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WINNERS

2020 Poet Laureate Contest

First Place: Shaniece Holmes-Brown, “The Queen Commandments”

Second Place: Joseph Lindsay, “Another Number”

Third Place: Gianna Moon, “Lovelight”

5th Annual Guy A. Sims Short Fiction Competition

First Place: Embrasia Parker, “2003”

Second Place: Gianna Moon, “In the Long Run”

Third Place: Janelle Castellon, “The Crosser”

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WORKING

Slaving, some call it,
Or starving myself of dignity
And going home at five.
I used to leap through hoops of fire
In pursuit of lost dreams

Before waking up again for work at nine.
Took five-hundred shifts to realize
That cursed is the black man
Too in love with capitalism.

Too busy locking his own shackles
And calling it a profession.
Too busy teaching himself
New ways to learn vision boards, taxes, and lessons
From Jeff, and Bill, and John, and George.

But cursed is the black man convinced he's on the ground floor,
Sure that capitalism can save him,
Certain that the dollars piling beneath his feet
Won't leave him buried with his people.
Chasing American dreams,
Getting crushed, stabbed,
And choked.

Took one-thousand shifts
To decide to work hard,
Not work myself to death.
But cursed is the black man
Who falls into the American Dream, the abyss,
With no measure of its depth.

Who finds economic salvation
In a system, in a nation,
Built on the blood that drips
From his back.

Enslaved is the black man
Who finds solace in capitalism,
Convinced that money can
Transform his skin,
And that power can

Change the past.

THE BLACK WOMAN

The Black Woman:
then America's Mamie,
now America's muse.
What once was a caricature of oppression
has become the embodiment of self-destruction.

The Black Woman,
created in her varied shades of brown,
with a warm cocoa smell
and silk-spun skin,
her Beauty misused,
the alterations to her natural with perms or weaves or surgeries,
causing damage to her ethereal with insecurities, doubts, self-loathing.

Disgusted by our own shade,
we are just as quick to shade each other
to feel like we'll shine brighter.

Black woman—
it's like I don't even have to know you personally,
but because I was taught to hate myself,
I have to hate you too, but I couldn't even tell you why.
I think you're pretty and could see us being close,
but I can't make myself smile at you.
Ignoring you feels cooler, belittling you feels more reassuring,
and hating you just feels...safer.

It's like it's almost a crime to love the black woman,
so I don't speak and keep my admiration to myself,
masking it in eye-rolls or mean mugs,
maybe even silence or a lip smack,
when really I just wish you would hug me,
tell me my shoes are nice,
somehow revive the bonds that broke
as we were broken down and bonded to ship floors,

before paper bag tests and the hot ghetto mess,
when it was full breast the color of dirt,
swollen with nutrients to grow the earth on our backs,
with enough time to still have the kids in bed and have a drink.

The Black woman,
with the potential to move mountains when in sync,
but one always has to out-black the next.
“No way you finna’ scream louder than me.
It’s me. I win. You lose!”
If she don’t dress in designer clothes, she obviously bummy;
Since she don’t shave her arms, I just bet she funky.
She can never just be comfortable, not in her clothes,
not in her skin, not in her choices.
So many black women living to be accepted
by those who will still overlook us,
mistreat us, abuse and disregard us.

The Black woman,
to them all the same,
nothing more than bad-mouthing,
baby-boomin’, angry, Ghetto, animalistic,
dark-shaded sub-humans.

When really we’re descendants of royalty,
our skin soaking up the sun, providing warmth for our souls,
our hair, when left untouched, naturally extending toward
the heavens, defying gravitational forces.
Our voices rumble just as thunder does,
our wombs producing practical demigods,
our spirits left hanging in the darkest corners of the world,
having been the light to shine Love through all Hate.

They say you don’t know love till you’ve been loved in the black,
and once you go black, you never go back.
Well let’s go back to the black:
Black Love, Black Success, Black Acceptance,
Black Power—in the Black Woman.

2003

“Something bad is gonna’ happen,” I say to myself as I glance out the big window in the living room. Something bad, but what could it be? Before I can think about the situation long enough, my thoughts are interrupted by a stern voice.

“You should be packin’ your clothes instead of staring out the window,” my older brother Jon Jon says as he walks up to me with my little pink suitcase rolling behind him.

Pack for what? I ask myself. Where are we going? I want an answer, but I’m too afraid to ask my brother these things. He sits the suitcase at my feet and turns to leave. Before he leaves the room, he gives me a look that I know means one thing: PACK, or else.

With Jon Jon and I being so close in age, we’ve always shared a different bond. Even though I’m 5 and he’s 7, most people think we’re twins off an initial glance. We’re both a rich shade of dark milk chocolate with big brown eyes and smiles as wide as the county line. He’s always been my favorite, but of course, being the youngest sibling, I don’t have to listen to anyone and he knows I can give him a run for his money, so much so that we often get into fist-fights. Surely any other time I would have matched his gaze with a smart comment, but his voice today has a tone of strictness mixed with a sense of fear, so I know now is not one of those times.

Where are we going? I ask myself again.

My oldest sister JB comes into the living room and sees me still glaring out the window.

“Why aren’t you packing, Emie? You’re actin’ as if you don’t want to see yo mama,” she scoffs.

My mama, I think. So we’re gonna’ meet our “mama.” What!? My entire life I have only known Mama A. My sister often tells stories of another woman I’ve never met, but I don’t know if the stories are true. All the time JB says how she hates Mama A for stealing us and she wishes we never had to meet her. I’m always confused when she goes on these rants because to me Mama A has always been nice. She calls me her baby, buys me anything out of the stores, and doesn’t get mad at me when I want to eat cereal and melted ice cream for breakfast.

“It’s about time we’re finally leaving. I’ve been waiting years to ditch this hellhole and I don’t have time for you to mess it up being a crybaby and looking out the window at nothing,” JB belts out, knocking me from my daydream. “Go and pack your stuff so we’ll be ready to leave. NOW!”

To be honest, I’ve never really liked JB. She’s only 9-years-old but acts so bossy. She thinks she can control me just because she’s older. Whenever I don’t listen, she gets upset and pushes me to the floor, or worse. She always tells me I’m stupid because I can love a stranger more than I love my actual mama, but how can she blame me if this is the only mama I’ve ever known? I try not to make her mad but I think she hates me. Or maybe she’s just jealous.

Despite my rebellious nature, I know better than to argue with JB, so I quickly exit the window, grab my little pink suitcase, and walk out to go pack.

“And don’t take all day,” she screams behind me.

When I get out of JB’s view, I roll my eyes and proceed down the hallway. I enter the small room that my sister and I share to see her side bare, as if no one has ever lived there. I look to my side with my princess sheets, all my favorite toys and stuffed animals, my pictures, my life. The more I glance around my room, the sadder I become. Looking at my small backpack-sized suitcase, I think to myself: How am I just ’pose to leave all this here? Why do I have to go? I love it here.

I drag my blanket off the bed and to our closet. When I open it, I see that the side where JB’s clothes had been is just as bare as her bed and the wall around it. I sit on the floor of the closet, hiding behind all my pretty clothes that are still starched and pressed and hanging up, and I softly begin to cry until I soon fall asleep.

I awake an hour later to my siblings calling me from the hallway. I’m still in the closet and not trying to be found, so I don’t respond to their wails. As soon as I think they are no longer looking for me, my sister swings open the closet door and grabs me out by my arms. Whack! She hits me on the side of my head.

“I told you to pack, not hide. If I come back in here and you not doin’ what I said, I’m a smack yo ass again!” she screams.

“You are not my mama. You cannot tell me what to do, and if you curse at me again, I’M TELLIN’ MAMA A!” I rebut.

Whack! She gives me another blow to the head.

“She’s not yo mama either, and I can’t wait for you to never see her again. I’m yo’ older sister and you have to listen to me, so PACK your

things or I'll smack you again." She smiles as she walks out the room, taunting me with a song:

*We're really leavin', yay! Hooray!
No more seein' Mama A!
Emie's gonna' cry all day,
but it's too bad cuz she can't stayyy.*

I wipe my tears, throw her the finger, and stick out my tongue. I defeatedly begin to look for things to pack into my bag. I first pack my favorite shirt. It is made of pink silk with a lace border and on the front is a tall, black ballerina whose hair is styled in two afro puffs, one of my favorite hairstyles. I then pack my Etch-A-Sketch, which is still fresh out of the box. I don't know why I pack it, but I have this thought: How can I know what to pack when I don't even know where I'm going?

As I sit there confused, I begin to imagine how my "mama" will look. I think of me and Jon Jon, and I imagine her as brown as a melted Hershey, with thick, rough hair, a warm smile, and our big brown eyes. We are the complete opposite of JB's pecan-shell complexion, soft, puffy hair, and pretty, light brown eyes. Maybe if "mama" looks like me, I can say JB's not my REAL sister. I plan to tell people we found her in a garbage can, like Oscar the Grouch, my favorite character from *Sesame Street*.

I laugh then sigh as I'm brought back to the reality of the situation. As I begin to pack again, JB screams from the living room, "IT'S TIMEEEEE." Before I can get up and investigate, there's a knock at the door followed by a rapid series of doorbell rings.

JB knows better than to open the door without an adult, but that doesn't stop her from dancing by the door until Mama A manages to get it unlocked and finally open.

I wait in my room just behind the door, too scared to see who has come into the house. JB is overly excited to see whoever has arrived, but I have no interest in finding out. Through a crack in the door I listen to their conversation.

"Hi, I'm DaVita. I've been assigned as the new worker for your case, and I am here to remove the children. I will be transporting them to their new location, so please bring everything they'll be taking with them. Are they available to come now?"

The mystery person is a woman! Could it be? I quickly dismiss this idea because I remember from JB's stories that she never mentioned a

DaVita. I choose to not let my fear get to me and I continue to listen. All I hear now is JB and Jon Jon anxiously shuffling garbage bags, suitcases, and small boxes full of all their possessions. “How can they just leave?” I say aloud, but not too loud, as I haven’t been discovered yet and don’t want to blow my cover.

I hear the mystery woman speak again: “In my report it says there are three children I will be removing today and I have only seen two. Where is the youngest child?”

It only takes three seconds for JB to burst through the door and knock me down to the floor. She sings, “Somebody’s here to see youuuu.”

Before I can get myself together, she hoists me up and carries me down the hall and into the living room. She drops me in front of the mystery woman like a dog who has just retrieved his stick and is waiting to be petted.

“I can use my own feet, thank you very much!” I say to JB, picking myself up off the floor and fixing my clothes. I look at the mystery woman for the first time and she’s nothing like I expected. She stands taller than us all, Mama A included. Her skin is so light she almost looks white, and she has thick, jet-black hair that is flat-ironed so nice it sways when she moves. I can’t understand how the stern, demanding voice I heard from behind the door could come from such a nice-looking lady.

“And what’s your name?” she asks me.

“Emie,” I whisper.

“Such a pretty little girl,” she says. “I know you can speak louder than that for me.”

“My name is Emie,” I say loudly. “Where are we going?”

“I will be taking you to your new home today. Are you all packed and ready?” she asks with a smile.

“No, I have not packed because I don’t want to leave. I love Mama A and you can’t just steal us from her. Why do I have to leave?” I say through my tears.

DaVita crouches down and looks me in the eye. She says, “Mama A has done such a good job with you. I can see because you are so clean and pretty. But Mama A is not your real mother. She’s sort of like a fill-in until real mommy’s better. I know Mama A loves you and won’t have an issue with you visiting any time, but right now I have to take you from this home to your new house.”

As our conversation continues to spiral into more confusion for me, I don’t notice that JB has finished my packing. Nothing is folded or neatly placed. She prances down the hallway on her tiptoes, dragging the

garbage bags filled to the rim with all my things. At this point I realize there is no getting out.

Me being the smallest, I prove to be no help to the older kids and am forced to watch with Mama A as they load our things into the small moving van. Mama A, who has not said anything during the whole ordeal, looks at me with tears in her eyes and says, “My Emerald, my jewel. It’s not right how they can take you from me, but I knew this would have to happen one day. You’re my precious stone and that stone will sink more into my heart until you’re back in my arms. I love you and don’t forget about me. Ever.” She kisses the streams of tears that have started to roll down my face and tells me it’s time to leave.

Once the car is all packed and we are ready to go, Mama A comes to watch our departure from her front porch. It is the same porch that I sat on all those warm summer nights as I ate my drippy ice cream, and the same porch I ran to when the mosquitoes started biting after hours—and I will never see it again.

“Feel free to visit any time, and don’t forget Mama A always love y’all!” she says to us as DaVita turns on the engine.

“Goodbye. See you never,” JB says just loud enough for me to hear.

I look out the window at Mama A. We lock eyes as the car pulls away, and her tears tell me it will be a long time before I ever see her again.

LOVELIGHT

A candle in autumn, the breeze of this night,
The warmth of a blanket, all the comforts of home.

The elation of good news, the satisfaction that follows,
Beautiful sunrise, longing sunsets.

Neither sun nor moon, but the sky in all its phases.
Dark horizons and absent sun, the iridescence of stars.

All of which are gentle, all of which are loved.

And in that glow, you are all that shines silver and glitters gold.

POETIC PARADISE

I walk in the sand in my bare feet,
Looking at the sky,
Cuz the sky is the limit.
I admit it: I smell success,
And it smells like rain.
Rain drizzle,
The type of rain
That makes the wind
Whistle.
Seeing paradise with my own
Pair of eyes,
Looking at beautiful women
In bikinis,
Apologizing for these males
Being cheesy,
But that's just us.
You think we got it easy?
We don't wake up buff, tough, rich
With Lamborghinis!
I am a Gemini Gentleman;
I ain't no genie.
3 wishes, well, that shit easy:
First wish is to find love,
That heavenly woman from above,
True love—the kind that God
Made from his hand.
Second Wish is to feed fam,
Make sure the whole bloodline
Get at least a Mill,
Whether money or a meal,
Still....have 'em right.
Third wish is to never become
The victim or the enemy,
But to be the hero

Of all oppressed people,
Live equal,
And always be true to my word.

THE CROSSER

The girl needed to get out of the house. Her parents were hassling her about getting a job since she just graduated college. Coming home after being out-of-state was not easy. Her mind felt as though it was stuck in a threatening fire of confinement. She left mid-argument and drove around until she stopped at a Home Goods store some miles away.

It was fairly hot for the month of May. Mosquitoes devoured anything pumping blood to stay alive themselves. The short, recently conditioned brown hair that sprouted so quickly from her head stuck to her sweaty neck like leaves to honey. She rushed out of the car and into the store to relieve herself of the heat that suffocated the air. Aisle after aisle she simply browsed to think and kill time. They never went to college, she thought. How could they understand?

She continued down a section of the store filled with glass figurines, plates, and mirrors. Blinded with annoyance and frustration, she did not realize the small puddle on the floor left behind by a child's spill; stepping carelessly, she slipped and flew right into a large, neighboring mirror. Just freakin' great. But it did not crack or shatter. She fell right through it like it was not even there! Her scream echoed into the grassy cave as a rock concert does in a stadium.

The honeycomb eyes could not process the new location she stumbled upon. The cave smelled of salt water and sweet seaweed. The grass surrounding her was yellow and it waved as though a strong wind was passing through. She turned around, frantically looking for the mirror, and sighed in relief when she saw it embedded in the cave wall surrounded by burgundy vines. The store was faintly seen inside the mirror from which she fell. From the corner of her eye she saw another large mirror near the mouth of the cave. The one by the store entrance? She walked over anxiously.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," she expressed aloud.

She closed her eyes and lightly jumped into the mirror. She opened them once more and found herself inside Home Goods again. Heart racing, she could faintly see the cave. Confusion flooded her like a large ocean wave and it was unstoppable.

She found herself sitting in the car without remembering her walk back. A vibration was heard from the passenger's seat and she saw it was

her mother calling. After a few more vibrations, it went to voicemail and there were seven other missed calls awaiting a call back. She drove home anticipating a storm from her parents, but to her surprise they hugged her as she entered the house and apologized for the way they had been acting and treating her.

“Nenet, you’ve barely been here two weeks and we’ve been overbearing,” said her father. “We hadn’t realized that you just wanted a break from work and school for a while. Again, we’re really sorry.” He was teary-eyed and his wife was sad to have not been aware of what their daughter had been trying to tell them for weeks.

“It’s fine. I’m going to my room for a while. I need a nap,” sighed Nenet.

Her mother and father watched in low spirits as Nenet walked down the hall and shut the bedroom door. She did not care about the useless argument; it was the unusual trip in the store that consumed her mind. Where did she go? How was that even possible? Was it all a dream and she was napping in the car the whole time? No, it was too hot. She had question after question and no answers to ease the thoughts that raged like wildfire. It was not bad but she could not tell if it was good either. Nenet took off her shoes, put the fan on blast, and threw herself on the bed. She lay there for some time, eyes making patterns of the small bumps on the ceiling.

“I can’t sleep. Gotta try that again,” she whispered to herself.

She curiously looked over at the mirror hanging on her closet door and crawled out of bed. Standing in front of the mirror, she peered into the glass and vaguely made out a shape that resembled a tree. To be sure, Nenet closed the curtains to avoid a reflection of any kind. She turned back to the mirror and the supposed tree was still there, along with others she had not seen ten seconds earlier.

She closed her eyes and prepared her mind and body for another paranormal excursion. A chuckle slipped from her lips as she thought about how silly all of it seemed. After a moment, Nenet opened her eyes and realized the mirror was not particularly large enough to casually jump through like the others. She would have to walk sideways.

I’m just crazy, she thought. Dyslexia and now it seems like schizophrenia, too. Fuck. The mirror situation was eating her from the inside and the hunger to figure out what happened shined brighter than before. She grabbed her phone and stuffed it in a pocket and placed

herself back in front of the mirror. Nenet took three breaths and slowly stepped into the mirror.

Her arms and legs were riddled with goosebumps as she processed the fact that it had happened again. As she presumed, the figures she saw from the other side were trees, but they were no taller than she was and the leaves a mustard yellow. There were trees on small rolling hills as far as the eye could see and walking paths to divide them. Nenet turned around and realized the mirror from her bedroom was attached to the tallest tree she had ever seen. The trunk was as wide as her house and as towering as the Statue of Liberty. DAMN.

On one of the paths there was a tall man walking and admiring the trees. She quickly ducked but he had already noticed her standing by the consequential tree. Quickly, Nenet tried to decide whether to approach the man or hop back into the mirror, but he decided for her. The man, not far away, walked up the path toward the large tree as she still crouched.

“Excuse me, miss,” said the man.

His voice seemed to carry in the slight wind like a feather, so that Nenet could not hear what he said. She looked up and craned her neck awkwardly to be able to see his face because he was so tall. A seven-foot man. Nenet was relatively tall as well, like her father, reaching about six feet. She stood up to avoid straining her neck even more. He’s kinda cute, she thought. There was an awkward silence and she cleared her throat.

“Hello. Where am I?” she asked.

The man raised his eyebrows in confusion and replied, “Oh, what language is that?”

Nenet did not understand him either and it was a draw. He pulled out a rough-looking piece of paper and a lead stick to write the symbols of his language.

“Is that ancient Egyptian? Wow!” Nenet exclaimed. She pulled it from his hand and recognized one of the symbols from a high school class. Suddenly, she could make out some more symbols and read the whole paper. To say the least, she was flabbergasted. Nenet stepped back and thought about the words the man said earlier. She put the pieces together, realizing her dyslexia did not trouble her when she read the small paper. Her eyes went back to the man.

“I was speaking English,” said Nenet. She mentally patted herself on the back for her unknown fluency in Arabic.

“English? Never heard of it. What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I just kind of stumbled here. Literally.”

“Okay, well, this is private property. My friends can escort you out.”

“Oh no. I can take myself out. But before I go, I do have a question. Where is this?”

“The state of Kenitede. Known for our beautiful growth of ahKa trees. These are my lands.”

“I see. So is this a part of Egypt nobody talks about?”

“Egypt? There is no Egypt here. Only in mythical stories. What do you refer to?”

“Interesting. Well, I should be going now. It was nice to meet you.”

“Shaba.”

“Okay, Shaba.”

Nenet smiled and turned around back into the mirror. Her room smelled of chicken and rice. Dinner. She opened her bedroom door to find her mother just about to knock.

“Oh! Dinner’s ready, Nen,” she said.

Her daughter sighed in relief and made her way to the dinner table where everything was surprisingly already set. As the family ate in silence, Nenet let the chaos of the day’s events roam in her mind as she tried to make some sense of everything that had happened. How the hell can I tell anyone about this? It’s crazy. She brought her senses back to the dinner table after some time and asked her parents about what they had planned for the weekend. As expected, they said they planned nothing and wanted to do nothing.

“Why leave the house if you’re around? Plus, you know it’s not really our thing,” her mother said.

“Well, we have thought about this couples cruise that’s happening in two weeks but we put it off a while ago because you wanted to come back for a bit after graduation,” added her father.

“Do it,” Nenet said. “I think you guys really need it. You guys are always working. You shouldn’t change your plans just because I’m around. I’ll be here when you get back. Go,” reassured their daughter.

They looked at each other and became aware that Nenet was right: they needed some fun and the cruise would be on course in no time. Plus, they both kept their days off from work aligned with the cruise just in case. Nenet’s father excitedly excused himself from the table and hurried to the computer to reactivate the tickets. The rest of the family busied themselves by cleaning and he soon joined them to speed up the process. With the ship set to depart the next Friday from the Florida coast, Nenet’s parents decided it would be better to fly out a couple days before to enjoy some Florida sun, amongst other things.

Nenet decided that while her parents were away it would be a good time for her to further explore the mirrors. The late-evening flight on Tuesday arrived fairly fast and she drove them to the airport. Her parents promised to be back in two weeks and said their goodbyes as they entered the airport terminal. Nenet waved until they were no longer in sight and hopped into the car to drive back home.

It had been nearly two weeks since she crossed the mirrors into a completely different world and she was ready to attempt once more. She had time to process and research what she could, but nothing relating to what she experienced was found. She speculated that the mirrors were somehow attached to wormholes that led to another place. Nah. Well, maybe? The only way to get answers for her countless questions was to go back to the other side. I need to talk to Shaba! He might have answers or knows someone who does. He mentioned mythical stories. She packed her blue backpack with some food, water, a knife, and a taser. You never know. Nenet thought about the taser and decided to put it back in her drawer. Her father gave her some military training just in case she ever needed to protect herself. I should be fine, she thought.

Her breath was shaky. Just looking at the mirror in her bedroom made her nervous, but she loosened up because it was an undertaking in need of a calm and collected navigator. Grabbing the backpack with one hand, Nenet inched closer to the mirror and saw the growing, vibrant trees once more. She peered closer and noticed faint shadows near the other side of the mirror. Well, the sun looks like it's going down soon over there too.

Her legs crept closer to the mirror and she found herself amongst the trees once more. But to her surprise, she also found a group of about twenty people, men and women, asleep near the large tree from which she entered. Among them, Shaba. Their graceful slumber was being drizzled by morning light. She looked at the sky and realized the sun was not setting; it was rising—from the west? Nenet had so much to learn and she was ready.

From the corner of her eye she could see one of the women stirring and waking. The woman looked up to see Nenet and immediately called for Shaba, who woke in an instant. They were waiting for me.

“You’ve come back! We’ve been awaiting your return!” Shaba said with child-like excitement.

“Hi again,” Nenet replied.

At this point, everyone was awake with wide eyes and she began to feel a bit uncomfortable.

“We didn’t mean to startle you. Please sit down with us. There is much to discuss,” Shaba insisted.

One of the men placed a patterned rug by her feet and she slowly took a seat. She scanned the group that huddled before her; it became apparent that they were more concerned about the experience than she was, and the thought of it alleviated the anxious air. Shaba pulled out a book and flipped through it until he found the desired page. He handed it to Nenet and motioned for her to read it aloud.

“Ammon, the man that bridged two worlds,” read Nenet. “This ancient man was an influence on the planet’s leading language. For decades, the people of Kreona adopted the endearing words of Ammon, and it slowly became the language of the common. It is said that he traveled from another planet through hidden portals only he could access. He brought ideas, beliefs, and technologies similar to our own. His home was known as Egypt.”

She stopped reading and her eyes met Shaba’s.

“You are the hidden one, just like Ammon,” he said. “He was a character in a magical story we were told as children, but it must have been true because here you are, appearing to us as a dream does.”

I’m not the first and only one, thought Nenet. I have some answers but now I have more to decipher.

“Ammon, huh? Who would have thought? I am just as confused as you, Shaba.”

“Ah. You have yet to tell me your name.”

“Nenet.”

“It is nice to officially be acquainted with you, Nenet.”

“A beautiful name,” chimed in one of the men.

In a hidden facility, the location of which not even I as the narrator could tell you, countless men and some women frenzied over the security footage of Nenet disappearing and reappearing in mirrors as she conversed with the people from Kreona in real time. One man in particular, leading agent Paul Barlow, watched the footage numerous times, backwards, sped-up, slowed-down, in color, in black and white, and in its original form. It was the most popular video on social media for nearly a week and the agents made sure it was authentic before taking further action. Paul loved ancient

Egyptian myths and folklore, and the story of Ammon came to mind during his first glimpse of the footage. He made it his mission to uncover the girl and her capabilities.

“Run her face through the system and find her,” Paul told the analysts.

Right away the analysts went to work and found Nenet within minutes. They compiled a generic file and handed it over to Paul.

“Nenet Ganem. 22-years-old. Only daughter of first generation Jordanian-American Adofo Ganem and Cuban-American Flora Diaz. Currently resides in Middletown, New York. Attended the University of North Carolina. B.A in Architecture. Looks like she wanted a break from her parents. Seems like any other person. Well, time to make a trip.”

Paul asked leading analyst Jenna Sterling to come along and be his right-hand woman. It is safe to say that he had a special admiration for Jenna that broke past the workplace. They packed whatever they needed and headed for the SUV. Just before they drove off, three agents invited themselves to tag along just in case. Among them was Agent Vic Masse, and this irked Paul deep in his core.

“Nice of you guys to join the party of two and make it five,” he said sarcastically.

They snickered and put on their seatbelts, and the fifteen-hour drive commenced.

TO MY TOURIST

It's where the palm trees are genuine,
The only true home for your love.
We're in the shiny Caribbean:
I'm like the beach and the sun.

These make the vision symbolic.
You are what makes me so 'luxe.
Let's take a picture by the water,
Drinking from young coconuts.

Extension of stay is required.
Please remain here and live off love.
There are plenty of reasons to stay here:
I have everything that home does.

But for the summer I know you,
Being hot doesn't mean much.
Heat is like purification,
And this is just phase number one.

*Can you swim against the current?
Can you bear the crashing of waves?
Would you dive into shark-infested waters?
Would you pour salt in my veins?*

If there's a tropical storm, will you
Catch a flight or rebuild from the pain?
And if you do venture to snow-tipped mountains,
Will you still see me the same?

AS I LAY

I can't help but think how
This all could've been avoided,
All this anguish and pain:
The hole in my heart,
The blood on my shirt,
The broken glass around us,
The cut knuckles.
As I lay here with you,
I can't help but feel that
This shit is getting toxic.
You're not, nor are you ever going to be,
The one for me.
I may think this is normal,
But bruised lips and drunk nights aren't normal.
I'm not trusting you aren't single.
I'll never trust you and you won't give me reason to.
We aren't normal.
We shouldn't even be but here we are:
Angry and silent.
Your lip's busted too, but you wear it well.
My temper is as passionate as yours.
You will always be stronger;
I'll bewilder: a deadly combination.
As I lay,
Because you left me for her and
I'm alone to clean this up,
I think of what my life would be like
If I had never opened that door,
Crossed that threshold,
Or put myself on the back burner
For your sinfully decadent love.
Are these just words?
Will my actions speak louder than
The yelling in my mind?
My consciousness is in disarray,

For I know right from wrong,
Or so I think I do.
As I lay here,
You'll come back to me,
I'll open the door,
Let you cross the threshold,
And repeat.

MOTION SICKNESS

I'm the lover you need,
But you don't want to hear that.
I'll finish a glass of wine,
Thinking about you and me.
I'll finish a bottle and now
I'm only focused on your face.
I'll open another bottle
To the concern of those around me.
No need to slow down when you're
Moving on and moving fast.

Slow down, please,
I'm getting dizzy.
This ride is taking me over.
Motion sickness, but I can still see you clearly,
Like a vision in the sky.
Come to me.

– *Jasmine Gayle*

PRI-MA DONNA

The house was big and luxurious. Nothing like I'd ever seen before in West Philly. He lived just outside the city. He had a tall gold gate that appeared to be touching Paradise or something. Barricading the house was a wall of stone that you would probably see in a Medieval setting. I remembered him mentioning a fanatical interest in the time period. To go even further, he had this almost perfect recollection of the Treaty of Verdun and many other notable events of that time period, so it made sense that the wall was there.

I met him online. Online dating is the *thing* of this generation. A few months ago, I found an online dating site for local singles. I was definitely searching for my soulmate. I was at a point in my life where I sought validation, and what better way to do that than to look for a man, right? I met Russ—that's his name. We started talking. What caught my interest? He was the only guy I had matched with that didn't just use chat-cronyms in every message. I crave conversations with actual substance that caress my mind and put me in an intellectual bliss. Mr. Russ did just that. The achilles heel of it all, though, he was older. Not like three or four years older. I was born when he was 35—literally. I'm in my early 20s, but my age isn't important here. After a few conversations, we eventually got onto the topic of what we were seeking. Once I told him what I was looking for on the site, I learned that his reason was the complete opposite. Even though I was opposed to his preference, there was something still enticing me to go through with the companionship. I guess it was his ability to give me that "grown man" affection.

I slowly pulled up to the gate and my 2007 Altima gave the regular erratic engine roar once I came to a complete stop. I noticed that mounted on the stone wall was an intercom. I rolled my window down and pressed the "Talk" button.

"Olivia?"

He spoke my name with an Italian accent. I contained the chuckle that had already prepared itself. "Mhm!" is all I could get out.

"Oh!" he cooed. "I'm glad you could make it, hun! C'mon in."

The gates made a light electrical sound as they opened, and I proceeded onto the private property of grandeur. I parked my car and headed to his doorstep, where he was already waiting to greet me. I got close to him

and he immediately engulfed me in a huge hug. This was our first time meeting in person, so you can imagine that I was weirded out by the hug. Noticing my lack of response, he suddenly let me go.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m a hugger. I should have asked first.”

I took a moment to examine his appearance. His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly combed in a sideways fashion, and his salt-and-pepper stubble looked like the thorns of a porcupine. He had a few extra pounds, nothing too overwhelming, but definitely not my go-to. He rubbed his (most likely) clammy hands on the seams of his pants. He wore regular jeans that looked as if they were fresh from the cleaners, and his white button-down shirt was tucked in. He remained formal for this regular meet-up.

“Please, come in *ma donna*.”

He led me inside the house. I couldn’t help but notice the reflection of my feet against the marble floor. Walking in farther, I noticed the different Medieval paintings hanging on the wall leading to the living room. The one in particular that caught my eye was a painting of a woman holding a baby. I would have assumed it was the Virgin Mary, but of course Mary, Jesus, and Allah are all black.

“*Ma donna*?” I said.

“It’s Italian for my lady,” he replied.

He had a white velvet loveseat, and, adjacent to that, a white velvet chaise lounge.

“You can sit on the chaise, and I’ll take the loveseat. Get comfortable.”

Hesitantly, I walked to the chaise lounge and sat down. He plopped onto the loveseat and let out a grunt as if sitting took effort. He breathed in.

“So, since we’re here, we might as well get into what we talked about online. Is that ok, Olivia?” He gave me a patronizing look that made my stomach churn.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Did you put any thought into what I asked?”

I bit my lip. “I did. I didn’t make a decision, though.”

“Well, I don’t want to force you into anything that you don’t want to do.”

“I wouldn’t allow you to do that,” I said.

He took a breath. “Think about it. We’d meet once or twice a week—over coffee, dinner, or anything—and I’d be financially supporting you in return.”

“You’re willing to support me financially just for having coffee or dinner with you?” I asked. I was wearing a smirk at this point. I just knew I was beating him at his own game. This was a grown man! He tilted his head and gave me a warm, fatherly grin.

“I never told you this. I figured I’d wait until we were in person. About a year ago, I filed for divorce from my first wife. I fell in love with her in high school, but after we were married it just wasn’t the same. She didn’t make me feel how I did in our youth. I want to feel wanted like I was then. I just want to experience that same excitement for once.” He reached out and touched my hand. “And I think you’re the one to give it to me.”

My smirk slowly shifted into a soft expression. Just as much as he yearned to be young, I yearned to be wise.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m in.”

His smile reached from ear to ear, and he looked like the dogs in the Dentastix commercial wearing those big, creepy, human-like smiles. Even through this creepiness, I still obliged. He was just trying to feel that same excitement he used to feel when he was younger, and my young, exciting ass could help. I was willing to go on all the dinner and coffee dates that he wanted, especially if it meant more conversations such as this one.

A few weeks later we met up again. Instead of meeting at a restaurant, we were at his fine establishment, *again*. According to Russ, he had some last-minute work to finish up and thought it’d just be best to cancel the reservations and stay in. I didn’t question it—I guess it wasn’t really any of my business. At the end of the day, I was being paid to be a girlfriend experience—*nothing more, nothing less*. As a way to make up for it, he hired his personal chef to stay later and fix us a candlelit dinner. The set-up was out on his balcony; it literally hovered over his gated community, as if he was the king. The lights of cars and buildings scattered around the active city flickered simultaneously, but still managed to provide an eye-pleasing aesthetic. The breeze blew softly, causing the candles’ Cinnamon Apple scent to invade my nose. A smile crept onto my face as I took a sip of an already fixed glass of champagne.

“Cinnamon apple...you remembered?”

“Now, how could I forget?” he said, letting out a chuckle.

We sat and talked for a while before the personal chef brought our dinner on a silver platter with a lid crowning the top, literally. He sat them both in front of us, removing the crowns at the same time. My nose knew the dish before my eyes even got the chance to see it—fried chicken, collard greens, candied yams, and macaroni and cheese! My eyes wandered to the plate to find everything perfectly proportioned, looking just as

mouth-watering as the aroma. I wondered if Russ had kidnapped an older black woman with the “Thanksgiving arm.”

“Oh, you’ve really outdone yourself tonight. You felt bad you couldn’t take me out?”

“Yeah, I did. I know how much you would’ve enjoyed being wined and dined and it didn’t sit well with me that I had to cancel.”

I took a sip of champagne. The sweet aftertaste made my taste buds crave another sip.

“Oh my gosh, this champagne!” I threw my hands up in jubilation.

He laughed at my goofy behavior. “That’s a very special type of champagne,” he said. “It’s a family secret.”

“And I’m the best keeper of secrets.”

We both shared a laugh. I was enjoying this time spent with Russ. He actually paid attention to some of my interests and considered them for tonight’s date. When I went on dates with guys closer to my age, there was barely any talking. There were barely any dates with them. It made me feel good that Russ had taken the time to put together something nice, considering the fact that we weren’t able to go out.

I started to feel attracted to Russ. Instantly, we locked eyes. Russ rose from his seat, moving closer to my face. I was taken aback by this action, but I still managed to lean forward, allowing our lips to collide. What was I doing? I couldn’t tell you.

The next thing I knew we were on the couch in the living room. He was in between my legs, his heavy-set, sloppy body hovering over my small figure. His sweaty palms rested on my hips as his fingers played with the sewn lace of my panties. In one smooth motion he pulled them off. Usually, before even giving him the chance to expose me nude, I would be—at least—resistant. But this time I was oddly confident and feeling sexually aroused. Still trying to wrap my mind around what was going on, I could feel the rough texture of his hand in the center of my back as he searched for the clasp of my bra. He unhooked it, causing the bra to fall off my shoulders. Why wasn’t I stopping him?

His lips crashed into mine and his champagne-tasting tongue explored my mouth. The small sound of him fiddling with his belt buckle drew my attention, and shortly after I felt him inside of me. His grunts filled the silent room and sweat beads collected on his forehead. My body apparently was enjoying it, but it was almost as if I felt inhibited mentally. My eyes wandered the room, and found that same distinct Medieval painting of the woman and her child. Only this time she was moving—and talking.

“Pure woman, he’s taking your innocence,” she repeated over and over again.

Her halo shone with an iridescent beam of light that was painful to look at directly. Followed by this were loud, blood-curdling screams in a woman’s voice. I felt my heart rate speeding up quickly, as if my heart was going to burst through my chest. The screaming continued and the woman and the baby in the picture began to cry tears of blood.

“Help me!” she screamed.

The noise made it hard for me to focus. Suddenly, the feeling was not enjoyment or confidence; it was violation and vulnerability.

“G-Get off me!” I said. “What are you doing to me?!”

I tried pushing his extra pounds off me, but he held me down, preventing me from freeing myself. The sound of screams and the woman pleading for help became more desperate.

“You didn’t actually think dinner and conversation was all I wanted?” he said.

And that’s when I lost it.

LONG EYES

Thin strokes and white jagged lines,
The picture on the wall is now, yet lost in time,
And the woman on the canvas looks like a thought
Trapped in a dream of sorrowful colors.

Her eyes are too big,
and they fall to her chin.
If she blinks too fast,
she'll break her neck and tear the paint.

I imagine her slumbering as the light escapes her sockets.
I imagine her tears swinging like heavy fingertips,
Fading like a phantom,
Yet heavy like iron in a swaddling cloth.

In her eyes, I see a crowd laughing at my doubt,
My every screech and itch, so I duck between my arms.
 Here_they ponder,
 There_they follow,
And everywhere I'm reprimanded for wanting to escape.

Each white stroke is surrounded by scarce lashes.
They wave behind my back,
As if to embrace me with fiery criticism.
Still her eyes call me to suckle and feed.

She sees through me and pities my mediocrity.
She thinks me a child who will never be
Displayed in a white hall or a red room.
I'll never be pregnant with the "mysterious,"
Or have strangers thirst to understand me.
I've just simple eyes on my head and I'm ashamed.

TECHNICALLY ABUSE

It's technically abuse, but I've forgotten
How to tell right from wrong,
'Cause I've held the cord more times
Than I've had a chance to breathe.
You've taught me to hate my emotions;
Now all I want to do is come out of them.
I fear...I fear who I'll be when you're not around.

Do you know what it feels like
To slowly lose your mind while flying kites,
To watch your bones break like falling sand castles,
To close your eyes and see your
Mother with her life cut in two?
You're hurting us, and I don't know why.
Who am I when you're not around?

Look what you made me into...
Now I'm sleeping with a fist around my neck,
Listening for the moment I can finally open my eyes,
Skipping parts in my prayer,
And taking bread from the Lord's plate
'Til he visits me with vengeance or good company.

I don't know anywhere but home,
But I'm needing an escape.
I need to run away with the dying dawn,
Or travel with the receding waves.
Anywhere other than here.
I need to know who I was meant to be
If you were never around.

I want to love myself enough for me and you.
I want to be loved, even if not by you.
I need to know that I can be loved, especially after you.
Love is patient, but I've waited long enough,
So I'm moving on, without the love of a father.

—Ifeoma Mbachu



Embrasia Parker
Untitled



Embrasia Parker
The Water Bearer



Embrasia Parker
Untitled



Gianna Moon

Baby I'm a _____



Kyle Gordon
Night #1



Kyle Gordon
Night #2



Joi Sumler
Shine



Joi Sumler
Rebirth

BABYPROOF

As I park my car after a long day of work, I lean back in my seat and stare at the red hue in the sky, dreading entering my apartment complex. Trying to kill some time, I take my phone out of my pocket. *October 13th, 2019* goes across the stop of the screen. Before I can even unlock my phone, I notice the family that lives above me walking their kid, swinging him gleefully in their hands as they walk down the sidewalk. They're so obnoxious, but I'm jealous. Why can't Nadia and I have this happily ever after?

Nadia is my wife. I met her my sophomore year of college in 2013 and I instantly knew she was the one for me. Her long brown hair that danced every time she would walk, her soft caramel skin that felt like marshmallows, her hazel eyes that always seemed to twinkle like the stars above, and her smile that could warm the coldest of hearts. It was odd, but Nadia always knew what I was thinking. I would tease her and say that she was an alien or something that was not of this world every time she could guess what was on my mind. In all, she completed me.

Two years in I popped the question, and she did not hesitate to say yes. The feeling was like euphoria. Six months into being married, I found out that Nadia was expecting a child. I was excited and nervous about being a father. Growing up, I didn't really have a father figure in my life, but I was ready to be the man for my kid that my father could not be for me.

As I take a deep breath, I get out of my car and proceed to walk up to the door of the apartment complex, holding a small white box with me. I grab the bronze handle, but before I can open it, I feel something hit my foot. I look down and it's a basketball. I see the kid running to get the ball, so I pick it up. He stops in his tracks and shoots me an innocent smile with his hands stretched out.

I slightly grin and pass the ball back to him.

"Thank you!" the boy shouts as he runs back off to play.

I stare off into space for a little bit, not noticing that the mother of the child is looking at me. My eyes begin to refocus, and I see the warmest smile, something that I haven't seen in a very long time. I turn my head, slightly embarrassed, and enter the apartment complex.

The walk to the room today feels longer than usual. If there was a way to take a detour to get there today, I would in a heartbeat, but it is simply a straight walk down to the end of the hallway. I get to the door and I hear nothing on the other side. It is dead silent and for some reason that makes me even more nervous to open the door. I muster up the courage to open the door, and when I do Nadia is sitting at the table in the living room like she does every year on this day. I slowly shut the door as if I'm trying to mask my presence, but the creaking of the door gives me away instantly and Nadia looks at me.

I smile, "Hey, baby. I went to the local bakery on 13th street and I got your favorite."

I walk towards her in a goofy manner and place the box on our unstable table. She looks at the box, but turns her attention back to the object in her hand. I sigh and go to the couch and take off my shoes. I stare at the peeling paint on our walls and begin to peel back the layers of every moment that got us to this point. I look back over at Nadia and I can't help but be frustrated. I take a deep breath and get up off of the couch.

"Baby, can we talk?" I say as I walk towards her.

Nadia acts as if she did not hear a thing and that makes my frustration rise like a volcano ready to erupt. I begin to say something, but then I notice what is in her hand and I get stuck.

"Nadia, I thought you said you got rid of everything?"

Nadia looks up at me. Her eyes are empty and lifeless. She turns her head back to resume looking at the photo. I can no longer hold back my frustration and in a burst of anger I snatch the photo out of her hand.

Nadia gets up. "Give it back," she says.

"Not until you talk to me, Nadia."

Her face starts to become red, which usually means she's about to scream at me.

"Alexi, gave me back the photo! It's all I have left of her!" she screams.

"Come on, Nadia, you and I made a promise that we would leave those memories in the past so that we could move forward in our lives!"

Nadia pleads, "I'm begging you. It's the only thing that keeps me sane, happy, and not going over the edge."

I am taken aback by what she said. Did she really just say that? After it all, what's left for me? A broken marriage?

"This photo is what keeps you sane, Nadia? This photo right here?" In a rush of anger, I begin to rip the photo apart and Nadia rushes towards me to grab it and I push her back. She falls onto the floor and hits

the table and the box falls to reveal a destroyed strawberry cheesecake. She stares at me with tears flowing down her face. I look at her and I don't even recognize her. Her hair is thinning, skin is pale, and her face is sunken. Is this the woman I married? Is this an imposter?

“When Alice died, it hurt us both, Nadia. It hurt us to our core. I went and searched for a new job and the only place that was hiring was in this nowhere town, but I took it regardless because I love you. I knew how our old home reminded you of her so much. How we painted her room pink and plastered rainbows and pink clouds on her walls. How we sat up all night trying to put her crib together, and how we babyproofed the whole house preparing for her. I know that it shook you to your core, but damnit woman, what about me?! You think I'm ok?! I have nightmares sometimes, you know? Where I am holding a baby and it has no face. Everything fades to black and I am sitting in this void. Faintly hearing a baby crying, I try to reach the voice every time, but I never can. Alice haunts me just like you, but to say that the photo is the only thing that keeps you going is complete bullshit!”

Nadia slowly starts to crawl toward the ripped-up photograph and begins collecting the pieces. I quickly take one of the pieces of the photo off the ground and I look at it. It's a grey silhouette of Alice's head from the ultrasound. Tears begin to run down my face so rapidly that my eyes drown in the wave of emotions that hits me.

“You hate me, don't you?” she asks.

Her words snap me back to reality, the harsh reality that is right now. She could always read my mind, but this time she is wrong. I hate our marriage, I hate how things took a turn for the worse after Alice died. When she died, Nadia did too. Movie nights turned into lonely nights, good laughs turned into bad arguments, and sweet kisses turned into despairing distance. Our marriage is but a husk of what it was. Things will never be the same, and it's all because of this damn baby. I can't help but resent it because if it was not for her, my marriage would still be intact.

Wiping the tears from my face, I take a deep breath. “You may not want to admit it, but Alice is the cause of all our problems, and if we want to move on then you have to let Alice go or I can't do this anymore.”

Nadia gets up off the floor and walks into the bathroom. She looks back at me with a faint smile and says, “Don't worry, I'll let go,” and shuts the door.

I'M ANGRY

I'm angry.

But it's only because I never asked for him to come into my life.

You know those people that come into your life
when you least expect them to?

Yeah,

that was him,

slowly easing into my life,

practically hiding in plain sight,

telling me I'm not good enough

and that today will be a bad day as soon I wake up,

and I mean as soon as I wake up,

every...morning.

So I send him off with a smile,

and maybe his words won't matter for a while,

but deep down inside I know they do.

So who am I trying to convince?

Him or myself?

His grip is getting stronger and stronger,

tugging at every bit of happiness that I've ever known.

He's even telling me not to eat, so I won't.

I can go another day

eating less than the day before.

My weight is dropping like degrees Fahrenheit on a January morning.

Stepping on the scale for me was like standing on an auction block,

pointing out my insecurities,

a slave to my mind.

Looking in the mirror is getting harder because

he won't let me see the girl that everyone else sees.

Why can't I see her?

Why can't I be her

on the inside?

When I'm alone, he's harder to ignore,

making me see the worst in myself more and more.
This is a battle that I don't think I'll win,
as he's found a way to change the way that I feel about myself within.

Yet, on my way out the door,
I place a smile on my face,
preparing my mask for the day,
constant "How are you doing's," followed by "I'm good" with a smile.
Why do I lie, when I know how I really feel inside?
He is close to shattering me like fine china in a child's hands.
How am I going to pretend that I'm fine
when the levees break and the water starts rushing in?
I feel like I'm drowning,
because I'm not comfortable in my own skin.

And sometimes he tells me that I shouldn't be here,
and that everyone will be better off without me.
I'm angry,
but I have every right to be!

I'm suffocating in his grasp.
I really hope that this will help him pass,
but he won't go away that easy.
I am here and I'm stronger than him,
because he is just one against the army that I have behind me.
I will grow and I will prosper despite what he says,
and use his words as a lesson.
I'm not afraid to say his name.
Do you hear me?
I said I'm not afraid to say his name.
His name is depression.

SCARED TO GROW

So many stories about flowers getting ready to grow,
But this is a story about one who was scared to and didn't know.
Although it had all the talent and beauty to be brilliant,
It still thought of faults and mistakes, it was not resilient.
There was only one side of this flower that everyone knew.
The problem with this is that the side was not true.
Deep down inside it was the epitome of beauty and grace,
But the flower decided to go with the side that was not a pleasant taste.
The reason for this involves new feels and a faster pace.
The flower knew it had more to show, you could see it in its face.
One day the flower realized the true gift that it was,
And stopped comparing itself to others—that was a negative cause.
The flower realized it did not see the true beauty in itself.
It was acting that way because it believed it was not of high wealth.
The flower did not know its worth,
So it went through many lessons and felt pain,
But it picked itself back up and now it is sane.
The journey of this flower blossoming was quite rough,
But now the journey is over because I realized...**I am enough.**

WHO AM I?

Who am I?

I just left a suicide prevention clinic.

My occupation is death.

I live alone, taken care of by my aunt.

My life is boring.

My parents left me; I am unwanted.

My life is temporary, just a blink.

I want to trade my hurt for wealth.

Just dust in the galaxy, just a dot on a big planet.

I see the faces of my parents in the stars and visualize a smile.

Who am I?

This day, the class feels melded together with all the other class days at Arthur Horn High School. It meets the standard criteria for “unrelated to my own investments.” I fall in an imaginative zone while my last teacher of the day, Mrs. Anderson, introduces some dead man’s theory of relativity. I am uninterested in what he discovered before I was born, and it doesn’t even sound like English. Then eventually time catches up, and the bell wails like dreams ready to die, making itself known, riding off the rhythm of a high frequency belch, but long, long does it reverberate against the tall white walls.

“Okay, class, your ‘Who Am I?’ papers are due when I see you tomorrow!” she exclaims before all the teens bustle toward the door.

Finally!

“Xavier, can we talk before you leave?” she abruptly intrudes on I, who wants to leave. Great, why the fuck is she saying my name with her signature helpful but demeaning tone? I get up halfway. Looking away from her request, I notice the calendar with gold stars bordering the students whose papers make them “On A Roll Achievers.” The date is from November. It must be the third month in this English class and the smart half just finished *Frankenstein*. I finished a chapter. Shit. I look back at her combatively.

“What?” I say.

“Your grades have been average. Do you need any assistance for the assignment tomorrow?”

“I can handle a paper on myself.”

I squint my dark, poison-green eyes into her dusky hazel ones, and take my bookbag, signaling to her that I’m leaving.

“Okay, well, if you ever need anything, send an e-mail, and have a nice day,” she says.

“Peace,” I say

I lurch from the desk as if I had been rooted by great weights and this was my first time fully erect. I am a frail guy, and the hard chairs don’t do well for my boney, non-fatty bottom. Why even bother? I leave the assignment paper atop the desk, and feel Mrs. Anderson’s vigorous and annoyed stare fix on me as I leave between the two lovers clogging the narrow doorway. Priorities. Before I open the chocolate milk I saved from lunch, I plan to talk to my crush. Yeah, I like my milk warm. My music is all I need. I walk a few paces down the hall, led by the rhythm of a wild piano in my ears, and THUD, our collision.

Of course, it’s my crush’s twin.

“Sorry, Angelique,” I say.

“Watch out next time, tall guy,” she says. “You know I’m short.”

“Yeah, I wanted...”

“Anyways, I have to go catch my bus,” she says.

“Okay, let me walk...”

“See ya’, I gotta’ go.”

Damn, she’s not listening.

“I’ll walk with you,” I quickly pronounce.

“No,” she says. “My boyfriend will be jealous. I can’t be seen with you, a black guy.”

*I pause,
As if stillness could rewind my movie.
I feel afraid, alone, and happy all in one frame.
Rigidly, I wave goodbye.*

At home, I make my way to my study space, my bedroom, after heating up my aunt’s homemade—but now leftover—pizza. My bedroom is full of philosophy books stacked on a bookshelf too small for an infinite imagination. My father’s worn-out piano has its own corner near a clothes rack that can be considered my closet. A 1980s antique wooden drawer and some unpacked containers hold what auntie calls “some

punk teen's youth." She's being sarcastic: my "youthful" collection is nothing but the finest mix of philosophies, comedic tragedies, detested ironies, horrors, and a museum's collection of music left by my father. I find that whatever he left behind are his teachings to me. My aunt can't stand anything I read that goes against the word of God, but reading deep into novels and theories is my favorite hobby.

I started *Frankenstein* again in the afternoon, and now I feel the cold winter air coming in through the open window. The night is cold. Midnight comes and goes. I do it overnight. In overtime. Read the book and write my paper. I surprise myself. I am one cool crazy cat, prowling, creating fancies like this and that. One chill rascal. A leopard in the sheets and a bull on the beach. A tunesmith of Mythology, finding words in the tongue rhythms vibrating off the lip of a mute. Radio voices and music like blues and jazz keep me up. It is now four in the morning.

*Should I nap,
shower, or make breakfast?
THUD! My head hits
my arms below
and I sleep.*

A moody and dynamic ringtone plays in my tired ears. "The Boogie Woogie" resonates throughout my cramped bedroom. Eventually, I wake to check the time and see I missed one call from last night. Dominique called me. I call her back.

"Hello."

"Hey, what's up, Dominique?" I say like I practiced.

"Hi, Xavier," she says, and laughs. "Do you know what time it is? I expected you to be here at the stop."

I am quietly desperate and thankful. Her voice must be made of cream: it is so smooth. Her tongue must be such a relaxing sour. I swear she puts the dialects of the world into a lesser category. But a feeling of regret passes through my body. I did say I would manage to get to her bus early today, Friday.

"I'm sorry. I had to talk with my aunt," I say. I think I lie well enough. "What time is it?"

"It's 6:30. The bus will be here in 20 minutes. I thought you wanted to talk."

Woah! What the fuck? Okay, okay, run. Get ready and just run.

"I'll make it to you. I'm on my way."

Her bus stop is not my bus stop, but a five-minute walk from my porch. I find one uniform set untarnished. This will do. I then reach for my bookbag that is hanging on the light blue door, which leads people to believe that my room is brighter than it is. I have a green marble and darker blue paint design in my room, which complicated my early childhood dreams. Rushing now, I wash and dry myself in the sink, put some of my auntie's good perfume on, get bread and an apple, and head out with a trail of forgetfulness.

"Hey, Dominique," I say with some morning voice still left over, and hug her.

Her head falls and lays below my chest, resting for five seconds, a calm and peaceful feeling swirling in my stomach. Could she hear that?

"Hey, you doing okay?" she says.

"Yeah." I clear my throat, realizing that I should have grabbed some water to wash this bread down.

Dominique looks stunning in her tight black pants and mint-green top. I feel like I'm finally awake. She has tied her hair so tight it's hiding behind her neck, but her round cheeks are really coming out. I see her unveiled dimples that look so nice, like inverted hills for kissing, a place for lips to rest or retreat into.

"Dominique," I say.

"Yup," she says.

"Do you want to go out with me after school or something?"

She looks at me and I look at her.

"Ya know, if you like me," I think I say out loud.

"What are your intentions?" she says, in all honesty and sincerity.

I stop functioning. The water rolling down the hill across the street stops, the leaves of the bushes lose their vibrant morning green, and I lose sight. My head goes to a place where there are no answers for her, broken by the temptation to answer honestly. What do I say? She is so cute, she is so nice, she is so...

"I want to spend more time getting to know you and stuff," I say.

"That's it?" she says.

Does she want more? What more is she thinking about?

"That's enough, but if you want more, I'm prepared."

"Okay," she says, cracking open a godly smile.

Done deal? No way! Did I just do that? YES, I DID.

Later, in English class, I listen as Mrs. Anderson addresses the students. "Welcome back. I would like to start with the 'Who Am I?' presentations, so take your papers out."

Her voice projects like she is attacking me sonically, her words ringing throughout my soma. I find her rabble to miss me again this day, because coming through the narrow doorway is Dominique. My soul takes a sweet sip of coffee to observe her fully. Dominique comes in, looks left, and comes forward, bypassing the back regions of the class. I notice other rubbish turning their attention toward her. I have a date with her, fools! My instincts come out with a fierce, passionate carnality. I use my eyes to aggressively pierce dead the glances of Anthony, John, William, Adam, and Mark, all in one cone of vision. She ultimately sits at a new chair closer to me, down a chair to the left and one chair in front. Yeah, day's almost done. Perfect.

"A forewarning," states Mrs. Anderson, "we'll be presenting in alphabetical order."

Cool, let's get this show started, I thought.

But where are my papers? I left my papers. No. Where are my papers? I'm now in a flash of panic. Glued to my seat, sweating in a cold school climate. I feel a fear and terrible agony, not from skipping the assignment, but because my excitement and hard work betrayed me. I have to do this. I already wrote it. I can recite it. Remember, remember, remember. Think back. What did I do the other day?

Okay, I'm next. I can't blow this in front of Dominique. I crack open a warm milk and take a swig for good luck. I get up and head to the front of the class, sweating. I close my eyes and peek out to see twenty-three peeking back.

"Hi, class," I say.

"Hi," they respond.

Silence. My breath breaks apart.

"Is he okay?" I hear people murmuring.

"I'm fine. I'll get through this."

I vehemently break free from an overbearing tightness in my flat chest.

HAI HAI HAI!

This is the shout of my people.

My aunt taught me and told me:

A man must shout in times of test.

That gets a nice laugh out of a few jokesters in the back.

I am a native to this body, but also to many more.

I am a borrower of all intellectual minds,

*Transmigrating in life's passage and birth.
I am a wandering soul looking for a home now.
My mother left me, my father left me,
But I don't feel as though they don't want a way back to me.
I know death, and I have seen many people seek help.
My aunt works late shifts at a suicide prevention clinic.
I follow her some days and realize how much people feel
Weight. Weight of love, family, work, society, religion, money!
I want to trade their hurt for wealth,
So that they can be rich, and I, not so aggrieved.
When I read, I feel as though the world they live in could be mine,
Making my world such a bore, but I do not regret tranquility.
I am not a fool, never was, never will be.*

I open my eyes to an invested classroom, and so I keep my eyes open.

*I see the faces of my parents in the stars and visualize a smile.
I am alone, I am not alone anymore, I was alone.
Some time ago I thought my life was nothing,
Just a beetle in a giant forest.
Now I know I am not, or at least there will be more beetles like me.
Who Am I?
I feel as though I am. Therefore, I am, I am.*

And the class goes, "I am, I am."

I take my seat. I'm definitely going to need a change of clothes, or just don't forget deodorant next time.

The bell wails like dreams ready to die, making itself known, riding off the rhythm of a high frequency belch, but long, long does it reverberate against the tall white walls.

"Okay, class, have a nice weekend!" Mrs. Anderson says.

I look up from the half-desk, noticing that she's missing. Where did she go?

"Xavier! Hey, that was good, man," she says, exhaling on my wet neck.

"Hey! Thanks. I thought yours was really good too," I say with a trembling spirit.

"Sooooo what should we do?" She cracks open another godly smile unworn throughout the day, revealing itself to be unique and especially bold for me.

What? I didn't think this far, so fast.

“How about you come over my aunt’s place and I’ll show you something like a collection,” I say selfishly.

“A collection?”

“My house, my bedroom, is a museum type of place. It’ll be nice. I really mean it.” I laugh with sincerity.

“Okay. Let’s head home.”

“The sun is setting,” I say

“Yeah, it is,” she says.

Unremarkable, usually,

The sun sets

Really pretty

Just this day.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

I gave you the world
and in turn mine crumbled.
I shot for the stars
because you made me feel
out space.
I gave my all.
That's what I grew up seeing:
when love was action
it had way more meaning.
I carried myself very strongly
because with you I could be weak.
Judgment came in different ways,
but I knew you were my peak.
Your lack of judgment
was what I'd seek.
I did all these things
with all my heart,
and even with all these things
you tore us apart.
Your lies
untied the place you held.
Those laces undone,
I trip over the thought of us.
You took something beautiful and unique
and made it ugly and weak.
I'll learn how to let you go,
where the thought of you
doesn't make me so
Angry
Heartbroken
Hurt
Disappointed.
At some point
these states of being
will just be,

and those feelings
will pour out,
but until then this is goodbye from me,
the one that got away.

I'M SORRY

And while we're on the subject,
I'm sorry in advance
That you ever had to hear this,
for giving me a chance.

But I'm sorry is what I say
when I can't say everything.
It's the lie I use to paint over the truth
with a better story.

It's the half-truth of apologies,
ringing hollow in reality.
I'm sorry is my defense;
it's the difference between shy and confident.

I'm sorry is everything I meant
to say that went unheard,
the words that couldn't escape
the critical mass of anxiety.

I'm sorry means I'm listening
to the words I didn't say.
It's my apology to you
for making you feel that way.

But most of all, I'm sorry
is an opportunity missed.
Every time I wish for the courage
to speak a little more,
"I'm sorry" makes it out
before I even have a chance.

THE QUEEN COMMANDMENTS

There's a contradiction in the way we criticize black beauty
That I hope will one day be explained to me thoroughly,
But until then, I got some rules that need to be respected,
For the pretty black girls with the kinky dark curls
Who are constantly being rejected.

I can speak from experience.
Men are always comparing me
To the type of girl I can never be;
Therefore, inadequate is all they see,
But that's their problem,
Because I know ain't nothin' wrong with me.
Yes, we stand strong on our own,
But that doesn't mean that love isn't needed,
So allow me to remind you about how
A black woman is supposed to be treated.

#1:

Don't constantly tell me to be proud of my complexion,
When it is the main reason for why I come across rejection.
Being shades darker than my lighter-skinned friends
Should never be used like an invisibility cloak
To hide from the men who are supposed to be standing in my corner,
Teaching other brothers how to "stay woke" and love their black queens.
Well, I guess you've been asleep.

#2:

Stop comparing us to women you know we can never embody.
I'm artwork created by God, not a made-to-order Barbie.
And I know you hate it when we get loud, but there's something we
gotta' say: this isn't Burger King—you can't have it your way.

#3:

Don't tell me not to get offended when you say
You only want to have light-skinned babies.
Let me ask you something:
Why do we still allow shade to determine beauty?
Do you worry that if your baby is dark-skinned it will have a harder life,
One with discriminatory workplaces and long days full of strife?
I respect that.
It's similar to when parents don't want their children to be gay,
Because they think they're sparing them the agony
Of not meeting the status quo,
Of struggling more just to live their lives happily.
Sadly, discrimination is an institution we all eventually see,
But just because ya'll are afraid
Doesn't necessarily mean that we have to be.

#4:

Queens do not look to others to validate their beauty.
Queens do not ask for permission to exist.
Queens dominate with a gracious smile,
Because power isn't controlled with an Iron Fist.

My melanin has become the shield that I hide behind
To block the scorching prejudices from piercing my skin,
Because unlike the people I grew up around,
I was raised to recognize that beauty
Isn't just physical, but comes from within.
So now I'm able to walk the streets
With a perfectly engrained grin,
And my confidence isn't based on the future I hold,
But has been molded from the places I've been.

Inferiority triggers the nerves that are vital to my Womanhood.
Words are the only reason why Queens are too scared to wear a crown,
Because we allow our worth to be validated by men like Chris Brown.
I don't need your blessing to say any of this,
Because your approval isn't needed.
Just remember where you come from and never forget
How a black woman should be treated.

IN THE LONG RUN

You are tired, very tired.

Somewhere between four and five in the morning, you can see the sky's slow shift from pitch black to a navy gradient. Your first class is at nine. And you're not quite sure you can get back to bed with all the tension in your body, so you resolve not to try at all. Instead, you move to the window and look outside again, a mug of apple cider in your hands.

It's a clear morning. Streetlamps illuminate empty streets as quiet echoes across the area, save for the occasional dog bark and bird call. A car sails by, no doubt on its way to somewhere important. You'd almost forgotten that some people leave their house willingly at this hour. You take a sip of the cider and close your eyes. Your brain's awake enough to process taste and sensation, therefore you can catch the sweet balance of the fruity concoction. It's one of life's most simple pleasures to delight in a sweet drink in spite of your body's morning time need for water. Neglect has never tasted so sweet.

There are a few minutes of wistful staring before you decide to call it quits on one of your rare dawn staring contests with the nature of college suburbia. This wasn't the first time you'd woken before reasonable hours and it probably wouldn't be the last, not if you had any say in your body's processes. But that's undergrad: class and papers, clusters of people and expectations topped off with sleep disturbance. No need to stress. You know you have something to do, you just have to do it and that'll start the process. You'll trust the process, and it'll trust you. That's all you can do.

The mug you were holding goes to a nearby table while you attempt to fix the blinds as they were to maintain a semblance of an organized living area. As organized as you can be in a house of four. It's you and three of your friends. What a shocking accomplishment for anybody these days. To live in a house! You'd be proud of yourself if you weren't so tired. Drink in your luck with the housing market, for you don't know how long it's meant to last. You just know that you're content with your monotony. And as it turns out, fixing the blinds while daydreaming about another day in the life is exactly how clumsiness takes the reigns and makes the entire set collapse off the nails. You've managed to upset your entire balance in all of five seconds.

While tussling with the blinds, you decide to have another look out the window, to see if anyone caught your fumble from the comfort of their home.

Silence.

A shadow crosses the threshold of the block before you see the form it belongs to, street lamps catching the silhouette of what looks like a jogger dressed in black. There's a joke about joggers and how they all look the same. You're able to make out the stylish white stripes running down the leg and arm of the tracksuit—that one brand you're too broke to buy. You sip the cider in your mug and drain the rest of the cup in a toast to good fashion. You'd think by the time you finished the jogger would be gone, but they aren't. They're standing in the same spot, and quite frankly it's starting to wake you up. With a sigh, you decide it's high time you stop being nosy and go take a shower, a good way to ease your mind of this non-encounter.

Soon enough you're all cleaned up. After a peek out the window, you're certain that the person standing in the street is gone. Now it's time to check your phone and address the voicemail your mother left you.

All of a sudden your nice morning is interrupted by the news that your aunt is dead.

The days that follow are a weird mix of hectic and mundane. You go to school, you call mom and dad to make sure things are all right and they ask you the same. You answer with more energy than you have. You make it clear: you can't come to the funeral because of mid-terms, but yes, you'll send your condolences and whatever pictures there are of you and your auntie for the program. You didn't know her that well, but she was nice. You don't say that you're not going to study that hard for mid-terms and that you'd probably have skipped the service anyway. Because you didn't know her that well and there's something about eulogies that puts you off. So, no funeral.

First, it's your parents who ask the questions, and then it's your friends. All the same. You can't escape it, it's everywhere, in the house, on the phone, in the classroom.

“Are you okay?”

Yes.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

No.

“Are you coming to the party on College Ave?”

Yes!

“Do you have something to add to the discussion?”

Uhhh...

A few heads turn your way, your Philosophy instructor none too pleased to see you and your peers whispering above the lecture on...what was it again?

“Can you repeat the question?”

“We’re talking about free will. Do you have any thoughts or comments?”

“Hmm. Well, uhh. No, sorry.”

“You know, free will is linked to one’s vices and virtues. I wouldn’t say it’s a sin, but I would call talking during a lecture a vice a lot of you like to engage in. One that hurts the self, or perhaps your grade when you exchange responsibility for social deliberation.”

The instructor looked out across the room, and was met with uncaring faces, a few of which were engaged in whispers. She turned back to you, her arms crossed.

“The question to ask is if you don’t have any thoughts or comments because you don’t have anything to say, or because you’re making the choice to not have any of those things?”

Now there were eyes on you, bored eyes, but eyes nonetheless. Your eyes skim the PowerPoint at the front of the room. Nonsense, it’s all nonsense.

“I guess I’m choosing not to,” you respond.

“Then please choose to keep the side conversations to a minimum.”

Shame curls in the pit of your belly. But still, you whisper. You’re taking notes, but you’re whispering, too.

Class ends with the transition of lunch to the dinner hour, and then it’s back to lying in bed. And if you saw the jogger in the tasteful tracksuit, you don’t ask if anybody else saw them, because free will is real and you choose not to remember another random figure in a sea of random figures on this campus.

Free will, you know that’s all about choice. And then you wonder about that choice. If there is a right or wrong one, if you have any say at all.

Then you get dressed and go to a keg stand with your peers. Because you’re in the prime of your life and that’s how you’ve been coping all this time.

“What’s it feel like to be this week’s champion?” one of your friends asks, grinning wide.

“Disappointing,” you answer, shaking the waves from your vision. She pats you on the shoulder with a snort.

“That’s quitter talk if I ever heard it. I wish I could pack away as much as you do. The hell does it all go?”

“Great things come in small packages, ain’t that how it goes?”

“Wise words, Master Yoda.”

“A fuck about your opinion I do not give!”

And then you two are bent over, giggling like a bunch of school children at your terrible impression. The world spins a little more at your raucous laughter, the contents of your stomach bubbling and boiling until you straighten up.

“I need some air. Gotta’ sober up.”

Then out the door you go, fist raised to the heavens as if you’re still basking in the post-victory haze. And you are, because winning’s supposed to feel good, even when it doesn’t.

The porch is a little damp, but it’s okay to sit on, which is good. This is good. You’re good to flop onto your butt and stare into the night. It’s calm enough for that.

“Nice job back there.”

You make sure to clamp down on the startled scream that’s begging to tear its way out of your throat and plaster a smile on your face as you glance at the stranger.

“Thanks! You did well, too.”

“Sorry if I scared you. I didn’t think anybody else would come out so early.” He wiggled a cigarette between his fingers, smiling wryly. “I’d offer you one, but you’ve probably had your fill of stuff tonight.”

“Nah, I still got room for more. Pass it.” Your new acquaintance passes the cigarette your way and you put it to your lips. Smoke billows out across the front porch, with nothing but the exhale to carry it.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. I’m Zion, by the way.”

“Cool name. I didn’t get so lucky.”

Your name runs in the family, a hand-me-down of sorts, the small inheritance of another long-dead relative. It’s a little too embarrassing to volunteer, honestly.

“I think it’s plenty cool.”

“So you’ve heard about me?” Now you’re amused.

“Oh, yeah. Anybody who can drink that much has a reputation around here.”

You’re ready to make a witty quip about popularity and college life but you’re stopped by the dread seeping into your bones. Even above the

muffled music and chatter from the house, you can hear it. And once you look away from Zion, you can see it too. Standing right across the street.

Black tracksuit, black gloves, hood up.

“You good?” you hear him say, and like the idiot you are, you nod.

“Do you see that?”

“See what?”

You point in the direction of the jogger, only to find that they’ve gone.

“I have to go.”

You climb to your feet, ignoring the angry throbbing in your head. And with that, you are off on a light run, desperate to get away, or maybe to get closer. You don’t know. But you really want to go home.

Somewhere along the street you stop, muscles feeling thick and heavy from the drink. A cold sweat has left your clothes damp. Your throat is raw from running, your nerves unchecked. Here you are, running from nothing. You resolve to cut down on the amount of alcohol you’d compete to consume, and decide that if you see the jogger again, you’ll mind your own business. You won’t worry.

And you don’t worry when you see them again. You get angry and start chasing after them, against your better judgment. What are a few more blocks from home? To hell with it!

“Stop right there!” you order, starting to feel the burn in your chest with each quick step. And still, the figure keeps running and running. Out of touch, out of reach. Your head is pounding.

“Stop, stop!” you more or less beg, stomach churning with its meager contents. The odds of vomiting are climbing, but they still lag a little behind your lungs constricting you to death.

Then they stop, hands at their sides. You stop, too, scared of what it means. This person shows no malice, but it still feels like all the evil in the world has converged in one spot.

They don’t speak. The figure turns and hooks their gloved fingers under the fabric obscuring their face. The pain in your chest rises to unbearable levels, as if a vice has been applied to your heart.

Thump, thump, thump.

When the figure pulls down the hood of their jacket...

Thump, thump.

...you see your face staring back...

Thump.

..and you do not see the car that hits you.

2010 NOVEMBER COLD

That 2010 November cold was no match
For the freezing feeling of solitude,
In that room, confined to my own thoughts.

Another night on the bottle,
I assumed.
Before “driving the boat,”
Steering the yacht was you.

I made like a Rolex
And watched time.
Hours passed, then
BAM!

The door slammed
And I ran, and there you were,
Stretched out like a rubber band
In the arms of the Number House man.

Mouth open, eyes shut,
As if you were in a deep slumber,
But I couldn’t help but wonder—
Eyes open, mouth shut.

That 2010 November cold was no match
For his icy stare of concern,
Yearning to know if
I was okay.

I was numb.
Night after night,
You was drunk as a skunk,
And the alcohol on your tongue really stunk.

But what really put things in a funk
Is when I looked at you, Unc.
I had only seen dead bodies in the movies,
So this moment was 3-D.

Plenty thoughts of envy built within me.
It made sense to make God the enemy,
Or the bottle, or you.

That 2010 November cold is no match
For the bitterness I feel
Toward the icy-cold bottle of Blue Moon
That sent McPherson too soon.

Ashes to ashes, dust to glaciers.

HOLYLAND

I

She was convinced she'd get away with it. Barbara Jean grasped John's gun firmly in her hand, pointing the barrel toward his forehead as she stood before him, lying asleep in their bed. She stared at him, sweat dripping from her hair as she leaned over the bedside. There were no candles on in the house and no one near their ranch. The animals would hear a revolver but wouldn't know what it was, and John didn't mean anything to anyone who would care to ask if he was gone. Outside of Anthony, he walked around like more of a ghost than a man. Thinking carefully, Barbara Jean looked through the sight of the poorly cleaned revolver and her grip started to wane from the weight of the gun. She paused and placed it back on the bedside table.

John's eyes watered as he woke up later that morning. He heard noises in the kitchen and walked over, hoping that Barbara Jean was making breakfast.

"What you got cookin'?"

Barbara Jean didn't respond. She was making grits, keeping her back turned on John.

"Alright, whatever," John said, changing from an old T-shirt into a light brown shirt and denim overalls. "I'm goin' out later and I'll be back late, so you don't got to have anything cookin' for me tonight." He walked to a pail of clean water and splashed some on his face.

"What you doin'?" Barbara Jean said, finally unmuted.

"Oh, so now you got somethin' to say. You ain't spoke three words to me these past few days, but now when I finally leave, you stop holdin' your tongue."

"Can't you just tell me what you doin'?"

"I'm goin' out to see Anthony. Or do you got a problem with that?"

Barbara Jean turned around, resuming her silence and disdain for John, who was blissfully preparing for a cool whiskey at Fox Den. The sun drew through the windows of their rancher and faded into the wood surrounding them. It was hot, hot even for August, and it would still be

hot when night crashed upon Blackshear, sending a deep darkness into a lightless land.

No light anywhere, thought John, leaving Barbara Jean without exchanging any words. He didn't have to guess why she didn't want to speak to him. He was sure that the murmurs in his voice and the slight in his step led to crushing reaffirmations—startling reaffirmations that reiterated his lack of belief in himself, and his inability to tend to the ranch. John passed his horses and fed them as the haze of summer passed through his body and singed his skin.

The grasshoppers were humming early—not in tune, but not out of union. Anthony, John's farmhand and friend, helped feed the animals early that morning as he usually did. John walked fifteen minutes into town, kicking up dust and hearing the invisible grasshoppers amplify throughout the sky. The entrance to downtown Blackshear looked vast and empty, like the opening of heaven's gates. John walked through them, tired now. He walked into Fox Den.

It was an old tavern serving black folks in town, its ceiling caved inward and upward, striking a focal point at the highest point of the building, the structure of which resembled a pyramid. He looked for Anthony, strolling past a few groups of people sitting down drinking milk, orange juice, whiskey, tequila—drinks people from Blackshear could not easily afford, but could easily buy.

"How's it goin', John," Anthony said, sitting down at a table near the bathroom door. "Anthony! How long you been waitin'?"

"It don't matter. I was just chattin' wit' a woman sitting down here. Man, you'd never guess the type she was."

"I'll take a guess," John said. "Married? Naw, not married—engaged, but to your friend or somethin'."

"Naw, neither. Or at least I don't think she married. She was white, John, crescent-moon white. Looked young, too, maybe only a little younger than me."

"You got to be kidding. A white woman? In *here*?"

John looked at Anthony in bewilderment. He was rugged and built with a chiseled, stubble-covered face. It wasn't too often that anyone would see a white woman in downtown Blackshear, and it was even more uncommon to speak to one, considering that black people had just recently been freed from slavery. Blackshear was their chance to get away from their suffering and build their own community, but it seemed like history would always get in the way of that.

“Nope, not kiddin’. She was telling me all about her. Her hair was brown and, not even joking, she ain’t look too bad neither. Think she may be one of them rich ones from Florida or somethin’.”

John paused, part of him wondering what his friend had gotten himself into, and another part wondering whether the woman looked as good as Anthony expressed.

“Why was she in here?”

“Same reason we’re all in here, John. She wanted somethin’ to drink and to cool off. Hot as hell out there, even this mornin’. By the way, you getting somethin’? I had a tequila a little while ago but wouldn’t mind a whiskey to wash that down.”

“Sure. Before that, tell me how you even got to chattin’ with this lady, and why she was even walkin’ round a place like this.”

John looked outside, breaking eye contact. In the bar were men talking shop about scores they wanted to settle and trades they wanted to make. On the dirt road, between the gates leading to heaven, tired men walked around, headed to work or avoiding it. There was a sense of connection crawling through the ground, the roots beneath them twitching from the pressure of worn feet gracing the land above them, tired and worn out from fueling the world they helped build. This connection was felt by the black folks in Blackshear who helped craft their community, molded by the fear and hatred surrounding them throughout Georgia. John, as such, was surprised to hear that a white woman—an explosion in a meadow—strolled through downtown and stumbled into Fox Den and spoke with his farmhand and friend.

“I don’t know, honestly. Said she was strollin’ about,” Anthony said. “Said she wanted to go and see the town a little cause she wasn’t from here but ain’t know where to go. I told her she was in the wrong part to be tourin’ around.”

From the table, John asked the bartender for a whiskey before Anthony continued. The young woman in question was named Isabel, and she had gotten into a long conversation with Anthony about Blackshear and his work, but not much about her except that she was from out of town and was going to be back in a few days. She asked Anthony if he would be free around then because she was interested in talking more, maybe over another drink.

“You can’t seriously be considering this, Anthony. You don’t know a damn thing about her. Not even her last name,” John said, now holding a watered-down whiskey. “She could be a part of that damn McCaw

gang, ready to lynch you like they done did every other black man around here without a white man to report to.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. You’re being a little scared, aren’t ya,” Anthony said, sipping his lager. “She told me her last name started with an M, matter fact, but she was much too friendly round some black folk to be lynchin’ ’em, so shame on you for thinkin’ wrong about people.”

John was hesitant to believe that there was a white person on this planet that wouldn’t have a black man dead or captured if they had it their way. He was convinced that they were just biding their time, looking for a new way to get their slave back. God didn’t answer the prayers of John’s father, mother, and anyone else he cared for—they all ended up dying enslaved and exhausted at the plantation he grew up on. John sat back in his chair at the intersection between anger and fear, hoping Anthony didn’t get caught talking to a white woman, an out-of-town white woman at that, in public.

“I told Isabel I probably can’t meet her, especially since we’re gonna’ be caught up Friday anyway. By the way, make sure you got enough cash, in case we do decide to get some livestock,” said Anthony.

John was in the middle of expanding his ranch and hoped to get some chickens, hopeful that the developments would help him buy some more land and hire new workers in the future. He headed back to his home on foot, feeling dizzier than before from the watered-down whiskey. Walking back as the sunset began to creep through the margins of his sight, John looked up at the sky and hoped that his life, disjointed and hard to realign, would be all right, especially between him and Barbara Jean, who had been practically ignoring him for three days, only stopping to ask how the farm was doing, skeptical whether John even cared about finishing the developments he planned to make.

John paused his commute, deciding to walk up to a tall, grassy hill near his home to watch the sun set, and to pray. The grasshoppers were quiet during his walk home, coating John in silence, and connecting him to lost souls, God, but, regretfully, not the future. Barbara Jean hasn’t been communicating, thought John. Anthony has been dancing with the devil, and the grasshoppers have nothing to say, for once. John sat down and stared with closed eyes. He tried to talk to God, but the plain before him was too large to understand, and the world he lived in too silent to hear.

John headed back to the ranch after ten minutes had passed. The lights had fully dimmed, and a cloak of black and blue filled the air as John shifted through currents of a chilling breeze. He entered his home

to find Barbara Jean asleep in their bed. He went to her side and lightly shook her, hoping to get a response. She didn't open her eyes, and after a while, John got up and started walking to his desk to get some tobacco to roll.

"I just want you to take care of us and the ranch, John," Barbara Jean said, still remaining in bed.

"Well, ain't that what I'm doin'?" The only one who seems to have a problem with that is you."

"Don't tell me what I'm feelin'. I know we've been fussin', but I've been nothin' but supportive of you."

"Supportive? All you seem to do is wake me up outta' bed and make food for us. If that's supposed to be some kinda' special support, I feel like you might be confused 'bout what support really is."

"And you complainin' makes it better? You won't talk to anyone but yourself and you wanna' blame me and the rest of the world for your problems. Tell that to someone else because I spend too much time taking care of you *and* this house to be hearin' all this."

"That so? Because it feels like you're just tryin' to kill me."

Barbara Jean remained quiet and still, mummified by her resentment for John, ignoring that he realized what she had done that morning. He walked out, angered by the pressure she'd put on him to support the ranch, along with the arguments she started, even if she thought he didn't notice. These were trying times for John. He rolled a cigarette, and tended to the few cows he had left. There was a loudness to his thoughts, but also a sense of quiet that followed. Almost like something began to speak through his soul, begging him to listen. The voice did not belong to God, as John pleaded for—it was the sound of the land.

After a few days of silence on the ranch, Friday came, and Anthony wasn't in town to meet with John. Anthony didn't show up to work for days, and John was convinced he skipped out until the townspeople found him in the middle of the road. His body, torn up and dismembered with the remnants of rope burns stricken around his neck, was sinking into the ground as if it were joining the soil, and his eyes were burst open from the pressure of being choked, while God remained silent.

Not unlike the burial sites before it, Anthony's was filled with dirt, grime, and paintings depicting the eyes of God plastered over the casket. The channels between the ground and the surface shifted as his family dug out room for the casket, and the ground swallowed his body whole. John wanted to believe that God was watching him, but he wasn't sure.

He knew that by inching too close to the McCaw gang, Anthony had flown a little too close to the sun, failed the test, and been sent to be judged by a merciful God, and hopefully a forgiving one. Hoping was all John *could* do now. He could only hope that he was being tested, and that his trials would soon come to an end. Barbara Jean stood beside him, watching the casket—light brown and crooked—sink further into the earth as dirt continued to cover it. There was a shaking between them. They hadn't spoken to each other since John had told her that Anthony, John's truest friend, had been killed. Not a word came from her mouth. Not a tale about the young man who had died at the hands of the McCaw gang not too long before Anthony. Not a lecture on what happens to black folks out in their part of Georgia, no matter if slavery's gone or not. Not a hint of fear, concern, or worry from Barbara Jean—only silence, and the brisk wind of the coming fall.

The funeral ended and the Blackshear community, almost entirely black, returned to what they knew, riddled by the death of a familiar face. John, having returned to his farm with Barbara Jean, sat in his kitchen late that night and pondered his next steps. He drew a map of his farmland, doing the best he could to describe the cattle, the sheep, making sure to note where Anthony died. He planned to put some flowers there now and again. Barbara Jean, unable to sleep, finally spoke a word.

"Go to bed, John," she said in a heavy southern accent. "You can figure it out in the morning."

"I can't go to bed, Barbara Jean. Not when what happened to Anthony could happen to me or you or anyone we know."

"What you gon' do about it, then? Go after the McCaw gang? End up dead just like Anthony?"

John felt resentment toward the McCaw gang and their terrorizing of the community. They were a group of white supremacists, all of them kin. The rumor was they started off as plantation owners, but lost their land to the government. Ever since the slaves were freed, the McCaw gang had been hunting after the land they felt had been taken by the people of Blackshear. John got up and started to walk outside.

“Hey, where you goin’? I’m talking to you,” Barbara Jean yelled.

“I’m just goin’ to go have a cigarette! I gotta’ wake up in the mornin’ and don’t got time to be dealin’ with all this.”

Walking past Barbara Jean, John lay down the map on his work table. He grabbed his rolling papers and tobacco and walked outside the candlelit rancher. He sat down on the stoop of his house, only three steps high, and set out the rolling paper on his leg. He relied on the lamp sitting on the porch for light and struggled not to spill his tobacco. John, having transitioned from wearing his only nice button-down to wearing cotton overalls over a dirt-stained, striped Henley, kicked his boots on the dirt surrounding his home.

In Blackshear, when the sun is down the stars shine bright. He looked out at the sky and stared up at the stars. John listened to the sound of the grasshoppers, soon to fade away along with the high temperature, and he listened to the sound of the land. Ever since Anthony had died, the grasshoppers had been louder than ever, and the roar of the McCaw gang and their lynching and killing had spread from Waycross to Blackshear and all the way to Atlanta. John thought back to when he and Anthony built the home he was living in now. There was never any quiet. Not from the frogs near the pond, or the cattle John brought in a couple of years ago, or the hiss of the snake that almost bit Barbara Jean the month before. John never noticed the grasshoppers before Anthony—before the McCaws. He hadn’t heard God, either.

John finished rolling. He stood up and lit his cigarette with the flame from the porch’s candle, brighter now from the darkness, but duller from melting so much of the wax. He put the cigarette in his mouth and took a puff before walking out toward the rest of his land, hoping that the sound of the grasshoppers would stop and leave him to be one with his land, closer to God. He walked past the horses near the stable, still awake and staring out aimlessly through the night. He strolled by the cattle and took another pull on his cigarette. He reached the top of a small hill, approaching the end of his land, and the beginning of a country of grass billowing in the wind. He sat down, finished his cigarette and put it out on his boot. He closed his eyes and prayed, hoping for silence for the first time, having now gotten away from the grasshoppers, the farm animals, Barbara Jean. As John closed his eyes, he met silence for the first time in what felt like forever. He sat there for a while.

Before God could reach out and touch John, giving him the answers, a flame breached the night.

John opened his eyes at the sound of a lip-drawn whistle ringing through his ears. He saw flames approaching from the distance, arranging themselves in a flurry and moving faster than he could understand, almost as if they were dancing together. The stories of horsemen wielding flames, pitchforks, and knotted rope ran through his mind. Alerted, John ran back to his house, praying he got to it before they did. He darted past the house, tripping and falling near his cattle, crashing to the ground, fearing that he might be too late. An image flashed in his mind: he was hanging by a tightly bound rope from a tall tree with its leaves close to falling out, as the entire Blackshear community watched his body spin around, disgusted, fearful, trembling at the sight of a failed government and an evil God.

Fear blinded him, but John still got up, his arms and legs covered in dirt and grime. He heard Barbara Jean screaming inside the house. Then he saw the McCaws. They were circling on horseback, toting shotguns and revolvers. The trio appeared white and tall under the shine of the moon, as if readying for a dark, medieval ceremony. One of them hit Barbara Jean with his revolver, knocking her down by the front door. John screamed for them to stop. After what had happened to Anthony, he knew there was no room for debate. He didn't have a gun, so it didn't matter that there were only three this time. He concluded that they must have come on McCaw gang business—a verdict from which there was no appeal. It was the end of the line.

“What you all want?” John asked.

“You know what we want, boy. We done told you a million times to give up your land. We're done talkin' now.”

“Please, I'm beggin' ya!”

“You can keep beggin' if you want. I don't mind.”

The nameless voice tossed a torch at his home. The three men stood motionless, with shotguns pointed at John, who screamed in protest. Barbara Jean still lay unconscious by the door.

“Why don't you go and burn everything else while we're at it, Jack,” the man continued.

“Not a bad idea.”

One of the men rode past John, knocking him over with his horse. John got up, screaming at the sight of his wife burning alive.

“Wake up, Barbara Jean! Come on!”

John cried. The nameless white faces sat still on their horses, unwavering before John, fearless in the eyes of God. Barbara Jean burned

alive, and the smell stopped the grasshoppers, which had receded into silence along with the stars and the moon high above the smoke of this troubled land. John could not hear Barbara Jean, the sound of the land, or God. He could only hear burning, and the sound of a shotgun beginning to reload.

ANOTHER NUMBER

Kids playing in the street
See a man named Tony,
Nickels and dimes falling on the tray.
“Hey, hey, that ain’t enough to pay.”
Here comes a man named Tony,
Ice cream all around.
The kids won’t have no more frowns.
The day was saved by a man named Tony.

All the fly honeys around and about
Watch a smooove man named Tony pull up,
His mack game on point.
Gonna’ get every single lady in the joint.
“There goes that playa!” A man named Tony.

Sinners and saints, come one, come all.
“Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! He is above all!”
Shouted a man named Tony.
Bless ya heart, young man!
For the lord always has a plan!
Prayer heals all for a man named Tony.

It’s a common misunderstanding, deputy!
Here goes that “troublemaker” named Tony.
Cop shouts, “Stop resisting! Don’t you dare step to me!”
Another INNOCENT man gets beat down
As the officer flips the slip-sheet down.
“We got that gangster named Tony.”

We all know a man named “Tony” in our neighborhoods, our cities, our streets. When will we stand as a unit to say enough is enough? We are striving for our youth to achieve and prosper. It starts with a call to justice and fairness.

