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DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
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WINNERS

2019 Poet Laureate Contest

First Place: Tadia Nicholson, "Home"

Second Place: Deja Paylor, "Offerings"

Third Place: Dior Thompson, "The Weeping Willow"

4th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Place: Janelle Castellon, "The Poach"

Second Place: Renee Onque, "When the Lilies Wilt"

Third Place: Tadia Nicholson, "Nah, I'm Good"

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FREE

What's it like to be free?
Will I ever know?
Is freedom something that we ever did,
Or is it just a myth? An uninflated blimp
Talking about how fly he is?

The creator of the world,
Made a joke by the scientists,
Now he need a psychiatrist.
His mother did magic,
His sister saying tricks are for kids,
His father taught him how to be alive,
His brother wanting him dead.
The truth is in the sky
As the drones fly over ya head.

Maybe I should eat healthy and exercise,
But I got a 9 to 5,
And this Maruchan Ramen is all I can buy.
Survival of the fit and the strongest survive.
I'm just a kid who likes to listen to songs when I'm fried.

Acknowledged I was a diamond when I was shown that pressure.
Coconut on the skin, I was told that's lesser.
Locked my hair, hoping Bob would agree,
Soul-searching in some places where I could hardly see.
An L is just a smaller part of a V.
The whole scope is what we had until they parted the seas.

It ain't impossible, just uncharted.
Got many different aims but we shooting at one target.
Just want to be comfy and tell my kids they can be something,
So we can have our way without the green money.

Trapped in the system of school and work, fools and jerks,
I just wanna swim with lil mama in the pool as she twerks.
The cruel is berserk, and the cool is so uncommon.
Dads is never there, even presidents sometime-ing.
How can you fly without wind beneath your wings?
Them tears is lubrication for your chains.

What's it like to BREAK free?

RISE

Like Maya Angelou, I RISE.
Despite all the lies in enterprise against me, I RISE.
My dark skin with brown eyes they despise so much, I RISE.
Poverty around me every day but through my drive, I RISE.
Loving every passion that I make alive, I RISE.
Unapologetically for my voice and my mind, I RISE.
Educated from schools that don't teach my history,
But I learn on the side and why? Because I RISE.

Black Queens in America, they don't want us to strive, but I RISE.
Still fighting for equality where femininity is put aside
And they still try to deny, but I RISE.
While I walk under the rain without cover
To the deepest destination of my prime, I RISE.
Let my troubles aspire real high
And my success inspire those times
I never thought I could fly, because I RISE.
From the littlest flower that blooms
To the harvested garden that alludes,
Like Maya Angelou, I RISE.

TO THE FUTURE ME

Everything I do is to further you,
for if you are who I know you will be,
then your selfishness will turn to selflessness.

My foolishness will turn into your wisdom
My ambition will turn into your empire
My heartbreak will turn into your love
My pain will turn into your strength
My struggle will bring about your success
My confusion will turn into your peace of mind.

I will give today, so that you can have tomorrow.

LA IDENTIDAD

Mi identidad es la realidad de todo que hay dentro de mí.
Tengo sangre corriente desde Nigeria, hasta donde cumpla mis dreams.

Mi identidad es yo misma,
Soy negra y negra inside.
Tengo rizos y risa y sueños y prisa, y nada de nada to hide.

En la identidad hay una cantidad de cosas para Dios controlar.
Por todas mis blessings soy agradecida y ¡qué me ayuden llegar a far!
Quiero hallar el mundo y empezar de zero
Y aprender cada lengua que pueda.
Voy por los stars. Voy a viajar. Terca, sin control, y leda.

Mi identidad quizás parece abierta,
Pero yo la encuentro concreta.
Mi identidad es la realidad de todo que hay dentro de mí.
Tengo sangre corriente desde Nigeria, y correrá hasta cumpla mis dreams!

Soy yo. Soy me. Pero what's next?
We'll see.

YO CREO

Yo creo que yo soy “every woman.”

Yo creo que yo tengo “much to offer.”

Yo creo que yo soy “the wind beneath your wings.”

Yo creo que yo tengo “the foundation you need.”

Yo creo que yo estoy “el amor de su vida” y “the woman of your dreams.”

Yo creo en “you.”

Yo creo en “us.”

Yo creo en el amor.

TWO SIDES OF HEARTBREAK

After sixteen years, I received the acknowledgment I thought I wanted and deserved, only to find out it was at the expense of another. You see, I got divorced from my high school sweetheart back in 1991. I had a two-year-old son, Stephen, and another child on the way. It was a difficult divorce and very hard on my children's grandparents. I am referring to my ex-husband Steve's parents, not mine. I lived in White Stone, Virginia at the time, having moved there from West Chester, Pennsylvania. Divorcing meant I would be taking their grandchildren back to Pennsylvania.

When I was growing up there was never alcohol in our house. My parents did not drink. This was not due to anyone having a drinking problem; it was just how it was. Therefore, I was very naive when it came to any signs of alcoholism. After Steve and I were married I realized his father, Jack, was a functional alcoholic. What I mean by this is that he went to work each day and made a good living, but in the evening he did not fail to get quite drunk on his wine.

I met Steve in junior high school and we started dating when I was sixteen. We dated for six years and then got married and moved to White Stone, Virginia to start a plumbing, heating, and cooling business. After a few years of marriage I began to notice some changes in Steve. He began drinking more and more. On one evening I was in the kitchen making dinner and I received a phone call.

"Is this Dana Townes?" the policeman asked.

"Yes, it is, how can I help you?" I said.

"There has been an accident, and we are taking your husband to the hospital for a blood alcohol level test. Can you come and get your son?"

My heart hit the floor with this call, and it was time for me to face the facts and see the signs I was trying to ignore. My husband had a drinking problem just like his dad. It was at this point that I gave him an ultimatum: either get help or I was leaving. He did quit drinking for a short time, but then began drinking behind my back, and once I found out about the drinking, not to mention the girlfriend, our marriage began to fall apart. While I was preparing to move back to Pennsylvania, Steve's mom showed up at my house to have a conversation with me.

"Can't you let him drink socially?" she asked me.

"No," I said. "Your son is not capable of drinking socially. He is an alcoholic."

“Well, I have learned to cry silently and maybe you should too,” Meredith said.

Here I was, a twenty-six-year-old girl with a two-year-old son and another child on the way being told that I should ignore the drinking and the girlfriend. It was at this point that I realized that my idea of a healthy environment for myself and my children differed from hers.

“Meredith, I am not going to raise my children this way,” I told her.

A couple of days after that conversation, my dad rented a truck and came to get Stephen and I. This was the beginning of some very tough conversations with Meredith and Jack. I won't go into the details of some of the ugly things they said to me, but I will tell you that our relationship was very strained. Making the divorce even harder on them was the fact that Steve made no attempt to be a part of the children's lives.

Over the years, they were able to maintain a relationship with the children, but I know it wasn't the relationship they wanted. I made sure that they had time with the children whenever they were in the area. This was not easy for me, as I never felt comfortable around them. It was difficult for me to understand how they could treat me like I was a bad person, yet maintain a relationship with their son, who was neither paying child support nor acknowledging his children.

Sixteen years after my divorce, I received a call from Jack inviting me and the boys down to their place for the weekend. This was not something I wanted to do but I felt that we should. So we made the five-hour trip to White Stone, Virginia.

We drove down the long, gravel-stoned road that serves as the access point to only three other homes and pulled into the driveway. I looked around and thought how odd it was to be back here. It is a large house that sits on the water with a beautiful dock. It was very quiet and you could hear the water splashing against the dock. I sat in the car for a few seconds and took a deep breath. Shortly, Meredith and Jack come out to greet us. We grabbed our bags, unpacked, and headed to the dock. We spent the rest of the day hanging out outside. Jack began cooking dinner and also started his ritual of drinking his wine. After dinner, I felt the need for a break and I wanted to get out of the house for a bit. We told Meredith and Jack we were going to the McDonald's for a milkshake. This was just an excuse we used so we could get away and take a breather.

The kids and I got in the car and drove to a little beach that I remembered. As we sat on the chilly sand we talked about how happy Meredith and Jack seemed that we made the visit. We discussed how they seemed to be aging and that we made the right decision by coming down. We also talked

about some of the changes we noticed about them. They seemed to be much more relaxed than in the past, and not as uppity as they had been. One of the things we really noticed was that they allowed their dog on the couch. This was huge! This was not something the Townes had allowed previously. We left the nice little beach and drove back to their house.

When I returned, Meredith was waiting up for me. I was a little surprised by this because before we left they said they would probably be going to bed and that we should just let ourselves back in. She waited for the kids to go upstairs and it was just her and I in the kitchen.

“Dana, do you have a few minutes?” she asked. “I waited up for you because I wanted to talk.”

As I was standing in her kitchen, I thought, Oh boy, here we go. This should be interesting.

“Sure, Meredith, what’s up?” I said.

“Dana, I would like to thank you for all you have done with the children. You have done such a good job, and I know our son has done nothing.”

I was shocked; I had been waiting for this for years. I could not believe the words coming out of this woman’s mouth.

“Thank you,” I said. “How long did it take you to admit this to yourself?”

“A very long time,” she answered.

As she spoke those words, the tears started coming down her face. My heart went out to her. This poor woman was admitting to me that the son she raised was a disappointment to her. I felt horrible. All these years, I was angry with them because they did not give me the respect that I felt I deserved. I wanted to make them feel ashamed for the way they treated me. However, at that moment, I realized how difficult it had been for them to watch their son abandon his children. I found myself walking in her shoes and a lot of the anger I had toward them started to dissipate. Things changed between us at that point. They began treating me as an adult and not like the young girl they first met. I knew they were thankful that I worked hard at raising their grandchildren, and they were proud of who they had become.

I think that all those years ago they had to make a decision. They were hurt that they would not have the relationship they wanted with their grandchildren, but if they acknowledged what their son was doing they would lose him too. Steve was their son and they loved him unconditionally. I began to understand why they did and said some of the things they did. This was their way of coping with loss.

THINGS TO DO AT LINCOLN

Clean your sneakers
Hear about Langston Hughes
Binge *Black Mirror*
Get angry
Smoke

Watch the football team lose
Imagine you're somewhere else
Draw connections between Plato and Drake
Skip the cafeteria food
Pledge

Think about things
Chat with Devin
Drive to the market
Skip class
Regret skipping class

Take a leave of absence
Stop by the Wellness
Play Fortnite
Pick up juggling
Hang out with all your fake friends

Write poetry
Figure things out
Run for student government
Get made fun of for juggling
Cheat

Join a club
Look for internships
Read Audre Lorde
Linger over feelings of pain and isolation
Live in the moment because it doesn't matter anyway

THIS SIDE OF THE STREET

Black woman:

The one of us who floats downstream,
Her soul born in the middle of the road,
Her body kicked to the curb and stuck there.
Whole turned to half by her loved ones,
Abandoned with broken spirit,
Black woman is left at the mercy of her kin.
They see her pain,
But fail to hear it.

Black woman:

Not unlike the whisk of a flame in the wind,
She whispers to be heard
But is not paid too much attention.
Quickly brushed through the air,
She is her own source of heat.
Don't care how old—
Don't matter whether black woman
Crashes her car
Or builds a fort under the sheets.

Black woman:

Stays outside in the rainfall,
Trapped in cold, bleak crevices,
Drifting between Black men who
Crept in and dropped out,
Humming promises
Of the quality that left her
On the side of this unforgiving street.
Black woman got no place to call home,
Only got places she can sleep.

BLACK MAN, LOVE ME BACK

Black man, black man, why don't you love me back,
A sister who identifies with your struggles and always has your back?
Taken for granted I am, and in my own community.
That's a shame.

You're a man who has faced oppression for years;
I can see how we can relate to one another.
But this is the same reason why I can't keep a man.

Afraid to be his true self, my black man is reluctant to be happy,
Scarred from the father he prayed on but never had is exactly
What I mean:
Unrealistic expectations, and anger at the world.

I want a black man who is kind, patient,
Loving by nature and a man of his word.
I want a black man's love to change my perspective on Earth.
But to him...that's a shame.

Black man, may I ask, what is your barrier to communication?
I could give you the manual to a woman like me
And I'm sure you still wouldn't understand it.
Open up your heart and uncover your ears,
Learn to use your strengths when facing your fears.
Hmm, that's a shame.

Attempting to show him better,
To be the woman he can confide in
Through journeys of stormy weather,
I vow to hold him dear to my heart,
But I must hold my values closer.
I am here to stay, but I cannot continue
loving what doesn't love me back.
That's a shame.

Reciprocate my energy—
I question why my black man cannot,
But I accept that this is what draws us apart.
As a black woman, I want my black man
To accept me being strong.
My black man should not be damaged
From his experiences, but should be relentless
Enough to string me along.
I want my black man to love me back,
My black man who I don't have to make excuses for,
My black man that knows how to act!

Wondering if there is a man out there
Who can love me the correct way,
I keep my options open, but I must say:
I continue to choose him first, last, and back-to-back.
Black man, please learn to love me back.

NAH, I'M GOOD

It was Sunday, and that always meant she was cooking. It was tradition. The smells of spices and vegetables touched the edge of his nose. She had probably just put on a pot of stew or yams since it was well past 6 a.m. The sheets scented with her perfume and his musk lingered on him. The bed was still warm.

It was time to get up, though. He realized he was naked and a small smile caught in his face. She was the culprit. He walked into the bathroom to wash his face: the freshness of cold water. Rust spiraled around the metal of the old sink. He looked at himself, trying to understand the marvel in the hard lines of his camel skin. Rough under the edges with hard choices and harder living, but alive. His eyes remained hooded, his knotted roots a dark thin coat to his hard skull—used to being called a knucklehead. He crushed these hard things, remembering where he was and who was here.

Kyyani danced, in everything she did, everything she was. That's what she was doing when he swamped into the kitchen. She was clad in only a white sheet that she had fashioned into some sort of African-style dress. But it was beautiful and erotic to him. She smiled, unaware but aware of him at the same time.

“Are you going to smile all day?” she said smally, stirring in sweet milk, grain, and nutmeg.

She was a delicate rhythm of soft and strong. Soft brown skin and a coarse pepper mane of steel that she kept braided or free. She was free, as if she hadn't caught the memo of the same old jazz tune everyone else was singing; she sang her own song. She was fire like that, tall and built strong with strong shoulders and pretty arms.

“If I'm going to be here all day.” His eyes caught hers and she smiled a bright smile that looked as if she had three smiles packed into that one. And in that, he felt love.

She watched him eat, as the slanted kitchen watched them. The stove too old to catch a flame without fire caught to it. The fridge that belched and wailed throughout the night, unable to keep things frozen or get out that ugly yellow tint, no matter how often it was scrubbed. The tiles that stood up on the corners like facts with outdated designs and dried-up glue. The table that had belonged to her grandmother and had probably been in her family long before that but was still just an old brown table with four legs. It

had been something of great wealth, an antique of the family, a reminder of circumstance that repeated.

He could tell she had something on her mind. He was uncertain whether it would cause a positive or negative outcome.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.” She tried to make it sound sweet, but an edge caught on her words.

“Tell me.” His body tensed slightly.

She breathed a heavy collection of air: “I met up with Charlie yesterday.”

He froze.

And she knew, instantly knew to try and calm him down, but it was too late. It was too late to try because he loved her.

“I know you ain’t talking bout that motherfucker from when you was little,” he said coldly, not even looking at her.

She was quiet, still, this was something touchy for her. It made her feel as if her seams were loosely sewn and would completely come undone if pressed on too firmly. He knew this but did not care, for he felt betrayed. He had slain these dragons and monsters, and yet here she was speaking to demons in broad daylight.

“Yes, he contacted me. He’s been removed from my mom and the kids for some time. He simply wanted to apologize and ask for forgiveness for what he did.” She was gone someplace now, her words sterile, eyes averted.

“And you gave it to him?” He slung the words at her in a near-rage.

“I’m nearly thirty years—”

“You telling me you had lunch with the sick motherfucker who used to watch you when you took showers? He used to crawl into the bed with you and force himself on you, Yan. What the fuck are you talking about he was your stepfather?” He was standing now, furious, thunder collapsing in his chest.

And in a rush, those memories flooded her. All the shame and secrecy pushed itself to the surface and she felt uncontrolled. She remembered feeling him watching her and knowing he was enjoying it as she undressed to shower. She knew there was nothing she could say. She remembered the anger and how nasty she felt. Always feeling like she was dirty or nasty when he would press himself against her after school before her mom came home from work. She remembered wanting to die, she remembered all the times he had raped her, even when she told her mother who denied it. She remembered it all far too crisply, and that’s what still cut, the memories, and he knew that.

“You don’t need to remind me of shit,” Kyyani said. “Like I don’t know what happened to me. It’s not your place!”

“Who’s place is it then!? Who’s been taking care of you and showing

you what a real man is supposed to do. I'm better than your father and any other nigga that's ever set foot in your life."

"You must have lost your mind. I am not your daughter or your property." She was now standing as well. "This is my life and my personal shit, so you don't get a say in telling me what to do."

And in that instant, she crushed him.

"Oh, it's your life?" He couldn't believe it. "You know what, you probably wanted to see him. None of that shit even happen like that. You missed him."

And in that, he crushed them.

He knew he had gone too far, but there was no taking it back.

Tears erupted in her eyes, but not one fell. She just stood there, staring at him, the pieces of her soul exposed and raw. Because a deep-down part of her that was bruised and innocent still had wanted to see him. He had been a father-figure to her as a child, but she had separated those two entities, the monster and the man, and she wanted to forgive him because she still loved the man. How could she explain this to him? How could she tell this to the man she was in love with without feeling more shame and judgement from him? She could not, so she did not. She chose to put it back in the drawer of her mangled psyche and push towards something that felt good.

"Elijah," she said softly, "let's just go back to bed. I really can't deal with all of this right now. I put it to rest when I saw him."

But he was too far gone away from her. His heart had been put into the drawer of his own mangled psyche. Which saw blood, and felt hurt, and wanted to protect the most special thing in his life. But someone else had touched it first, wilted and tainted the petals of his most beautiful flower, and he couldn't stand it. He couldn't even touch her. Even though he knew she needed it, even though he wanted to, he could not.

"Nah, I'm good," he said numbly.

He got dressed and left, and all the while she stood there, washed away by the crashes of her emotions and thoughts.

His thoughts echoed as his footsteps pounded the block. He had been the man in her life, he had protected her, he had fought for her, held her down, he had been everything her punk-ass father and that sick perverted fuck had never been, but she chose him. He wanted to kill him, end his sorry life and probably keep a lot of little girls safe. He began calculating.

He went to his man's house. All his friends were already there chilling and smoking and talking shit. They had a few girls there but the faces blurred

in the smoke. All of them began to look like the real versions of themselves: little girls seeking the love and acceptance of the men around them. Some sort of unconscious exchange between young, brown-skinned folk.

He was mellow now, calmer from smoking a Backwood stuffed to ease his woes. But they really weren't his. Just friction in understanding the emotional space each of them lived in.

He still wanted to kill that motherfucker, though. So he rode around after leaving his homies, only taking his man Dre with him in case things went left. But the whole thing was making his head throb. The anger, the tension, the red in his eyes. Until they pulled up to the corner and saw him.

He was dirty, sitting outside a local stop-and-go on the corner. He was in a wheelchair with a leg missing. The snot had frozen on his face, his baggy jacket barely held together.

Suddenly, Elijah felt a lump in his throat. His friend asked him what he wanted to do, telling him he was still down for whatever. So they got out.

Elijah kicked him right out of the wheelchair, feeding off his fear and defenselessness, wanting him to feel used and taken advantage of. But Elijah did not feel satisfaction in his punches. He didn't really feel anything. He just kept on. And soon they left him there, not checking or turning back to assess the damage.

Afterwards they went to the strip club. He didn't want to think about it anymore. He didn't want to feel it anymore. He just wanted to drift away. He knocked back a few healthy shots of brown liquor and let some random dancer grind her ways all over him. She was pretty and young, dark-skinned with dimples, kind of body that ain't shy no matter what she put it in. But she was in something neon that was hurting his eyes. She whispered an offering in his ear.

"Why don't you take me home with you cutie? I get off soon."

"N-no," he slurred.

She moved her hands further down to his zipper. He half let her, half fought her. Soon her head was making its way to his dick. He tried to move her but she was persistent. It would have turned him on if his mind had not been so consumed with him and Kyyani. He pushed her again.

"What's wrong with you? This ain't something you want? Fine, just pay me."

And he did. He tipped her well.

"Is there anything else?" she said, being kind again after the big tip, her desire returning.

"Nah, I'm good."

Soon he was in front of Kyyani's door. And when she opened it he

knew she had been crying because her eyes were soft and puffy. She looked so pretty to him still. He grabbed her in an embrace, despite her protests, despite her insults. He carried her fighting all the way to the bed. And she began to cry, deep earthy expressions that made him feel a physical part of her emotions. He just held her.

“Are you all right?” he whispered, concerned that she was broken or his damage was irreparable. He did not have words, for he was sure she knew what he had done. He was sure she understood the implications and repercussions of this situation. He knew it in her breathing, and still he held her.

“Nah, I’m good,” she said with the most beautiful, pain-placed smile, and their eyes gently touched, then did not, like the dance of a match.

RESEMBLANCE

You look just like your father

 I've heard we have the same face

Yes, I see it in your chiseled jaws, stern eyes, and flat noses

You're built just like him too

 I guess we're both built like strong men

Yes, your firm chests, strong shoulders, and sculpted bodies

In fact, you must be just like him

 I am not

 For

 I would never lift my hand against a woman.

BOXING MY DEMONS

I went to fight disbelief,
I went to fight for our relief.
My mind is burden-free,
So fear is out to murder me.

When I was young
I vocalized from tongue,
My first experience of demeaning
Me and I in disagreement.

The first words I rung
Tussled with tin-tough lung,
And a long battle through many seasons,
Rounds fought right-out raw,
Was spent boxing my demons.

OFFERINGS

Some days

I give the toilet more offerings than I give my body
sometimes

I make my body purge itself to please a porcelain god
the feeling of purging often leaves me more dirty than clean

Clean myself of sin

purge myself of offerings

Thou shall not make yourself an idol

Thou shall not make offerings to an idol god

Take back these offerings

I will drag them out of my throat

painfully destroying my idol in the process

making my idol a hallowed god

bathroom floors have become sacred ground for this ritual

Of emptying myself

of making myself an offering

because what is a better offering than

your most precious possession?

Didn't god ask Abraham to give his only son

and wasn't he rewarded tenfold?

So maybe if I continue to give my last bit

of essence this god will bless me with the body I so desire

maybe if I continue to empty myself

there will be nothing left of me

And I will call it a miracle

because isn't it a miracle that even when I become empty

I will still have something to offer tomorrow?

I will have a smile for a man who doesn't deserve it

a kind word for a person who doesn't deserve it

an offering for a god who doesn't deserve it.

PANIC ATTACK

Oh no. Ursula has taken my voice again
I try to speak and with every attempted word
My breath is stolen too, my chest tightens
punishment for trying to fight the thoughts
maybe I should let them take over
never-ending fight with my demons.

No end in sight
maybe I should let my demons win
drag me home to the hell I know so well
the constant torture
only I'm the one inflicting the pain.

Not able to stop as if the devil himself controls my hands
I lost my soul a long time ago so I can't sell it for peace
I beg god for guidance but he is nowhere to be found
all these holy books hold no answers.

I try to cry out so someone can help but my breath is stolen
and my chest clenches tighter
my demons taunt me
dragging tears out of my eyes.

I am unable to wipe them because
my hands are still tearing at my skin
trying to distract myself from this slow suffocation
taunting laughter fills my ears, reminding me I'm nothing but a joke.

One day I'll be able to laugh as well
but right now laughter will cost me
oxygen that I already don't have enough of
the thoughts wrap themselves around my throat and
I find myself choking on self-hatred mixed with a forced confidence.

I was doing so well this morning
what happened?

How am I going to explain to them that
I can't fight these thoughts anymore
that I have no fight left
that every ounce of my strength is going
towards me keeping air in my lungs?
How can I explain anything when I have no voice?

My demons have committed the perfect crime
they have left a victim who can't tell what's wrong
the thoughts keep running
my nails dig deeper into my skin
I can't breathe.

All I can do is scream inside my head
that I need help
that I'm not okay
that nothing is ever okay
that the only reason I smile is because I'm too sad to cry.

I keep my shallow breaths going
mind hanging on to my last bit of sanity
like my body is holding on to my last bit of air
closing my eyes, hoping to shut out everything
but the darkness is where evil things play.

It gets worse
I no longer hear the voice of my guardian angel
instead the devil whispering that it would be easier
to let go
to give up
to let the last bit of breath leave my body
to finally cut that lifeline that holds my precious blood.

I'd be better off dead
he taunts me with a paradise
I can only see though the noose of a rope
a paradise that only appears in the puddles of my blood
a paradise I can only visit in a forever dream
I find myself choking harder on these thoughts of peace
that maybe I can rest in the tears watering the grass above my grave.

SHOT

PART I

There was thirteen seconds left in regulation and we were down by two. Luckily, we had possession. This was the moment we had been waiting for. We hustled and worked our asses off all season for this moment, the Georgia High School Basketball State Championship. Coach called a timeout. We huddled around him and he started giving us a choice.

“A layup sends us into overtime and a three-pointer wins us the game,” he yelled over the roaring crowd. “What will it be, boys?”

Jeremy and I looked at each other and smiled. The arena was loud, but our huddle remained silent as we contemplated risk versus reward.

Finally, I spoke up. “I’ll inbound the ball to Jeremy and then run to the top of the arc.”

Jeremy cut me off and quickly said, “Once you get to the arc, I’ll pass you the ball and set a pick.” He took a pause. “Do you think you can hit that three?”

I shot back sarcastically, “Is the sky blue?”

Coach looked around the huddle and said, “I love you, boys.” His voice stumbled as if he was going to cry.

“LION PRIDE!” we yelled and put our hands in the middle of the huddle. Then we let out a mighty roar. The crowd loved when we did that. They went wild, shouting at the top of their lungs.

I inbounded the ball to Jeremy and ran to the top of the arc as we had planned. Jeremy crossed a defender then tripped on his foot and the ball went free. I ran toward the ball and was elbowed in the mouth by an opposing player making a run for the ball. The taste of my own blood filled my mouth. I spat out blood on the court.

Jeremy somehow managed to get the ball back, so I ran back to the arc as Jeremy passed the ball and came in for a pick. When I caught the ball there were two seconds left. With blood dripping from my mouth, I sprang up and delivered the most important shot of my high school career. The horn rang to symbolize the end of the game.

Nothing but net.

The crowd went insane. Jeremy and the rest of the team ran toward me and threw me on the hardwood floor in excitement. I just won our school’s first-ever state championship. Coach ran out on the court and pulled my

teammates off me. His big brown arms coiled around me and he said, "I love you, son," with eyes full of tears.

I replied with tears of my own, "I love you too, Dad."

After the game, the team, my dad, and I went out for dinner. We stunk of sweat and hard work but we didn't care. We were riding on a ray of sunshine and nothing could ruin this night.

In the middle of the meal, Jeremy randomly stood up and said, "Let's hear a speech from the MVP, The King of Threes, King Splash!"

I replied, "Na, man. I'm just tryna eat."

He wouldn't take no for an answer and started chanting, "Speech, speech, speech." In unison, the team followed his lead: "Speech, speech, speech."

I looked at my father. He shrugged and said, "Might as well."

Annoyed, I stood up and spoke. "Thank you, brothers, for helping me along this season. Thank you for being there when I needed you and thank you for dealing with emotions for the game. I might have pulled off the final shot, but this was a team win. Every one of you did just as much as I did. I love you guys. I couldn't ask for a better family."

They all started clapping. I felt uneasy and just wanted to sit down and enjoy my meal. Before I could make it back to my seat, Jeremy walked up to me with the trophy in his hands and held it out to me. The trophy was a beautiful metallic gold color and depicted a young athlete shooting a basketball. It was simple yet beautiful. I grabbed the trophy and grabbed Jeremy and we held the award up together and let out a mighty, "LION PRIDE!"

PART II

I woke up in the early morning to the loud pop of a pistol being shot across the street. The sound had ceased to frighten me. I would find out who was shot in the morning. Their loved ones would cry on morning TV, pleading for an end to the senseless violence. Nothing would change. Nothing ever does.

Three years had passed since my Dad had been shot and killed. The events played vividly in my mind every time I closed my eyes. The day we became state champs was the day I lost him.

After eating our meal and saying bye to the team, Jeremy, my father, and I hopped in the car and headed for Jeremy's house. During the ride, my dad was making fun of the opposing team's coach. "His face was wrinkly like a walnut," he chuckled, as Jeremy and I laughed along.

We pulled up to the house, said our goodbyes to Jeremy, and drove off. On the way to our own house, my dad stopped at a gas station. He got out and started filling up the tank. A chubby man with red hair and a patchy beard stumbled drunkenly towards my father.

“Say, aren’t you that nigger coach that stole our game,” he shouted, slurring his words.

“No, I’m the black coach who fairly won our game. I am no nigger, sir, and I condemn you for using such language.” An educated man, my father spoke articulately and powerfully.

The man pulled a gun from his hip and aimed it at my father. I looked out the window and immediately threw open the car door and ran to my father. Two loud pops came from the weapon. I was too late. My father lay there, and the man attempted to run away, stumbling over every step. I came to my dad and held him tight. Two bloody holes in his chest stained his white dress shirt.

With his dying breath, he mumbled, “Be brave, son. Protect your mom.”

Crying, I said, “It’s gonna be okay, dad. You’re gonna make it home. I love you. I need you.”

He looked at me with tears in his eyes and smiled. The life in his eyes faded. He was gone.

I turned around in my bed to look at my alarm clock. In neon green, it read: 5:37 a.m.

“Might as well get up and make some money,” I said to myself as I grabbed my pistol and dope from under the mattress. My mom would be so disappointed if she knew what I had been up to. My mom took my father’s death the hardest, but she remained strong. She got a couple of jobs and provided for the both of us. I could tell she was dying inside, and I wanted to help her. She would come home from her morning job exhausted and then go to her night job. It hurt to see my mother like that. I spoke with my uncle and got a job. It wasn’t honorable, but we needed the money and my mom needed help. My uncle regulated drugs and guns within his neighborhood.

As I was walking to my corner, I saw a familiar face. I prayed he didn’t recognize me from across the street as I proceeded to my destination. When I arrived, an addict was already there. He had a shopping cart with him, full of trash.

“Y-yuh got anything t-today?” he stuttered.

“It depends,” I replied. “You got the cash?”

He pulled a dirty twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. I looked the man up and down, examining all his features. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties. His lips were white, and his skin was dirty with scars and other markings. I wondered how he had ended up like this. I wondered how I had ended up like this.

I took the cash and gave him a bag. He held the bag in his hand and asked, “Is that it?”

Pulling up my shirt to expose my pistol, I replied, "I could give you something else instead."

"I'm s-sorry," he said softly.

"Get out of here," I told him.

I hated selling dope, *hated* it. I pulled out my gun and gazed at it methodically. I wanted to die and all I needed was an excuse to put the gun to my head and end my suffering.

The familiar face from before came walking towards me. I turned around and started walking away. He yelled, "Hey King, is that you?"

It was Jeremy. I turned around and smiled.

"What have you been up to? I haven't seen you in years," he said.

"Tryna live life and help out my mom. How about yourself?" I said.

"Nothing much. How's your mom?"

"She's all right," trying to avoid further conversation.

"Does she know?"

"Does she know what?" I asked in confusion.

"Does she know her son sells crack?" he said.

I stood there looking at the ground and said nothing.

"I'm disappointed in you. You and I both know damn well this isn't what your father wanted. In addition, I know your momma wouldn't approve. I'm telling her. I want what's best for you, bro. Your mom needs to know."

I looked up at him and pulled out the pistol. He took a step back and asked, "Are you gonna shoot me?"

"No," I replied, and put the gun to my head.

MY HEART IS SWALLOWING THE REST OF MY BODY

“My heart is swallowing the rest of my body,”
as I remain lost in my own thoughts,
not able to speak the things that plague my mind,
because words don’t exist for these convoluted feelings.

My heart takes over,
not knowing it’s the beginning of the end,
for my heart is more reckless than my mind,
leading me down these obscure paths with no end,
a black hole on a fine line between
my needs and wants.

It seems there’s no end to the confusion,
no direction in my steps,
no method to the madness.
My heart is swallowing the rest of my body
in an attempt to create order in this unbalanced abyss.

Lucidity is what I seek,
and the path to righteousness
is being spearheaded by the heart itself.
Almost beating out of my chest,
my heart attempts to take its rightful place
past my lungs, taking my breath.

Up my throat, stealing my voice,
into my head, pushing out every
ounce of sense I once had.
Under new management,
I’m just trying to find clarity.

GARDENER OF SMALL JOYS

smiles on faces
good mornings from strangers
a moment of meditation
your favorite song on the radio

green grass growing
when it finally stops snowing
funnel cakes and boardwalks
beach strolls and long talks

shooting stars
the sound of crickets on a warm summer's night

moving with the wind
and shining as the sun
my soul is fed

no preference in selection
content with things as they are

I am a gardener of small joys

BE WATER

Be see-through

Be pure

Be wavy

Be essential

Be replenishing

Hold a purpose

Be needed

When the world is cold, be sturdy

When things get hot, be elusive

Be adaptive

Calm and soothe and devastate the masses

Be loved and feared simultaneously

When people abuse you, be scarce

And when people love you, be there

Be necessary

Be natural

Be Water

MAY THE BLOSSOM SPRING

You remind me of a cherry blossom that grows in spring.
When you bloom, happiness in others you bring.
When your flowers are gone, our hearts are torn,
Praying for the next time your presence will sprout.

And behold, there I will be, ready to come about
When the rain falls and washes your beautiful petals away.
I do not despair, as I know they will come back and grow another day.
Life is but a long winter and you are the blossoming spring.

You are like a goddess to whom I pray.
I hope your blessings never go away:
Your temple is a place I wish to stay.

Happiness must be real, I say,
For you to have been born in May!

I SINK INTO THE MUD, MY EARTH BECOMES

So drunk (it's like) earth's fallin upon me (HEAVY)
Sinkin in w/ropes (tide aside) like Jordan
pulled fast to Looney Tunes side (I'm chosen)
(sink into the mud, my earth becomes)
a jungle, no CAPITALIZED system
giving to those who know where they're going
ya handouts don't help out how we're flowin
I stir, in control, this ocean overloads w/ pirates overboard
(we sink into the mud, the earth becomes)
a violent tornado/crowded drastic elevator/haters, nay-sayers/hop on dick
below sea level
women doggy paddle (see if I'll settle)
but the weight of them brings me down
spin the world around on my fingertips/careful steady grip
shoot for yall (never miss)
Still imperfect!
Will fall
(& sink ina mud, my earth becomes)
a valid hurricane (let it rain)
Irma, Harvey, Jose never seen no strength like this mighty fist
thru a building quick, cement falls
debris dissolves ona ground
(sinks into the mud, my earth becomes)
a battleground!
boxing gloves louder than M-16 ROUNDS (clips fall)
(my earth ignores them all)
Consumes force feet to fist, passion blows hit till you fall
Opponents (sink into the mud, my earth becomes) CUTTHROAT!
Earthquakes/shakes mountains/ocean wishes to be birds at the moment
The ground falls so low
High off altitude & weed
(Pass it plzzz) we cough & spit it
(ina mud my earth becomes)
THC cannabis leaves/pot-pickers please feel free/grab handfuls of weed

(this shit grow on trees!)

EASY/diggin ina mud/growin bud from above

Put my BLOOD, SWEAT, & TEARS

(ina mud my earth becomes)

whatever I make it to be.

WHEN THE LILIES WILT

Here I am, sitting with my back pressed against our oaken bed frame, looking down at your corpse, wondering what your last thoughts were before you took your last breath. How will I protect myself next year? Who will get hurt this time? Will I survive? Will they? I guess this isn't the best time to ponder on your thoughts. Your blood is still spilling out and seeping into our blue sheets with the blue daisies scattered all over, each daisy such a perfect distance apart. I always envied the space each daisy had, wishing I could be the perfect distance away from you. It's only a matter of time before Lily comes through the door and makes sure you're okay, as she does every April 28th. Things weren't always this bad, or maybe they were and we ignored how bad they were. The one thing in our life that has never changed is that on April 28th, your wounds heal and mine remain.

When I first met you, everything was perfect. I was working my usual daytime shift at Nyla's Garden, the flower shop just down the block from my house, when you walked in. I will never forget the moment I first saw you: dark chocolate skin so rich, almond-colored eyes that twinkled in the light, chiseled jawline, full lips, and broad nose. It was as if God had perfectly created each and every one of your features. Your presence was not to be ignored and you made sure of it. I rearranged the chrysanthemums, attempting to act like I hadn't noticed you, typical me around any attractive guy. I watched as you walked around the shop, your eyes fixed on the pink lilies. I didn't realize I was staring until you looked my way. My immediate reaction was to pretend that I was checking the flowers to make sure that they weren't wilting, but you saw right through my facade. As you walked up to me, my heart pounded faster and faster.

"Excuse me," you said, searching for my name tag. "Laila, is it? How much is a bouquet of pink lilies?"

"The bouquets of pink lilies typically start at 25 dollars, depending on the size. What's the special occasion?"

"My mother's birthday. I want to surprise her at work."

"How sweet! You should definitely go with the large bouquet for 40 dollars. It also comes with a free vase if you do a quick survey about our services today."

"Okay, I'll trust your instincts, Ms. Laila. I'm Nigel, nice to meet you."

If only I knew that this moment was the start of the end of my normal life.

The next few months included some of the most amazing times of my life, from walks in the park with ice cream in the summer to ice skating on the pond in the winter. We were young and enjoying our twenties, the fresh-out-of-college feeling. We were stuck between dreading adulthood and enjoying all of the free time we had. I thought we had the same problems. I thought there wasn't a better person to go through these years of my life with other than someone who was going through the same things. I thank you for the experiences you gave me: they made up for the time I wasted, or so I thought.

I spent most of my days with you, but never on your birthday. You went on a special skiing trip every year with your parents. I never questioned it. I figured everyone has their sacred moments with their families. I even have my holidays that I always spend with my family, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, but eventually I started inviting you to these celebrations, introducing you to my family. I never wanted to ask you to invite me on your birthday skiing trips. I wanted you to invite me, but that invitation never came.

I remember the year you turned 27. It was April 21st, six days before your special day. We were hanging out in my kitchen, discussing the impossible weather in Toronto during April, but how the six months of summer would make up for it. I dreaded the fact that you would be leaving in six days, but I enjoyed the moments I was able to spend with you up until then. The following day, I received a call from your best friend, Michael, that you were in the hospital due to an accident at the construction site. I immediately rushed to Bennet Hospital. Pushing through the heavy metal doors, out of breath, I rushed into the emergency room.

"Nigel Scott's room number please!" I said to the receptionist.

"I.D. please, and who exactly might you be to Mr. Scott? A family member? A spouse?"

"His fiancée."

I lied. I needed to see you, to make sure you were okay. After being checked in, I rushed up to your room. As I turned each corner, hoping to see room number 345, the walk felt endless. Finally, I was at your room and I saw you, sitting up in the hospital bed with a cast on your leg.

"It's just a broken leg, babe," you said, noticing how anxious I was.

"Why didn't Michael say that? I rushed over here thinking I was about to say goodbye to the love of my life." We laughed about it, as we did most things. This moment made me realize how much you truly meant to me. The fear I felt when I thought I would lose you was extremely intense. Maybe it was because I loved you or maybe it was because of the life growing in my stomach that I had yet to tell you about. No matter the reason, I knew I wanted to protect you by any means.

On April 26th, just a few days after you were in the hospital, I walked into my apartment, which was beginning to feel a lot like ours, surprised to see you packing clothes into a suitcase. I forgot all about your skiing trip the next day, but what I didn't understand was why you were still going.

"Nigel, seriously? Your leg is literally in a cast. How are you possibly going on your skiing trip now?" I don't know what I was more annoyed by: the fact that you were still going on a skiing trip injured, or the fact that you would be spending yet another one of your birthdays without me.

"Relax, Laila. I won't be skiing. I'll spend most of my time in the cabin or watching my parents skiing. I need this getaway. Sitting in the house all day is driving me crazy." You kissed me goodbye, grabbed your coat and suitcase, and walked out the door.

I'm not sure what was different this year, but I decided that I was tired of the unknown. I was never able to meet your parents. I was never able to spend your birthday with you. I felt that you were hiding something from me, so I did what any rational girlfriend would do. I followed you.

The following day, I grabbed my blue parka, some very tinted shades, and hopped into my black Jeep. You always told me that you went to Greenville Slopes, Cabin 27. I punched Greenville Slopes into my navigation system and was on my way. During the entire ride, I felt crazy. I felt like I should've trusted you instead of following you to see if you were actually telling the truth, but I convinced myself that I deserved answers.

As I pulled up to Cabin 27, the sun was setting. I sat in my car for twenty minutes before I gained enough courage to finally get out. I planned to walk up to the door and tell you exactly how I felt about everything, but as I walked past the front window I saw you, Nigel, hovering over a man in all black. I saw the bullet in his head, the blood spilling out onto the floor. I was so shocked that I shouted. Our eyes connected and I immediately ran to the side of the cabin, out of fear. I didn't know how to approach you after seeing you murder someone in cold blood. Where were your parents? Who did you murder? So many thoughts ran through my mind. While looking for answers, I only ended up with more questions.

"Laila?! Laila?! Baby, please. Let me explain!" I heard you say from a distance. In that moment, I didn't know what to do or where to go, so I stood still. Eventually, you were standing right in front of me.

"You cannot be here, Laila. There are some things about me that you do not know, but what I need you to understand is that you can never come here, especially on my birthday!"

Before I was even given a chance to respond, another man in all black ran from around the corner and pointed his gun at me. You hopped in front

of me and grabbed your gun so swiftly that you killed him before he could even pull the trigger.

“Laila, I need you to go in the cabin now! Go in the back room and lock the door! Do not come out of your room until the sun comes up. You hear me?!”

Although I did not respond, I ran as fast as I could to the back room like you told me. I locked the doors and waited. I waited so long that it felt like the night would never end. I heard constant gunshots and bodies dropping. I had no idea if the bodies were the men in black or if one of the bodies was you, but I did as you told me. I stayed in the back room with all of the lights turned off and remained as quiet as I possibly could. I’m not sure if it was the shock that allowed me to follow your directions or the fear for my life, but when the sun rose I stayed in the same position that I had sat in all night. I heard a knock at the door and jumped out of fear.

“Laila, it’s me, Nigel! Please open the door so we can talk. I know you have a lot of questions. This is the last thing you were expecting, but I can explain it all.”

I got up and opened the door. The first thing I noticed was that your cast was missing. You were walking without a limp, as if your leg had never been broken. I didn’t know what to say or how to react to what happened during the night, so you spoke first.

“Listen, Laila. I know this may all sound crazy, but you need to listen to me before you jump to conclusions about what happened last night, from the murders to my cast being gone. Just listen to me before you speak.” You paused. “I am not normal,” you continued. “Well, 364 days of the year I am, but on my birthday something different happens. Every year on my birthday, the people who created me come back to destroy what they made. I am not exactly human. On my birthday, I am cursed with the ability to be hurt and heal the next morning. Hence, my cast being missing. I go away to Cabin 27 because they know where to find me and they cannot hurt you. Whoever is trying to hurt me knows that I will live to see the next day, but they want me to feel pain on my birthday every year. Every year I fight. Every year I leave to protect you. Please understand that.”

I couldn’t believe the words I was hearing. I couldn’t accept the things you were telling me, but I also couldn’t leave because I loved you so much and life was growing inside of me and neither of those things were changing any time soon. I didn’t want to do this on my own. I just couldn’t understand why you had kept the truth from me for so long.

“Nigel, I’m pregnant. A week ago, the doctor heard two heartbeats. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know how and now all of this is only adding

to it. Next year, I want to fight for you. I want to protect you by any means. For our family.”

Months went by and although I couldn't wrap my head around what you had told me, we focused on the pregnancy. We baby-proofed the entire house, we got excited about choosing names, and we found out that we were having a boy and a girl. We decided to name them after flowers, being that we met in Nyla's Garden. We came up with Lily, like the flowers you bought simply to catch my attention, and Anthony, from the Greek word "Anthons," which means "Rose." We got married and we were happy. Every year, we sent our kids away on April 27th and fought to protect you. When our kids were old enough, we trained them to fight, and we taught them to be ready. Maybe I grew tired of seeing how this abnormal situation affected our kids' lives, or maybe it was seeing how all of our scars stayed except for yours. Maybe it was the year we almost lost Anthony, but yesterday I just grew tired. 25 years of my life I have fought for you. 25 years of my life, April 27th could've meant the end of your life, or Lily's, or Anthony's, or mine.

Today, I looked over at you, peacefully sleeping. I watched as your wounds healed from last night. I waited for the sun to rise the same way I did when we were 27, the night I found out what you truly were.

"I love you, Nigel, but I cannot live another year fearing for my life or my children's," I said in a low whisper. I broke the flower pot on our nightstand, full of wilted pink lilies. Then, I pierced your heart with the sharpest piece. After 25 years of protecting you from losing your life, on April 28th, I ended yours.



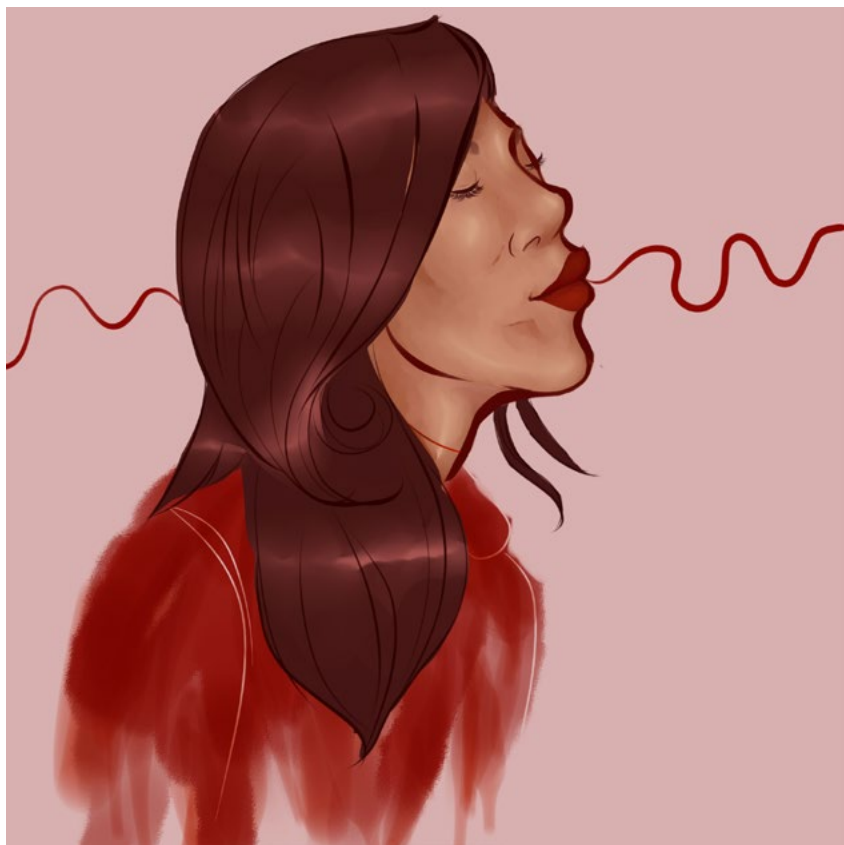
Embrasia Parker
Flowered Girl



Embrasia Parker
Untitled



Gianna Moon
Lady Luck



Gianna Moon
Curiosity Killed the Katz



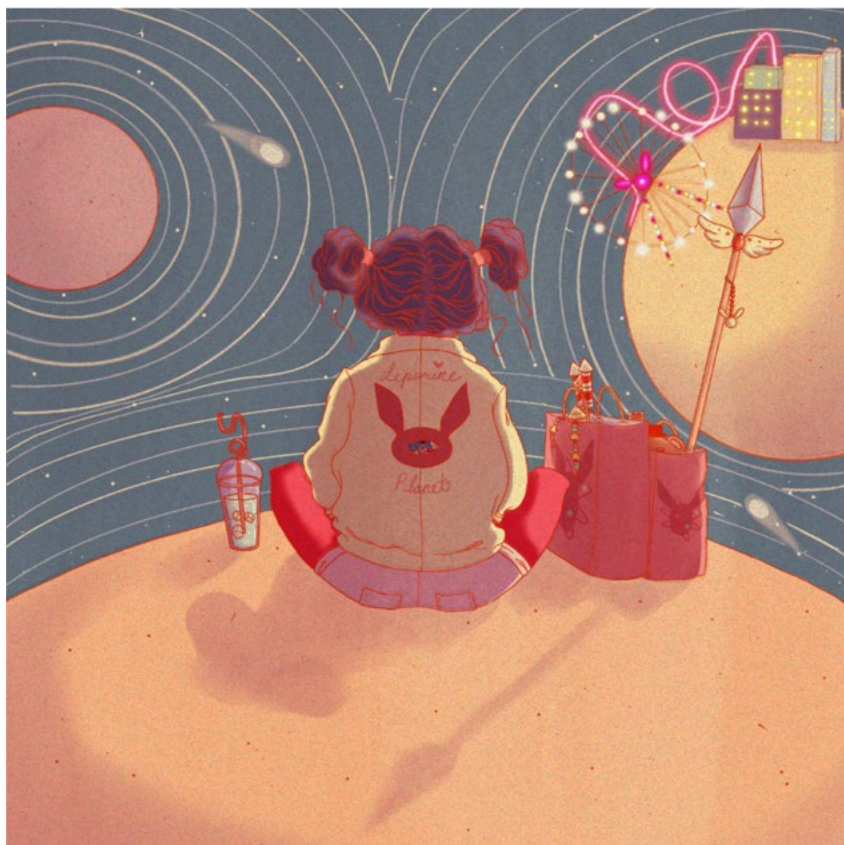
Gianna Moon
What's Up, Danger



Kyle Gordon
Gateway



Kyle Gordon
One Small Step for Man



Jaelyn Jackson
Leporine Planet Amusement



Jaelyn Jackson
For a Friend



Jaelyn Jackson
Night in the Woods



Jaelyn Jackson

Sister Florence...Is That You?



Quantae White
Untitled

THE WEEPING WILLOW

*I am ready for love,
Why are you hiding from me?
I'd quickly give my freedom
To be held in your captivity.*

—India Arie

You were a purple sunflower,
Or maybe you'd call yourself
My crestfallen chrysanthemum.
Stood tall, stood for nothing,
My forgotten angel:
You were summertime.
Green with envy,
Red in vain,
Your colors were a kaleidoscope.

You found yourself angry at the world
And I couldn't escape you.
You were everything and nothing.
You were nature, it was in your nature.

Oh how I love those willow trees,
The place where I was lost and found.

As you contoured in the shadow of the moon,
You weeped like my willow, and your soul
Danced like your ancestors did,
Twisting in union with the ground,
Finding matrimony in the way the trees
Kissed the sky at dawn,
In wedlock with the flames of my incineration.

I lost myself,
But as I danced around your roots,
I fell in love with your shade,

And God only knows
How your darkness was addicting to me.

Time went by.
I became bruised by your branches
While your willow became prickly,
Colored in that abstract credibility.
I called myself your “El Diorblo,”
Because you were my Diablo:
My devil, my tormentor, and my sun.

And oh how you shined those many shades of gray.
I felt your iridescence,
And as the seasons changed you did too,
But beneath your branches I found my beautiful.

My skin itched and prickled,
And healing was never that easy.
Bruises bloomed feather light
Fuchsia in the fall, but then

Winter came,
And I learned what it was like
When you lost your grip
On those willow winds
Whipping you into dominion.

*She was limitless.
Limitations only resided within her mind.
Restless.
Fear, you lay deceptive beneath her lungs each time she took a breath.*

*To make these melodies a symphonic reminder of my agony.
I watched a martyr become a moon phase.
Her, she tamed and taught
that love and pain are the same thing.
Two-faced,
Like the lies she was told.
Her light dimmed
And she was eclipsed.*

Lackluster,

A circumference of broken bone marrow and fine skin aged like wine.

An epiphany lined the lengths of her tongue.

Do you know what it's like to love someone's hell and their halo?

My soul screamed,

My body bent,

And I became another casualty to a weeping willow.

Another brown body broken,

I became a willow that day,

And yes...

I wept.

VENUS RISING

Life is difficult when you're shaped like a grown woman.
Age 14 and I'm already attracting stares from my bodega man,
Asking me to be his next wife, promising to take care of me.
"You'll never have to pay for a chopped cheese ever again."
He laughs at me as I grab my bag and run.

See, my plaid skirt and red blazer should have told him no,
That behind every schoolgirl fantasy is a schoolgirl.
I was warned about men like you when I was just 9.
Puberty hit me like a freight train, turned me into this
Bodacious beauty that's standing before you:
14, *fourteen*, an adolescent.

The world is a cruel place for a little black girl,
But when you're shaped like a black woman it's even crueler.
I hate my breasts because they draw so much attention.
Damn them!
I hate my hips and waist because their sway attracts older men,
And the way the clothes drape against my body,
I am the silhouette of their dream girl: 14.

Rid me of this Lord!
I hate that I hate myself,
I hate that I must cover up.
"Big body gyal, come hop in my ride."
"Browning, you look real sweeet, nuh."
At 14, I am scared for what
The rest of my life has in store,
Because the world isn't a safe
Place for a black girl with the
Body of a woman.

COMFORT VS. CONDEMNATION

I don't like praying because it feels like a chore.
As much as you make me do it, I could never grasp the purpose of it.
It's too early for you to be yelling at me.
I don't know what I am feeling right now but it's not right.
I feel a darkness encompass me like a wall of fire
You pray protects me as I walk the streets every day.

Mommy, I can't help what I am feeling, but I think I want to end it all.

I am scared.
I can't get out of bed.
I can't describe the hurt I am feeling,
But all you can say is, "When's the last time you prayed?"
I lie and say last night.
I lie about praying a lot,
Because it doesn't help.

Sleep helps.
Eating helps.
Crying helps.
Your concern would help,
But to you it's just a phase.
"You have no reason to be sad, nuh,"
Then why do I feel like this?

The darkness that encompasses
Me is as frightening as Revelations.
Please hear me out before it's too late.
We pray on the car ride to school:
Well, you do; I just mumble,
"Help me."

MY MAMA SAYS

My mama says women's work is woman's worth.

My mama says there ain't no future without black man plus woman babies.

My mama says I wear too many pants.

My mama says there ain't no revolution

With two girls holdin hands on the television.

My mama says good women make good homes with good husbands.

My mama says all my acquaintances are female.

My mama says I drink too much.

My mama says good thing no accidents can happen.

My mama says I shouldn't live on my own.

My mama says I'm starting to look mannish.

My mama says.

My mama says.

My mama says.

HOME

This house can be a home,
until violence and thunderous voices
disrupt it.

As if the sheets have been spoiled.

Home is here, but here,
voices are muffled like cotton
stitched into your mouth as you pray
for an ounce of rain to cure
your aching, silent throat.
There can be times of great joy; decorated will
be the faces of your family as you sit around
a tuned-out TV or munch on the feasts of
society in the form of a gold-plated check.

This is home,
where how it seems is mostly how it seems,
but we're all itching and shifting uncomfortably in this skin.
A pressure cooker where the likes of
anyone could snap at any moment.

And they do.

But this home is quiet, a chorus
of hushed conflicts and love,
everlasting love, but that doesn't
mean that lightning hasn't often struck,
and the eyes of those here haven't gone cloudy...

...man, they just tryna get free,
but free in this is nowhere to be.
You just learn there is peace
if only you can grasp it, and eventually,
you can love past it.

WHAT WOULD I DO WITH A GIRL?

What would I do with a girl?
From the soft, indestructible haven,
She would descend desperately,
Seeking air that would welcome her,
And I would clench myself together
In understanding of the silent thunder
Traveling with her
In every passing angle of her girlhood,
And the quiet hot whispers that would
Fall on her like rain as a woman.
Nubian rich. What would I do with a girl?

Birth to the boys swell in me.
I can at least try to tell them to protect
Women, respectively and introspectively.
I can expect to teach them not to knock women like
Shutters, not to speak with bent-spined mutters.
I can at least attempt at giving them a father,
But it must not be that simple because
Have we not all wanted the same things?
A brown father for our brown babies,
Yet the absence has cut off the access.
We are bathing black blossoms
That bless our woolly-haired kind.

Yet I lay on this cold table, peace fleeing
From my spirit as white blinds me.
And the only thing brown has erupted
From the center of my virtuous, sticky Universe,
And I have pushed him from my womb
Into this world. This cold, ugly world.
But in his presence I am no longer the only piece
Of melanin in that room. I am no longer looking
Into the mirrored eyes of the devil.
But he is breathing this air in with them.

What would I do with the birth of a girl,
When I have yet to give birth to myself?
Still trapped in my own chasm of infinitely
Impossible choices, still encased in the weather
Of my man and the storm of my children,
Still wondering what sunlight tastes like,
Still burning with such emptiness
I don't notice it much more.

What have I to offer a girl?
Principles she will break
Or untruths she will only learn
When the time comes?
Will I wait for the light to leave her eyes
As she understands the meaning of her beautiful
Black skin, the richness in everything she is?
And someone will crush it.
I speak from the crushed.

Not anymore...

Like my slave-broken mamas who
Washed their princesses in the rivers
Of mercy, give me no girls.
That will recount what it means to suffer,
But who will encounter what it means to be strong,
Who will encounter everything that was
Never made for the black woman?

BE be BLACK

be bright, eloquent and educated,
but your might should be but a mist.
Be respectable, worthy only to those deserving,
a part of the harvesting of the bigger picture.
In this way sometimes you will fill your pitcher.

be Be black.
be happy, but don't hang your joy on display
like a cheap ad for all to see.
Tuck it deep in your warm brown soul
where no one can attempt
to blow out the flame on its candle.
Be strong, resilient, and unmoving,
always pushing yourself not to bend to
the powers of power that wish to wash
you away; you are not dirty laundry.

Be be black.
be kind and soft in every way you know how
that does not make you vulnerable like an eye,
that does not tear down the beauty in you.
Put some beauty back in the most ethereal way.
Be just; don't waver on morality,
because it always will find a way to push itself to the surface.
Be not binding in only words but careful action.

To Be and to be are a collective symmetry
of black skin, a twoness of sorts.
Learn how to Be be black.

IT'S NOT SAFE TO BE BLACK ON THURSDAY

I am aware of the shock that a sermon with this title might cause, but this is a reality that many of us have to deal with every day, and it is one that cannot go unaddressed. I am not arguing that it is only unsafe to be black on a Thursday, because for black people it is unsafe every day. We lament the apprehension of male suspects of ebony hue, you who have committed no discernible crime. You weren't doing anything illegal, nor were you attempting to disturb anyone near you. It also hurts that because of who you are, and not because of anything you've done, there are people who have a great hatred and disdain for you. It hurts to think that this is going on, but what hurts more is that you probably think I'm talking about Jesus's arrest, but I am referring to the two young black men who were arrested for being in a place where they should have been welcomed. On Thursday, April 12th, 2018, two young men were arrested in a Starbucks for allegedly "trespassing" due to them not purchasing anything from the store.

This is only one instance, but there have been many instances in which blacks have suffered at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve. I know you're wondering, what does being black have to do with Thursday? I'm so glad you asked! It has everything to do with it because:

It was on Thursday, December 1, 1955 that Rosa Parks was arrested.

It was on Thursday, April 4, 1968 that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

It was on Thursday, December 4, 1969 that Fred Hampton was assassinated.

It was on Thursday, December 4, 1969 that Mark Clark was assassinated.

It was on Thursday, July 17, 2014 that Eric Garner was murdered.

It was on Thursday, November 20, 2014 that Akai Gurley was murdered.

It was on Thursday, March 22, 2018 that Danny Ray Thomas was murdered.

It was on Thursday, April 12, 2018 that two men were arrested in Starbucks.

These are part of the public record, but all of us have experienced a terrible Thursday. Many of us only make it through Thursday with the thought that Friday is on the other side. But I know of a Thursday you wouldn't believe, a Thursday that Shonda Rhimes and her TGIT line-up could never fix. That terrible Thursday begins in John 13, which discusses Jesus's last supper. Jesus had an inclination that his life was coming to an end very soon, and decided to

have dinner with the people with whom he was closest. So, on Thursday (also known as Maundy Thursday), Jesus had a last meal with all of his friends, and at this meal he gave us the gift of communion.

Communion (or Eucharist) is a gathering of a community to eat a meal in remembrance of the person who made it possible. Communion is literally a community uniting together for a particular occasion or purpose. It is an opportunity to have fellowship with other like-minded individuals. To this day, we gather around the table (or in some cases, walk down the aisles) as a community gathered in remembrance of Jesus Christ for the Eucharist.

But there are people without the heart and mind of Christ who are eating at the table with us. During the last supper, Jesus departed from His disciples to pray alone, while they too were supposed to be praying. But while all the disciples were supposed to be praying, Judas was out betraying—the same Judas Iscariot that had walked with Jesus for the entirety of his ministry. How could Judas, who participated in this meal with Jesus, be the one to betray Him? Judas symbolically ate the body and drank the blood of Jesus, but then became the cause of bloodshed. How could you, Judas? How could you walk alongside Him and then go out of your way to privately betray Him? Judas, you had Jesus's direct contact information. Why didn't you just reach out to Him if you had an issue? Was it because you wanted to be in the good graces of the Roman Empire?

Whatever Judas's intentions were, he sold Jesus to the highest bidder, the Roman government. The Roman government, with its industrialized and privatized prison system, had the capacity to retain and punish anyone who had broken the law. Jesus Christ, an unarmed black man from the hood of Nazareth who had committed no crime, was arrested for unidentified and unjustified crimes. Jesus was so innocent that they dragged Him to five different courts in an attempt to charge Him. Why? Because He was a black man on Thursday, so surely He had committed a crime or two, right? You've seen this before, when a black person is killed by a police officer, followed by a search for a justifiable claim to the murder, and our society slanders the name of the victim. Jesus was arrested, and though Judas was prepared to hand Jesus over, the text teaches us that Jesus was prepared to go to Calvary.

As the soldiers and Judas were approaching, Jesus stepped up and asked them who they were looking for. Jesus, knowing that they were looking for Him, put Himself on the line in order to protect the rest of the disciples. When they responded that they were looking for "Jesus of Nazareth," Jesus responded, "I am HE," and the soldiers let the disciples go.

This text teaches me something: in the midst of my Judas-like betrayal and breach of safety, I can hide behind the Lord, who will sacrifice Himself

to save me. On a Thursday, when it can feel like there is no hope of a future, Jesus stood up for me and said, “Let these men go.” He took on the death alone that we all should have shared together, sacrificing His life to ensure that His family would survive. In the midst of Judas-like betrayal, Christ looks beyond the situation to protect a people He knows are unsafe.

In order for it to be safe for blacks on Thursday, some work must be done. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until all people can stand with all people. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until the prisoners are at ease together, and do not hear the voice of the taskmaster. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until the small and the great are there, and the slaves are free from their masters. It won't be safe to be black on Thursday until ALL people act as the Good Samaritan.

But until this takes place, I know where it is safe for all people on Thursday. So I join in with the hymn-writer and say:

Some bright morning when this life is over
I'll fly away
To that home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away
I'll fly away, oh glory
I'll fly away in the morning
When I die, Hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away.

SING

Sing with confidence,
Beautiful child.
Fly with
The butterflies,
Run free and run wild.
Think with your mind,
Believe with your heart.
Such uniqueness
Cannot be torn apart
From the start.
Sing with confidence
And dance with
Pride.
To be you
Begins
Deep
Inside.

THE POACH

“Hand over my gun,” he whispered with intensity behind the newly grown leaves. The air was crisp and the sky was as clear as the lake nearby. The moon was not shining as bright as we had hoped; nonetheless, this night had to be a success, no matter the stakes. It had been six years since anyone had spotted a thing lurking in the woods. We visited every spring, just after the last of the snow melted away and the first blooms of hepatica and bloodroot were on the forest ground. I could never actually bring myself to kill such a poor creature, but alas I continued to trudge along; you could consider me an accomplice to the horrid tradition underway.

My eleven close companions, who were also taking part in our hunting party, always had a glazed look in their eyes. They were overcome by the hunger to kill a beast in cold blood. Kingsley and Hopper were the only ones who had managed to kill one and stuff it for display at conventions. The rest of the party was envious, hoping one day to be just like them, possessing the animalistic and narcissistic qualities of the wretched creatures hiding in the woods that we so happily hunted.

The legacy left behind was far from beautiful, but some thought it was our lives reborn granted by the heavens. In terms of history, my ancestors endured centuries, possibly millennia, of torment, until somehow the tables turned. Some gave credit to angels and prayer while the alternative was coincidence and revolutionary evolution. When it came to religion, our celestial sky was much different than that of the creature in the night. Although most did not believe in a higher power beyond ourselves, others entrusted their entire being to whomever stirred the clouds above.

The gun on the floor was handed over swiftly. “We have been blessed, blessed indeed,” the other whispered wickedly.

Kingsley steadied his arms and signaled for us to remain absolutely still. The creature was hard of hearing, but it seemed it was aware of our presence nearby, as if bearing a sixth sense. There came a slight rustle about five-hundred feet away, just beyond the other side of the clearing where we stood. We did our best to breathe slowly, and I looked in the direction of the sound. There he was. I doubted he could see us in the night, but I lacked assurance. To this day, I am still uncertain whether we truly locked eyes or it was mere coincidence that he looked in my direction.

Hopper had his gun pointed as well. It was obvious he did not want

Kingsley to have a straight shot without competition from the rest of us. There was another rustle and the creature vanished deeper into the woods.

“Damn it, Hopper! You scared him off!” Kingsley scolded.

It seemed Kingsley was the most famished for another taxidermied trophy, and it made me sick to my stomach. The twins, Joster and Pitra, were laughing at Kingsley for losing his temper and it angered him even more. Hopper was confused. Why would he be blamed for the animal running off? He and I looked at each other for a brief moment and came to one conclusion: this was more than just a hunting party for Kingsley. He stomped back to the mansion and the rest of us followed behind within reasonable distance.

“What’s the matter with Kingsley?” Pitra whispered.

“I don’t think it’s important. Just walk,” said Joster.

“He’s intense and has a gun. I think it’s important,” Pitra insisted.

“Well, if I knew the answer to your question, I’d answer it. Just ask him yourself!”

“Great idea! Kingsley, wait a minute!”

“Pitra, shut it! Are you mad? Just leave him be.”

“Never mind, Kingsley! As you were!”

We walked for half an hour before reaching the stone steps and we each went straight to our bedrooms, letting slumber take over until the sun rose the next day. That night I had an unusual dream about the creature. It spoke to me in a strange language with a raspy voice, but somehow I understood him. He urged me to stop our actions because they would come back to haunt us and time would catch up soon enough. I laughed in his face and startled myself awake. Why did I laugh? That was unlike me, even for a dream. I assured myself that what had happened to them would not happen to us.

“L-l-leonard! Leonard!” Spooks cried from outside my bedroom door.

I climbed from my bed and threw the door open. “What is it?” I exclaimed.

“I had the strangest dream! W-w-w-with the thing! It-it-it told me horrible things!”

“What kinds of things?”

“About haunting and the end of t-t-time!”

“So did I, but not that exaggerated.”

“No, sir! No exaggeration from me!”

“No need to be spooked, Spooks. Just go back to bed now.”

He stomped down the hall muttering to himself as I stood in confusion. Kingsley came to me with a similar story about his dream and it became

clear that it was a sign of some sort. I told Kingsley to grab everyone else and meet in the living room downstairs. After a few minutes, everyone was gathered and particularly frightened.

“All right, settle down, settle down,” Hopper urged.

“Let Leonard s-s-speak!” Spooks cried.

“I gently thank you, my companions,” I started. “To get straight to it, I know you all may be alarmed by our mass dream, but we should discuss why we dreamt it.”

“It’s the darn creature, Leonard! That’s what it is!” exclaimed Kingsley.

“He doesn’t want us to catch him!” Joster and Pitra said in unison.

“That’s it?”

“Indeed!” shouted three others. At this point, I had begun to feel frustrated with my close friends, but I could not blame them for they were speaking in fear.

“Calm down, my friends. Let us think together, only then will we feel secure.” They quieted down and waited for an answer to their confusion, but at that moment I felt vulnerable, as though I could not provide what they were searching for, as I always had. If I knew how to pray, this would have been a moment to do so. Suddenly, my semi-conscious notion turned conscious and all I could say was, “We need to stop our hunting.” The group gasped in astonishment at my remark, and it was too late to go back on what I said. “We cannot keep hunting,” I reiterated, “don’t you see? It is a sign! A sign for us to think of our morals! What does hunting even mean to us? What do we gain?”

“Money,” said one.

“Status,” said another.

“Something to talk about,” someone added.

“And what do we lose?” I asked.

“Absolutely nothing!” Kingsley exclaimed.

“Our morals! Morals, Kingsley!”

“Get off your high horse, Leonard. You’re just as guilty as the rest of us, but the difference between you and us, we own our faults. We recognize what we do and continue to do it. The past is irreversible, but our present—our present is in our line of sight, and as of right now our prized possession is that beast, and he will be ours for the taking! He is our present!”

Kingsley stormed off. The meeting was over and I did nothing to change their hearts. He was right: I was just as guilty, but he was wrong about one thing. I also recognized my role and it disgusted me. What was worse, I did not leave the mansion. I walked back to my room and sulked until evening.

Days went by without a single trace of the beast, days that soon turned

into weeks. My friends were on edge. Some assumed it would be another year with no trophy to reward their patience. I was content. A large part of me wanted the hunting to go unrewarded, but a meager part wanted us to catch something and be done with it. Since the meeting that night, I was barely paid any mind. Joster and Pitra denied me in their ludicrous conversations. Spooks no longer came to me about his radical thoughts. Kingsley involved Hopper in his studies on rare flowers, which was strange to say the least. The absence of wanting me made me feel alone.

On the 15th of April, we assembled in routine for the nightly hunting, but to my surprise Kingsley handed me one of his rifles, peered into my eyes, and said, "Feel her in your hands. I want you to be all the way with us tonight. You always hunt empty-handed. It's about time you fully honor our tradition. Recognize your part."

He walked away and asked Hopper to recite his lucky prayer in hopes of a meaningful night. "Let the sky grant one of our greatest wishes," prayed Hopper.

A few minutes later we started down the stone steps and back into the woods. I looked up to see a full moon, but the light was dim once again and less reflective on the lake as we sauntered by. The trees whispered with the light wind and the crickets were out of musical numbers to follow. The silence from my companions seemed different, my palms were drier than ever. I was chillingly calm in a tense plight. Kingsley raised his hand, signaling for us to stop in our tracks; he fixed his eyes every which way but called false alarm and we continued on. I started to trail behind and, after a while, realized I was no longer walking beside Spooks or anyone else.

The forest began to feel less welcoming and more treacherous with every step I took. The trees stood taller and darker, the bushes rustled with nearly every breath, the stars seemed to disappear into the darkness. I was truly alone. An hour or so passed by and I heard a gunshot in the distance. There was no cheer that followed, so I assumed it was a miss. After walking aimlessly, I decided to settle on a large boulder in hopes that they would pass by on their way back to the mansion. A few minutes later I heard rustling, and I knew that it wasn't coming from my friends. They hardly made a sound when they hunted. I swelled with anxiety, closed my eyes, and restrained myself from moving. The rustling ceased but I had a feeling I was no longer alone. I opened my eyes and there he was, injured but standing strong before me. He touched my soul with his pleading eyes, but I knew there was nothing I could do for him.

"Why have you come to me?" I asked faintly. No answer. How could he? He was a lone woodland creature whose kind was hunted all over the globe. I

dared ask a question I deserved no answer to. He came along beside me and sat on the boulder. The blood seeping from his shoulder was minimal compared to the larger scars seen in the moonlight that traced his body like crooked vines. I felt ashamed sitting beside him. There was a beauty to him. He was one with nature and he carried with him an unknowing. This moment in time was one I would never omit. He climbed down the boulder and vanished deeper into the woods, leaving behind only his blood and anguish.

Another gunshot sounded, only this time it was much closer and it made me dread my time with the virtuous being. Guilt ripped through me like a relentless storm. Only one thought encircled my mind. I jumped off the boulder and ran in his direction. It took mere moments before I found him. His eyes locked with mine and they expressed his readiness. I leveled the rifle and he closed his eyes. His body fell to the ground as the deathly sound vibrated throughout the forest. The disbelief was overwhelming. His anguish was passed to me; his blood forever stained my being and my morals departed eternally. I knew then that he was never the enemy.

Kingsley and the others appeared from the darkness and stood in awe. Their smiles grew almost too large for their faces and their eyes gleamed with pride.

“At last we killed a man!” they cheered.

The party was giddy as they carried the lifeless body away. I stayed behind, as I always have, to observe and absorb the last weeks in the woods. With each year, I drifted further and further from what was seen as fair and just. In history, the black man never treated the white man the way the white man treated him, and I questioned whether my actions were any different. I looked up at the sky for forgiveness, but what was there to forgive? Since no one could forgive man or animal, it was no one's place to grant peace of mind. The only peace was the man no longer living in the shadows of the trees, but I was even skeptical of that. The pool of blood had been hesitant to soak into the earth as the sound of hooves happily slapped the ground. “Until next spring!” they bellowed in the distance. Until next spring.

ACCUSTOMED

Too many times, I have let teardrops
Submerge my skin so heavily
That they're mistaken for rain,
Used my eyelashes as windshield wipers,
But it did no justice to clean the stains,
Marking their territory after mistaking
Friendship for attraction, love for lust,
Conformity for strength, and desperation for trust.
But now I gotta let them all fall before my body does.

Fall, from the pinnacles that I worked so hard to reach,
Fall, over the hurdles that I was meant to conquer,
Fall, for another wrong man making another
Wrong plan at exactly the wrong time.

I have grown accustomed to sleeping on a haystack of needles,
Bruising my spine after letting people constantly walk all over me,
Finding comfort in pain, refusing to let anybody see my fear,
In fear that my pride would be in vain,
But I learned that there is no weakness in being vulnerable,
So I'm gonna let these swollen lies leave my sunken eyes
To reveal a finally genuine smile.

Are they sapphires or diamonds that rise above my cheeks?
Can I be the kind of woman who shows kindness
But spits fire when she speaks?
I spent too much time allowing irrelevant folks
To use me to maximize their oversized egos,
But now, oh baby, that's all gonna change.
I won't claim any of the shame that they try to put on me,
Because I am not a representation of what they wish I could be.

I'm ready to finally be free of the lies that caged me,
Where I was left too shaken and afraid to realize
That I can do more than sweep this floor,

That I am a woman worth holding the door for,
That a woman like me doesn't just deserve a man, but a king,
Whose loyalty isn't rooted in objectifying my worth,
And who only treats me like a queen.

The time has come when I refuse to be treated like I'm anything less
Than the woman I've become, but I still see those
Trying to figure out who they are, constantly seeking
Affirmation from men who only look at them from the chest down.
Sorry, from the waist down.
Or, as a matter of fact, just down, because lowly
Are those seen flaunting what's considered to be their greatest ass-set.

Or ones they wanna code name as streetwalkers,
Cuz they pretend they got somewhere to be,
But where can you go when you've lost all control
And your spirit refuses to be set free?
Wearing fishnet stockings to cover up bullet holes,
Not as a wound to the flesh but a gap in their souls.

And so we wait,
Wait for them to recognize the potential
That a strong black woman can possess,
One that makes no excuse, accepts no abuse
And refuses to systematically be oppressed
By society, by her friends, or by a man.

Someone who can stand up proudly and say:
"I am a woman, not some ordinary chick,
Not a thot or a tramp and definitely not a bitch."
I am a woman who deserves to live a happy life,
Worthy to be a friend, mother, and wife.
I am a woman, not some lustful toy
Whose purpose is to satisfy your needs.
I am special and unique,
Not meant to be treated like a piece of plastic,
But a precious antique.

And if you don't know me, please try to understand
That I live to please Him and not your demands,

And I know you think that you have your own future in hand,
But you're not in control, baby, this is God's plan!
And the one he has for me is meant to observe
A woman whose patience made a way
To get what she deserves.
This is the woman that I set out to be,
So pay close attention while I grind to go get this college degree.

MS. PERFECT

I'm used to always being Ms. Perfect,
Always having my life's plans laid out in front of me.
But the closer I get to graduation,
The less sure I am about what I really want to do in life.
I've always said that I wanted to become a lawyer,
But do I really want to go to law school?
Is that really what I want to do?
I don't know anymore.
And that terrifies me.
I need a plan.
I need structure.
I don't do well with just going with the flow.
And right now, that's what it feels like I'm doing.
I'm so used to being held to such high standards,
And right now, I feel like not having a plan
After graduation is tearing all of that apart.
Literally anytime I think about life after graduation, I get anxiety.
Graduating college should be one of the happiest times of my life,
But the thought of it just leaves me more and more afraid.
Will I be a failure if I don't go to law school after undergrad?
What type of job should I get? Will I get a job?
Should I get a master's degree?
What am I doing with my life?
I just feel so lost.
I just want someone to walk up to me and say,
"Hey, this is what you need to do to get your life in order,"
So I can stop feeling so crazy.
I mean I'm sure I'm not the first person
To not have my life together right after graduation,
But I have so many people looking to me to be great.
So how do I tell them that I don't feel like the person they think I am,
That in reality I feel like a failure?
I'm only 21, and I feel like the world is sitting right on my shoulders.
And I feel like I'm supposed to have all the answers,
And the fact that I don't is scary.
And honestly, I think I put way too much pressure
On myself to be Ms. Perfect.

To have my life in order all the time.
That's who I'm used to being,
So who am I now that I don't have my life in order?
Who am I now that I feel like the walls are crumbling down around me?
I don't like to admit that I put too much pressure on myself,
But deep down, I know that I do.
I don't hold myself accountable enough for my own misery.
I'm seeing everyone so happy and living their lives,
But me? My happiness is temporary.
I would just like to trade places one time, just to see how the other half lives,
Because, quite frankly, I'm a little over my sad life.
I wonder what people would think if they knew
That I wasn't really Ms. Perfect all the time,
That it's a mask.
It's how I like people to see me: all put-together,
But half the time I'm a mess inside.
But as long as I smile and say I'm going to law school,
It makes me feel a bit better about myself,
Makes me feel like I have a plan.
Like I'm not totally lost.
But who am I really?
Truth is—I don't know anymore.

THE NEIGHBOR

I am putting down the pan of lasagna when I hear the shrill sound of the house phone. The air from the oven still lingers around my face as I take off my worn-out oven mitts and place them on the kitchen counter. *You really need to replace those*, I think, as I walk over to pick up the phone.

I know exactly who it is in less time than it takes for Agnes to say “hello.” The familiar voice takes me back to my college dorm room, in the heat of our end-of-semester exams.

“Did you hear that a student impregnated the Vice Chancellor’s wife?” I remember Agnes saying, her expression very serious, as if we weren’t both seriously studying just a moment ago, as if our big test was suddenly inconsequential in the face of this news.

“Really? No way! You must tell me all about it after our exam,” I responded with an equally serious expression, and I watched the sides of her lips twist upwards in a subtle smile, her eyes suddenly brighter. I was certain that if I looked close enough, I would see the word “winner” plastered within the blacks of her eyes. She had won my attention. I smiled and returned to studying.

I never let Agnes’s random outbursts irritate me. She had sworn that one of the altar boys at the parish was receiving regular beatings from his girlfriend. Before that, she was sure that one of our acquaintances had run off with a professor to get married in a different state. Over time, I learned how to give her just enough attention to keep her from talking me to my wit’s end in one sitting.

Between these memories and hearing Agnes’s voice on the other end of the line, I catch myself smiling nostalgically. I am excited to hear the voice of my good friend who I haven’t seen in quite a while, who always claims to be so busy that she barely ever has time even for a phone call.

“Hey, so there’s a person I would really like you to meet,” Agnes says after we briefly exchange pleasantries.

“Sister Agnes,” I say, dragging out the first syllable of her name, hoping she hears the mockery in my voice, since she can’t see it on my face.

Finally! I think to myself. *Finally my friend has found someone special in her life. Finally she has allowed herself to move on from the loss of her husband. After his car crash, she was not herself. Yes, it was terrible that such a young couple was separated by death, but I am truly happy that she has finally found the strength to continue with her life.*

“When would be a good time? I’m off work on Sunday,” I say.

“Oh, Sunday is just perfect. I’m looking forward to it,” she says.

After I hang up, I stand thinking about Agnes and her special someone. Who is he? How did they meet? Would he be anything like her last husband? Would I like him? Is he a church-goer just like her? I decided he had to be.

Last I heard of Agnes, she had found and fallen in love with Jesus after her husband’s passing. The church was the only place she found any comfort. In fact, that was where she earned the name “Sister Agnes.” A heavy-set woman who wears her Sunday service hat every day of the week, Sister Agnes loves the church. If she isn’t in the church building, she is out evangelizing. Since her sole aim in life is to win souls for Christ, I decide her new someone has to be a Jesus-lover too. Whoever he is, though, I am excited about meeting him.

As these thoughts bounce around in my head, I realize I can see into my neighbor’s room. He’s usually gone by now. Every morning, even before the first hints of sun, the man walks out of his home, gets into his aged Peugeot, and drives away. I do not know the man very well, although he waves hello sometimes. I don’t even know his name. He doesn’t speak much, probably doesn’t have many friends either. Occasionally, if I stand in just the right spot in my kitchen, I can see into the room he rents in the house next door. It’s a spacious, yellow-lit room that always looks organized—not that there’s very much to organize. Against the wall is a table on which he keeps his reading glasses and his keys. He has a desk lamp on that table as well. Opposite the table is his bed that is hardly ever slept in. I could make that room a little more homey. I would throw in an armchair, a houseplant, carpet, maybe even hang up some paintings. The man, tall, dark and very skinny, moves with the gait of a person experienced in age. I am convinced by the graying stubble on his face and the look in his eyes that he has seen a lot of hardship. But for some reason, I still do not believe this man is as old as he looks. *But he is not the point now*, I remind myself, as I continue my day in anticipation of Sunday’s visit.

When Sunday comes, I am overwhelmed with excitement. I am going to see Agnes after all these years. And not just that, I am going to meet her special someone.

As I should have expected, Sister Agnes is making me go with her to her church service. Her church, a beautiful Baptist Church on Allen Avenue, is easily the grandest building in the immediate area. As we are walking into the church, I catch a glimpse of a beggar sitting on the soles of

his feet, his legs crisscrossed in front of his body, waving his blue plastic bowl at the churchgoers.

“Why is there a beggar in front of your church?” I ask Sister Agnes just as we are walking in.

“Ah!” she exclaims, her eyes aglow. “That’s who I wanted you to meet. You still do sign language, right? Well, he’s mute and I need to talk to him.”

“What?” I try to ask but she’s already walking off to greet some other church members.

I ignore Sister Agnes and allow myself to take in the beautiful interior of the church. Everything is made of polished wood, from the long pews to the pulpit, the bottom of which is decorated with flowers of many colors. I cannot tell if they are real or fake flowers. People are still greeting one another in the church entrance, and in the center aisle between the rows of pews on either side of the large room. I am no longer in any mood to socialize, so I keep my attention on the skillfully carved wooden cross overhead, paying careful attention to the directions and patterns of the lines on the wood. *This woman is actually impossible, and she will never change*, I think. *I cannot believe she had me come all the way over here just so she could be in one more person’s business, just so she could have one more person to gossip about. What if the man doesn’t want to talk to her? What if he doesn’t even know sign language. Oh my goodness!* I glance over at Sister Agnes and she looks so unbothered. Now I’m irritated.

The preacher is eloquent, charismatic, and his message actually interests me. Apparently, Christianity is more than having an active presence in your local church. It should be evident even in our daily lives, even when no one is watching. I wonder if Sister Agnes considers herself a true Christian. I wonder if her other church friends do.

By the end of the service, I’m a little less annoyed. Sister Agnes, on the other hand, looks as though she’s about to be handed a gold medal. She’s tugging at my sleeve and pulling at my arm as if I am the thing that is delaying her from claiming her prize.

“Can you just hold on a second?” I ask. “What is really happening here?”

She’s silent.

I stare back.

“By God, I will turn around and go straight home if you think I’m doing anything without getting answers.”

She can see that I’m serious. She begins to tell me that it has actually been a few weeks since she started watching him. She fervently swears that all she wants to do is tell him about her Jesus, because surely, I can agree, that only Jesus can change his life.

At this point I have so many questions. Why won't you just leave this man alone? What is it to you, really? Did he tell you that he's looking for Jesus, or that he wants his life to be changed?

Sister Agnes might actually believe that she wants to tell the beggar about "sweet, sweet Jesus," but whether or not she outright admits it, we both know she's really interested in knowing his story too. It is her business to know his story, just like she knows those of all the other church members and all her neighbors. Sister Agnes has no job and no family to discuss in conversation, so she talks about people. That much hasn't changed since college. What baffles me is how far she's willing to go.

"All right," I say. "Let's go."

Again, I could just about see the "winner" in the blacks of her eyes. I smile. *I guess some things really don't change.*

As we walk out of the church, I can see the beggar. The man looks like he just wants to remain unbothered. Why won't she just let him be? I can see his profile as we get closer, but that's not much to go by. But then we get even closer, and when he looks up in our direction, I recognize his face. It's the man. My neighbor. A sudden defensiveness comes over me, and I know that I will play no part in letting Sister Agnes ruin his peace—whatever peace he finds in his isolation. And whether he be mute or not, whatever his story, he will reveal himself to whomever he chooses in his own time.

Sister Agnes excitedly steps aside as I move closer to the man. I stoop down till I am almost eye to eye with him. I have no idea if he recognizes me. I reach into my black pocketbook, remove a small wad of naira notes, and place them into his blue plastic bowl. His sunken eyes say *Thank you*. My smile says *You're welcome*. Sister Agnes will be furious when I get up without having said a word to this man. But I would rather have that than have her know that at nighttime he will uncross his legs, move with his tall gait to his old rickety Peugeot, and rattle home to the one bedroom he rents in the house next door to mine.

I wish I could say that I don't think much of it after that day, but that would be a lie. I wonder about this man, about his life. I wonder what his days are like, if he ever speaks to anyone. I wonder how much money he makes panhandling, and how he can survive like that. I also wonder if maybe I stared too long before I offered him money, if he looks as deeply into everyone's eyes. I wonder if maybe I should pay him a visit, but for what reason? And how different from Agnes does that make me?

As such, it is with a mix of surprise, excitement, and a little bit of confusion that I answer a knock on my door the next Saturday. It is him. I am puzzled, but I do not ask why he is here.

“Hi,” he says.

His voice is so low. Is he shy?

“Hi.”

We both stare. We’re both confused.

“Would you like to come in?” I ask, for this is all I could think to say.

He nods and walks in.

I feel as though I should apologize for my house, for the curtains that are not drawn, and the large windows that are letting in so much light, for the patterned carpet and fluffy pillows, for the bean bag on the corner and the piano against the wall, for the clear contrast between my place and his. But I don’t. I let him take it all in. Still, I’m wondering, *Why is he here?*

“Perhaps an explanation, or maybe a thank you, but I feel I owe you something after the other day,” says the man. He is seated on the couch across from me. And just before he speaks, he stops fiddling with the pillow and places it carefully next to him.

“Huh?” is what I try to say, but I don’t make any sound.

First, he speaks! And perfectly, too! Not that I was expecting different or expecting anything at all. Second, so it’s not just me, then! It’s not just me who has pondered over that Sunday. It’s not just me who felt that maybe there was business here left to be completed.

I halt my thoughts. He’s speaking again.

“I saw you walk by on the way into service on Sunday,” he says.

“I saw you too,” I respond.

“To be honest, I hoped you wouldn’t recognize me, that you wouldn’t stop by me. But I guess we don’t always get what we hope for.” He’s not looking at me anymore.

“What does that mean?”

I understand English. I know exactly what it means. It means we hope for things, because we can. But out of all those, some things we get, and others we don’t. But I wanted to keep him talking, because something tells me that’s what he came here to do.

He tells me that his name is Mike. Michael Madu. And once upon a time he was a Petrochemical Engineer in the making.

“Michael Madu, why are you out there playing with those boys?” his mother would ask, almost fuming out of her ears and nostrils. “It’s like you want to be a poor man when you grow up. Tell me, do you want to be poor?”

“No, mummy.”

“Do you want to end up hawking oranges on the street?”

“No, mummy.”

“Then you better get inside and start studying before I descend on you.”

Michael was an obedient boy, a good child. The first of his uneducated parents' five children, he was to be the one to lead them out of poverty. In his prime, Michael's father had been an honest and diligent worker. Always courteous and punctual, he drove his yellow taxi from sunup to sundown, and his employers loved him when he was making money for them. But after he had his first stroke, the same employers cast him away like he was suffering from the plague. He promised himself that all of his children would have the power that comes from an educated mind, power that he did not have.

Michael understood why his parents were so hard on him. He understood why he couldn't play sports or make friends or entertain any other distractions. His entire family name was resting on him and his education, so he studied. When there was still light from the sun, he studied outside his mother's workshed that was attached to the main house. He needed the sound that came from her sewing machine because he couldn't study in complete silence. And when the mosquitoes came out with the emergence of night, he studied inside the house with the light from the kerosene lantern.

It was his father's wish that he study Petrochemical Engineering at the university. The country was filled with crude oil, anyway. He might as well learn how to benefit from it. After four long and painful years, Michael graduated with a First-Class degree. His family celebrated with him even though no one was surprised. He was always the smartest person in any room.

"Mama, come and see," Michael yelled as he walked quickly towards his mother, waving a white piece of paper.

"What is that? Why are you shouting?" She got up from fanning the fire under the charcoal pot. Ignoring the beads of sweat that had formed on her face, she tightened the wrapper around her waist and turned her full attention to her son.

"They have invited me to interview in Port Harcourt," said Michael, visibly unable to contain his excitement. He showed the letter to his mother, forgetting she could not read.

She ignored the hand in front of her face and started to dance, singing, "Jesus has done it for me. My enemies have failed. My son will finally be an Engineer."

He abruptly stops narrating his story at this point.

"The woman you were with at the church, who is she to you?" he asks.

"Agnes? Yeah, she's my friend. What about her?" I ask, not expecting any response.

But I laugh a little when he begins to describe Sister Agnes and her busy-body behavior around the church. He says she doesn't sit still, and she's always talking. I assume he's mentally comparing her to his mother. The

“better” Christian, a quieter Christian. A woman who truly had faith in God, perhaps because she was poor, perhaps because she had to.

I’m enjoying the conversation and the company a lot more than I thought I would. I still have questions though, but I won’t ask them. I’ll let Mike say as much as he will, at the pace that he will. He continues with the story, and I pay rapt attention.

The day Michael came back from his interview in Port Harcourt, his family was not expecting him. His siblings were still at school, and his mother had gone to the market to purchase the ingredients for a big pot of Jollof rice with fried chicken, for her son, the big Engineer. But when she returned and met her boy at home a day early, she knew something was wrong.

As he saw his mother approaching him, Michael desperately wanted to sound strong, to sound hopeful. But this was the woman who single-handedly raised him and his siblings, after his father’s recurring strokes had reduced him to a vegetable. She would see right through him. She sat next to him on the bed. And the moment she said, “What happened?” Michael’s voice cracked and gave way.

“They asked me for my name,” he sobbed. “They wanted to know who my father was.” There were no tears, just the sound of a broken, frustrated man.

He didn’t need to continue the story. His mother already knew. At least these people were a different type of shameless. At his last “interview,” he didn’t even see the inside of the building. It was the security man at the gate who informed him that the position had been given away as a favor to some rich politician. Now, these ones. They knew he was smart enough. He had passed their ridiculous series of exams. But they wouldn’t give him the job because he was not the son of some powerful businessman. She pulled her son closer to her and said, “Don’t worry, another one will come.”

Another one did come, but Michael didn’t go to it. His father had passed shortly before, and there was nothing anyone could say or do to convince him that he wasn’t a failure. He had so strongly believed that his father would live to see things get better for all of them, but he didn’t. He didn’t live because his son could not afford to pay the hospital deposit. And his son could not afford the money, because this son had no job. Petrochemical Engineer indeed!

After his father was laid to rest, Michael wasn’t the same. It was as though his drive and his will were buried in the ground along with his dad. He turned into a shadow of himself, a shadow with a First-Class degree. He felt like a burden to his mother and to his siblings. He recognized that he was of no use to them, and he left. Against his mother’s wishes, despite his siblings’ pleas, Michael took his father’s old rickety Peugeot and left home

for good. But what would he do next? He was, after all, still living. He had the technical know-how to get involved in some trade, but he didn't feel like contributing to an economy that had failed him. So Michael carefully picked the spot on Allen Avenue, right in front of the Baptist church, and that was it for him. No more struggling.

"This may have been a little too much information. And I'm not even completely sure why I just told you all that," he says.

I'm visibly stuck on the last part of his story.

"Thank you, I guess, for saving me from your mouthy friend," he says.

I manage a smile.

Many questions answered, just not all, not yet. Do you have any friends? Are you truly comfortable? How much do you make in this lifestyle and is that enough to survive? Do you ever regret it? Are we friends now? Does this mean you'll visit more often? If I visited, would I have to sit on the desk chair or on the edge of the bed?

"This country makes it so difficult to be a man of principle," he says.

At that sentence, we both burst into laughter, but Michael stops laughing first.

BRAVE

The wind chill factor,
When it's twenty below.
The shivering cold,
The arctic snow.
Withstanding those conditions,
No house, no cave,
To some, that may serve
As the definition of brave.
To be hurt, I mean pierced,
To the core of your soul,
To feel a crease in your chest,
As if your heart did unfold.
To then stand before others,
And let that story be told,
With the intention of saving many,
This is the definition of bold!

You share your story,
And I'll share mine,
And in succession with humankind
The world will align.
Despite our many differences,
We all feel pain,
And in those moments of despair,
We're all one and the same.
We deal with hurt differently,
But that's the beauty of life:
Individuality, free will, pro-choice, free-voice.
Strength is measured
By our will to survive,
The measures we take
En route to stay alive.

A hero is a woman
Who's been through it all,
And she uses her darkest moments
To cushion one's fall.
I understand your situation,
I feel your pain.
I empathize, I sympathize,
I'll umbrella your pain.
I will see you through,
Navigate exponential terrain.
I will ease your load,
Alleviate the strain.

If I could, I surely would,
Put the world on my back,
And I'd carry them to the top,
And we'd never look back.
Since I can't, I'll lift their spirits,
With nouns and verbs,
Motivate and empower them,
With pounds of words.
I'll stand up for certain things,
And for those things I'll die,
And before I explode again
I'll break down and cry.
Please understand what I am about to say:
Those enslaved are the ultimate definition of—
Brave!

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