he had never been picked, but the man simply put him where the light was best in the store. What a relief! The donkey's hope surged. No, it skyrocketed, and it seemed it would never stop. Another chance to be chosen and fulfill the destiny all his friends achieved. A wonderful moment that could last forever.

A short time went by and the sweetest young girl saw him and thought he was perfect. The donkey and five others were chosen

by the girl's family and out the door they all went. It took a minute for the piñatas to adjust to the newfound light. The images they used to watch on the storeowner's television were now right in front of them: streets, cars, trees, animals—just life outside of the candy store. The cool air from the air conditioner could not compare to the calm, aromatic wind outside. The warm sun against the rainbow paper was the donkey's favorite part. Sunlight through the corner store window could not compare. The family walked an ample distance and soon they arrived at their tan, one-story home. The piñatas wiggled with excitement and awaited the next stage of their lives.

The father unlocked the front door and everyone rushed in to escape the summer sun. The family relaxed for a moment before getting their purchases situated. With the piñatas ready for the next step of the journey, the parents walked to the garage and placed all six of them on the concrete floor. The door slammed shut and quickly locked. The darkness of the garage was overwhelming at first, but their eyes soon adjusted and they could see one another. Almost all at once, confusion rushed through the piñatas. Number 5 was the first to speak.

“Is everyone alright?” he asked.

“Yes,” the rest replied.

“Is this where we're meant to be?” asked the princess.

“All that waiting for what? A hot dark room?” called out the crown.

“I want to go back!” cried the unicorn twins in unison.

Donkey was as confused as the others but chose to stay quiet and think. He had a feeling the garage was temporary, but was unsure of what was to come. A touch of uneasiness passed through him. He decided that it was the brief disappointment meddling with him. Donkey listened to the rest of the piñatas until they grew tired of talking and fell asleep. They were lucky to find some peace within the situation, to be able to rest. He sat, immovable, wondering why they and everyone else before them had been so excited for something so unknown. Mystery precedes the want for anything different.

Over the course of the week, the people of the house would occasionally wander into the garage and out again, only for the piñatas to be aroused and distressed each time. Finally, the garage door was pulled open and sunlight poured in. The piñatas were beyond relieved for change, and hope filled each of them like stuffing in a teddy bear. The father walked over and picked

up one of the unicorns and all their eyes grew in attention. He placed the piñata on top of the hood of his car and walked into the house. They stared at each other and the man came back, hands full with bags of candy. *What could he be doing with all that?* they thought simultaneously. Grabbing a pair of scissors from his pocket, he carved a palm-sized hole in the top of the unicorn's head. The unicorn screamed in agony as it prepared to be stuffed with human delight. All the piñatas gasped in horror and froze with panic. The father ripped open the bag of candy and filled the unicorn like a mother stuffing a turkey's body for Thanksgiving.

Next was the number 5. And then the princess. Followed by the crown and the other unicorn. The man motioned to grab the donkey but realized he had run out of candy. With the rest of the piñatas traumatized, the donkey felt singled out and less than them. He wondered why there wasn't enough candy for him, and why he was chosen last. *I'm always last or not at all*, he thought. He then realized that the process looked painful, so maybe it was a good thing.

The father left the garage, and the piñatas were still frozen and speechless. A few more days went by and not a single word was spoken between them until the mother entered the garage. One by one, she picked up the piñatas and walked them over to the backyard.

"No!" screeched one of the unicorn twins as the other was carried away.

"I don't want to go!" replied the other twin. "I'm scared!"

"We're in this together!" the crown tried to reassure it.

Are we really? the donkey thought to himself. As their consciousness returned to its full capacity, they noticed a hefty set-up of tables and chairs in rows, with the anticipation of a crowd lingering in the air. The piñatas were placed in a spot of their own by the cake-and-presents table. The decorations around the backyard were pink, purple, and white. Balloons tied to a centerpiece and tablecloth garnished every table. They sat there for hours until people started to arrive and seat themselves. The music trembling in the air excited the piñatas as they watched the people dance the evening away, forgetting the event days prior. As night fell, the piñatas noticed the group of people beginning to gather in a large circle. A couple of the men grabbed long ropes and one of them climbed to the roof of the house. The mother of the birthday girl called out, "It's piñata time!" The piñatas looked

at one another in confusion, but the donkey stared off into the distance. The touch of uneasiness came back; he had no anticipation for what came next.

The father grabbed the number 5 and hung it by its hook on the rope. All the piñatas' eyes grew. The group of people began chanting and clapping with excitement, but all the piñatas saw was evil masked as cheer. A public execution ornamented in sparkles and confetti. The mother walked up to the father and handed him a very large wooden stick, like the broomstick from the candy store. The birthday girl brightened with the ravenous want to destroy the number 5. Suddenly, the little girl raised the stick over her head and struck the first blow. 5 screamed in agony and the rest of the piñatas shrieked at the sight of their friend. She then delivered another blow, and then another, and the piñatas couldn't believe their eyes. 5 collapsed within itself and screamed no more. The little girl finished her turn and handed the stick to the next child.

Slightly larger than her, the boy struck 5 with more force, and the sound of the beating echoed off the wooden fence and back to the piñatas. For them, it was like hearing a train crash over and over. The next child walked up, larger than the second, and ended number 5. The piñata broke in half and all the candy spilled out. Children ran with wolf-like drool hanging from their mouths and picked up as much as they could of what remained of him.

The piñatas were speechless as they mourned their friend. 5's lifeless body was removed from the rope and thrown to the side, its purpose over and done with. 5's mauled body lay there as if it were nothing. The people laughed and popped candy in their mouths as they awaited the next piñata to be hung. The donkey was disgusted. *How could they do such a thing and be happy?* He would have thrown up in his mouth if he could. The lack of remorse and pure evil struck him harder than any blow of the stick.

Next was the crown. Unable to help their friend, the remaining piñatas watched in panic. The chanting started again and another child walked up to begin the satanic ritual once more. This time, the piñata was broken into several pieces and the children grabbed the remains and paraded around the backyard with them on their heads. To the piñatas, it seemed as though the people were trying to summon the darkest of forces. Only something this cruel could bring the devil himself. The donkey couldn't even scream anymore, and all he thought about was his turn to

die. He watched as the remainder of his friends were beaten to death.

The piñatas' mutilated bodies were piled alongside him, and he cried at the sight of the once lively beings he knew from the time they were first created by the candy store owner. By the time it was his turn, the crowd had minimized and lost interest. The father walked over and picked him up, noticing how light-weight he was compared to the rest. He remembered there had not been enough candy. The birthday girl motioned for her father to leave the donkey alone and he was set back down. The people seated themselves and joyfully ate what was once inside the donkey's friends. He didn't want to live with what he had just experienced; he preferred to have been murdered with the others. When the party was over, he was left outside in the dark night, all alone. Flies paraded around him, feasting on the food left astray and dancing on the severed bodies.

When morning arrived, the little girl stepped outside and saw him. She grabbed the donkey and brought him to her bedroom. She had a small bed with purple curtains and toys laying around in a constant cycle of play. She sat him on the chair in the corner of the room and ruffled his rainbow paper. She felt warm and fuzzy when she was close to him, but he did not feel the same way. Her father walked in and asked her if she would like for the donkey to be hung. She jumped up and down as a confirmed "Yes." He hammered a nail at the top of one of walls and grabbed the donkey by the hook and hung him gently. For a moment, the donkey had a flashback to the candy store, and he wished he had never been moved from his dark corner.

For months, he relived the fateful day when his friends had been broken to pieces. He grew tired of seeing the little girl and her family live their lives while his friends were dead and he was at a standstill. One night, while the little girl was sleeping, his anger and frustration became so strong that he willed himself to move, something he had previously thought impossible. Although he looked like an old woman with a walker, he was able to swing himself off the hook and land softly on the ground. Donkey turned to look at the girl sleeping peacefully and felt even more rage. His friends needed to be avenged.

He crept around the house, looking for the stick of doom, and luckily found it in a crevice next to the refrigerator. *An odd place for a weapon of destruction*, he thought. The donkey had some

trouble holding onto the broomstick at first, but he was just big enough to manage it, and in no time he could swing it like a baseball bat. He walked over to the master bedroom and stopped at the foot of the parents' bed. He remembered the day he was chosen. He remembered there being no more candy left to stuff him. He remembered the little girl telling her father to leave him alone. *But they murdered my friends. Like it was a heinous game that was done countless times before. It can't be. No. No. No.* He climbed the bed and stood with the stick over his head. If tears could fall, this was the moment.

Is this the cycle? The life and death of a piñata? Made to be destroyed? They meant more than that. I mean more than that.

His moral compass fought hard. His mind went back and forth, and he got tired of holding the stick over his head. All Donkey wanted was for them to feel what his friends had felt. The pain. The agony. Their lives taken in such a destructive way. But he could not bring himself to do it. He threw the stick on the ground, hopped off the bed, and ran out of the house. He ran as fast as any lively piñata could, and into the dark he went.

THE UPCOMING AUTUMN

It is the sound of the wind in the trees
Rustling through the leaves.

These are the things that fly out like a sneeze
Into a bustle of dreams.

The symbolism of death and rebirth
Is what calls forth the work
Of taking notice of little things

That weave a paint brush into the leaves,
And sets aside the bees to create the wings of better things.

Take a step into the dream of possibilities,
That leaves the old skin to form a new vessel.

Take a deep breath and breathe the freshness of better things.

Devour the taste of rejuvenation,
And take satisfaction in the fullness of opportunities.

Let go of the hunger of the over-and-gone,
And proceed to push toward the light of tomorrow.

Look back at nothing; let go of something
That plagues the chasm of reality,
And let nature be the goal of ascension
Into your foremost individuality.

THE SNOB WITH THE JOB

There once was a snob with a pretty amazing job, but he didn't think so. He wrote many books for kids about crooks and imaginary places for people to go look. His name is Dr. Suess, and he wants to be reintroduced, so I'll let him say, "Hello. "It's been 20 years. Twenty long, tiresome years and you would think everyone would appreciate me around here. I gave the world *The Cat in the Hat*. I had these little rotten brats eating *Green Eggs and Ham*. I DON'T EVEN EAT THAT! Snot-nosed kids love all my books, but nobody walks up to me for autographs. I'm tired of being known as the man who rhymes. I'm more than that. I went to college. I can go into any field and be amazing at it."

And so he did just that. Dr. Suess left his house, saying goodbye to his cat, wearing a black suit with his favorite leather hat. He hurried on his journey, never stopping to chat, figuring out which places he'd like to start at.

He stumbled across a sign that read, "Need Employees," so there he applied, the place: Applebee's. Once he applied, he got the job instantly, but he was messing up constantly. His last customers he'll remember vividly.

"We have fries for the guys, no salt for your sake, and I refuse to bring burgers 'cause you need to lose weight."

"SUESS. MAY I SPEAK TO YOU IN THE BACK PLEASE?!"

That voice you hear. That voice that sounds mad. That's Suess's manager. Chad.

"Suess. We've been getting plenty of complaints about you. Customers have been telling me that you've changed their orders and are calling them fat. You've also been rapping to them?! This isn't the studio. This isn't Club Applebee's. You rap on your own time."

"Firstly, I wasn't rapping," said Suess. "I was rhyming. Giving this place a lil' spunk. I don't see how there's even people coming in here with how dull it is. Everything's wood. The floor is dark. Curtains are a bland, red-wine color. Also, you guys need to start telling people about themselves. How is anyone going to improve if you don't tell them? I don't know if you've noticed, but there's been a bunch of big ones coming in here. It's like y'all have a special for them, the way they just flood in here."

This may not have been the job that Suess desired, because before he could quit, he was fired. He left Applebee's with his head held high, and waited for another place to come by. He found another job that came sooner rather than later. His next job was at the newspaper. He's the headliner for all their success, but the headlines and stories were always a mess:

The killer of Miller.

Be careful everyone, for there is a killer.

He happily just struck on Miller.

He's walking around in plain sight.

If you see him, he might give you a fright.

I urge you all to stay calm,

Or get a baseball bat in your palm.

Hit him across the head and go on about your day,

Or run off in an attempt to get away.

"Suess. What the hell is this?!" I know what you're thinking.
Another voice. Well, that voice comes from Royce.

"Suess, you can't tell people to attack a killer. What sense does it make that you're telling people to just put their hands on a psychopath?"

"Why would I let the killer walk right past people? They should know if they see him, hit him. Killers are meant to be dead. This is what people need in their heads."

"Suess. Look at me. This is not PBS Kids. Take your poems and get THE HELL OUT!"

Royce had a temper, but Suess did not care. He took his paper and left with a snare. He went to find another job, another victim in his case. His next application went to The Children's Place.

In this place, he was spotted right away, and started his job the very next day. He did great when he stocked the shelves, but dealing with parents didn't work so well. A lady gave him a scarf that looked very nice, but Suess just wanted to give her advice.

"If you were my mom, I'd scream to the sky. If I had to wear that scarf, I'd die. Have a fantastic day!"

"Suess. You mind if I have a word with you for a minute."

Once again, Suess is called to the back. He sits in the chair and waits for his feedback. This time the voice you hear is unique. That's his newest manager, Monique.

"Suess, we love you here. We really do, but this is the sixth complaint we've gotten today. Earlier you saw a kid digging up his

nose and popped his hand.”

“And what was wrong with that?”

“That’s not your kid?!”

“You’ve got that right! My child will know better than to do such a disgusting thing. I bet you if I hadn’t popped him then he would’ve eaten it. We can’t have kids around the world thinking that’s okay.”

Suess went on pleading his case, but that I may say was quite a waste. The words “You’re fired” went out her mouth and into his face.

He grabbed his belongings and went on his way, but before he did that, something told him to stay. He looked to his right and what did he see? A shelf full of books that belonged to he.

Suess thought to himself, What should I do? He followed his heart, and his mind came, too. He rushed home and picked up his thing-a-ma-bob, and started writing a book called *The Snob with the Job*.

THE LIGHT OF ANGEL WINGS

Color and beauty surpass the light of angel wings.
They tell us stories of passive kings
Who wore diamond rings on their rosewood-colored fingers.
Let us surround the great seas
Until our long-lost ancestors move through us
With tales of young intellectuals
Discovering wonders only black souls could know,
Secrets that our generation will never hold
Because it has forgotten that with this pigment,
There should never be a reason to be hidden,
Never for the fact that melanin makes us different.
Assimilation is what we have committed,
Telling us that we're no longer wanted or permitted,
So we morph and fit into their perfect image,
Even though their perfect picture wouldn't have us in it.
We fight this battle every day because we are torn here,
And as we stand on the frontline, we yield no weapons,
Only words, hoping that peace and love
Can somehow make a connection
To the correction of the treatment of my people.
Hopefully, one day you can see me
As not just a person, but as your equal.

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