

# Whispers from the Wood



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# Senior Spotlight





#Blackouttuesday  
by Aubrey Draughn

Every skin tone matters,  
But every skin tone isn't treated equally,  
Every skin tone doesn't face the same success so easily,  
Every skin tone doesn't have to be afraid when the police show up,  
Or fear for their life when they get pulled over  
Every skin tone doesn't have to be afraid when they go on a jog through their neighborhood,  
Every skin tone doesn't have to be worried when they open their front door,  
Every skin tone doesn't face half of the amount of the injustices,  
Every skin tone doesn't have to deal with the constant falling victim to a system that doesn't  
protect them,  
Every skin tone matters but only one skin tone, With its multiple shades,  
Suffers the most.

We riot for justice,  
We get more injustice,  
We protest peacefully,  
We get sprayed with tear gas,  
We protest violently,  
We get assaulted,  
We tried to speak up,  
Just to get shut down,  
There's no peace for us in this world,  
There's no justice for us in the system,  
These problems stem from 1774 and beyond,  
The system was made for our skin to lose,  
But no one understands,  
And no one will,  
But at the end of the day,  
Our day will come,  
Our peace will come,  
And when it does our pain will end.

## The Never-Ending Furniture Store By Sean Burns

Bob got off work like his usual day. He lives by himself in an apartment building. Bob normally took a nap after every day of work. When he laid down on his bed, it snapped. He looked at his bed while scratching his head. He realized that he had to go buy some new furniture at the furniture store. He got in his car and started it up. He decided to try and find a shortcut since he did not feel like driving. He went away that he does not normally go.

While he was driving, something caught his eye. He saw a furniture store that he had never seen before. It was a retail furniture store, so he went to go look. He walked in and looked for a store manager. While walking around the store he noticed that he could not see an exit. It did not worry him now though. He decided to leave since no one was here. For some reason Bob felt like he could not remember where the exit was. He started to panic and run around looking for the exit.

Out of breath, Bob made a choice that he was going to call the cops. His phone had no service. Bob curled up in a ball. About 20 minutes later, he started walking around. Bob thought that walking in a straight line would solve the problem. He walked straight for 4 hours and collapsed. When he woke up the lights in the store were off. In the distance, he could hear a voice. Bob thought that someone else was here. He started running toward the voice.

Suddenly, he was tackled by someone else. This person was claiming that she saved him. Bob did not understand what was going on and was clueless. He tried to yell for help. The girl put her hand over his mouth. She told not to yell or were dead. He expressed a face of confusion. She explained to him that when the lights go off weird creatures run around trying to kill them. They hid together in between two shelves. One of the creatures repeating, "The store is now closed please exit the building". Bob complained that he could not find the exit. The girl told him that she has not seen an exit since she came to this store. Suddenly the light came on and elevator music started playing. The girl said that it is now safe.

She told him to follow her to meet everyone else. The store had a ceiling so tall that Bob could not see. It was just rows and rows of furniture. Bob could see the creatures walking around. He could see the hideous creatures now. They were tall and buff or super skinny and short. They did not have a face and their skin was darkish brown. They were at the entrance of the fort. It was shelves stacked with beds on top of them. Bob decided that from now on he would be brave.

Sit Down  
By Phaeguana Wortham

I am tired of feeling like I do not belong  
This has been going on way to long  
For years and years to say there will always be a probably with my weight.  
And I laugh as I say this because the tears, I hold back every day is fighting its way out so my  
pain can be released but I hold it in and put a smile on my face  
So, you are going to sit down and listen to what I have to say.  
I am tired of every time a boy sees me, they see ugly on the outside  
but when I look in the mirror, I see a beautiful young lady.  
I am tired of girls not liking me  
is it because I am too loud or am I different and my weight is not equivalent to theirs?  
I say it's simply because I'm fat and I walk with confidence so I don't have a care for what little  
boys or girls say I can look at myself and say I'm beautiful no matter what they say.  
They can think I look like a beast, but I know I am a beauty.  
So, sit down eat your snacks and drink your water  
while a fat girl accomplishes all her dreams and goals.  
Sit down while I grow up and I take your words and burn them.  
Sit down and watch me make a change in this world  
Sit down because your cruel words do not affect me anymore.  
I am tired of feeling like I do not belong

The Cliff  
By Kaitlyn Gardner

The song playing on the radio was drowned out by our screaming voices singing along. It took all I had to stay focused and continue driving straight. It was difficult not to let go of the steering wheel and dance to the song like Sadie and Wen were.

As Katy Perry's voice faded away, the air fell quiet for a few moments. "Not to be dramatic or anything, but I think that was the best one yet," I told my friends sitting in the backseat behind me. "The volume was excellent. As for dancing, I could feel your movements shaking the car. Great work guys."

Wen laughed. "Come on, if we hadn't shouted along to Roar, you'd have to assume something was wrong with us," he said. He leaned forward and rested the long sleeves of his red hoodie on the back of the passenger seat. "How much longer anyway? I mean, my throat feels fine, but no one knows how long Sadie can keep up all this screeching."

The freckled girl playfully slapped Wen. "I can keep it up way longer than you can, dork."

A smile found its way upon my lips. "We're almost there." I tightened my grip on the steering wheel as I continued along the road. It was a dark night, and without many streetlights, the only thing guiding me was the moon.

A comfortable silence filled the car as we pulled into a gravel parking lot. The sound of wheels stopping over rocks was an indicator that it was time to get out of the car. "Come on, losers," Sadie said to Wen and I as she hopped out of the car. Her red box-dyed hair was blowing slightly in the breeze.

Wen and I got out of the car and slammed the doors. We had always liked the echo of loud sounds in the quiet of night. It was a reminder that we had control over the outside world. If even only for a moment, we had caused a sound of our own.

I followed Wen, his six feet of height making his shadow huge. Sadie was already sitting on the edge of the cliff. We started hanging out here back in 6th grade. At first, we were cautious, not trusting ourselves to be able to obtain our balance and stay at a safe distance from the edge. However, the longer we spent here, the more comfortable we became. It no longer felt like an adventure to be here; merely a normal occurrence to be found sitting by the overhang. No one else we knew came here, which made it seem like our very own place.

I sighed. "This is going to be our last time all three of us are here together," I remarked.

"Hey now, that's not true," Wen replied, hitting me softly with his hand. "I'm sure we'll all come back here sometime."

"That's going to take a while. You are leaving for Eastwood tomorrow, Wen. That is two states away. Sadie is going off to her own school, and I'll be here until I figure out what I want to do," I argued.

"Rowan's right," Sadie agreed, sounding sad. "I thought I was ready for high school to end, but now that it has everything is going to change."

"Guys, that doesn't mean we're going to lose touch," Wen urged us. His left hand was now playing with his ginger hair, as he often did when he was unsure or unsettled.

I stared down at my black boots, dangling off the edge. Underneath us was a small town. Sparkling dots below us showed that lights were on in the houses. "Everyone says friendships won't last into college."

Sadie nodded. “I don’t want that to happen to us. I don’t want things to change.” She turned her head to the left to face Wen and I. “I don’t want to lose either of you dorks.” Wen put his hands behind his head and laid back, looking up at the twinkling stars scattered among the sky.

“Change doesn’t have to be bad,” he stated calmly. “We’re all going to grow. We’re going to become successful. We’ll create lives of our own.” Noticing the concerned look on my face he added, “Of course we’ll still be in each other’s lives. It’s not that difficult, guys. We all have cell phones.” A childish smile crept its way across his face. “We’re gonna be okay.”

“But- “

“But nothing,” Wen said, interrupting Sadie. “Just lay back and look at the sky.” Reluctantly, Sadie and I did as Wen told us to. All three of us laid next to one another, gazing up above us.

Wen’s arm towered above us as it pointed to stars in the sky. “See those three stars together over there?” Sadie and I nodded.

“That one is me. That one is Sadie. And that big one right there is- you guessed it!- Rowan.” We all laughed a bit.

“Okay Wen. You made your point,” Sadie told him. “We’ll be alright.”

As the night dragged on, the three of us stayed up and admired the stars. We reminisced on all the memories we made throughout the years. We sang songs and laughed. Before we knew it, birds began chirping from their hiding spots in the trees, and night turned into dawn. Watching the sunrise is always beautiful, but watching the sunrise from the cliff—our cliff—is absolutely gorgeous.

Wen, Sadie, and I hopped back into my black Honda Accord and took the long way home. Perhaps this was goodbye for now, but we knew we’d always have each other. This was only a new beginning.

Moonlight  
By Noah Scott

People's state of mind changing  
Continuously harming their heads with grief,  
but the cure is unity  
understand that you are not alone in your heart  
we are all a part of this change  
we will get through it beginning to adapt  
day by day, this is our home  
the place we roam, you may feel trapped  
as if there is no way you could ever adapt,  
maybe you feel there is a void in your heart keeping you in the dark,  
but trust me there will be a spark  
releasing you from the dark  
which will give you a different prospect  
of the way your mind is set,  
so you will begin to understand if the world changes  
you follow in its steps,  
I know these days  
it fills as if all you get is rest.  
When the time comes, you wake  
it feels as if you are in a devastating Horrible state the mind  
feeling closer to collapsing into a deep dark sea  
The need of wanting to stay asleep  
As if that is the only thing that could put you at ease  
or at least get a glimpse of peace.  
Depression seems to have a liking to you  
following you in every corner of the earth, the feeling filling you up  
making you feel as if you're going to burst,  
the void in your heart also continuously gets bigger  
not going away such agony just wants to stay,  
why can't it just be at bay leave me at peace for just at least one day  
Then you may go on with your game.  
Days passing by as fast as a leaf takes flight  
it's already night outside,  
now I take a glimpse of the moonlight  
hopefully such a peaceful light  
can smite the darkness that remains inside.

Secret Note  
By JaKayla Harris

I woke up on Valentine's Day at a decent time and felt uneasy. This was going to be the first Valentine's Day I spent without Jasmine, my best friend. She went missing a couple of months ago during October. Mostly everyone had forgotten about Jasmine. They police say some "random Halloween freak" took her and closed her case. Just like that, Jasmine got no justice. Just like that, Jasmine was forgotten.

I leaped out of bed and wiped away my thick, salty tears far from my blush face. Every time I think of Jasmine I ball my eyes out with tears; I can't help it. I get up to take a warm shower and put on a Valentine's related outfit. Jasmine and I always wore some kind of holiday outfit when then the holiday came around. It was our "thing." I was determined to continue this for Jasmine's sake. The school day was going to be tough, but not impossible.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" said Ryder, who I guess is my new friend. Ryder is on the varsity basketball team while I'm the president of NHS. We have crossed paths before but we run in different crowds. Ryder reached out to me when Jasmine first went missing. He said he wanted to make sure I was okay. Ever since then we've become close. It's nice having Ryder as my friend.

"Happy Valentine's Day to you too," I said with a fake smile. I wanted to smile but my face wouldn't allow me to at that moment.

"Here! I got you a little something," replied Ryder as he handed me a Dove chocolate box.

"Thank you," I said shockingly, "you didn't have to get me anything you know."

"I know. I just wanted to give you something. Oh and fun fact about the chocolates, the wrappers may spell out a phrase or something like that. If your wrappers happen to spell out that special phrase, you win a prize!"

"What kind of prize? A year's supply of Dove chocolates?" I said jokingly.

"Ha-ha maybe. Well that's the bell. I'll see you after class."

"Yeah, I'll see you later."

The school day went on and on. I thought the day would never end. The entire day people kept giving me fake smiles and unsympathetic apologies about Jasmine. By the end of the day I had enough of everyone and was ready to go home. I quickly walked home after school even though I had to stay after for history with Mr. Weber. I didn't care, I just wanted to go home. I wanted to be away from all the fake smiles and encouragement.

When I got home the first thing I did was run upstairs to my room and sprung on my newly made up bed. It felt so good just to relax in my room. I remembered the box of chocolates and opened them up immediately. I carefully unwrapped each of the 16 candies to reveal the hidden letter on the inside of the wrapper. I hate to admit it but I was curious about the whole

secret phrase thing. Secrets always made me invested in things, even stupid secrets like a Dove chocolate wrapper phrase.

I laid out all of the wrappers and looked at all of the letters I had. I had a G, F, O, S, A, J, E, D, 2 M's, 3 N's, and 3 I's. I stared at the letters for what felt like hours. What kind of phrase could I possibly spell with all these letters? Was the phrase possibly in another language? My mind felt trapped trying to figure out the phrase. I put the letters in any order I could but I got nothing. I was able to make out a couple of small words like "go" and "in" but that was it.

My head ached from thinking about what this phrase was. I don't even know why I was spending so much time on trying to crack this code, but here I was wasting my time on this stupid thing. I don't know what it was but this phrase had taken hold of me. It was like I couldn't let it go. Like it needed me, or maybe I needed it. Whatever "it" was. Even though this phrase sounded stupid I knew I had to figure out what it said. I worked all night racking my brain on what this phrase could say, on what it could mean. I made some progress. I found another word, find. Now I had 3 words, go, in, and find, All the letters that were left were 2 M's, an E, a J, a S, an I, an A, and a N. I was at a complete loss at that point. All I could think about was Jasmine would know what to do. She could solve this in 2 seconds. And that's when it hit me.

I rearranged the remaining letters and figured out the whole phrase. "Go find Jasmine M in." That was the phrase but what did it mean? Find her in what? Where was the rest of the phrase? Without thinking I called Ryder, even though it was late at night, and questioned where he got the box of chocolates and if the store was still open. Thankfully he got them from a 24-hour gas station that was close by. I thanked him and promised I would explain everything later.

I hopped on my bike and rode down to the store as quickly as possible. I grabbed a box of chocolates hoping this box would have some answers. I paid the cashier and left without my change. I hurried back home and tore open the box. I unwrapped the chocolates and was yet again faced with an assortment of letters only this time I was faced with a slight knock at my door. To my surprise Ryder was at my door and demanded answers, I quickly explained, and he offered to help so I let him in.

We quickly began working for hours straight. We put the letters in any order until we made a phrase that made sense and completed the first phrase. "Mr. Weber's basement." So altogether, the phrase was "go find Jasmine M in Mr. Weber's basement." Ryder immediately called the cops while I was in shock. Ryder didn't tell them about the note but he told them to search Mr. Weber's house because he might be connected to Jasmine's disappearance.

Ryder comforted me while we waited for some kind of news. We finally got the news that Jasmine was found in Mr. Weber's basement like the note said. Mr. Weber was arrested and refused to talk about his reasoning for kidnapping Jasmine at the moment. The cops are trying to see if there were any more possible victims. I hadn't seen Jasmine yet but her parents called me and said she was ready to see me.

Still to this day I have no idea how Ryder and I put that message together. I still don't understand how we saved Jasmine from that cold, dark basement. I still don't know how that

message came from a chocolate box. I still don't understand how the message got to Ryder and I. All I know is Jasmine is safe now and God came through and gave us that message. That is the only explanation or reasoning I have for that night.

Short Story  
By Shelby Powell

My eyes crack open from what feels like years of sleep, and I wonder what time it is. With the blinds shut tightly, I know it must be past 5pm. Once it gets dark again, they can open, and we can go outside. But until then, we're stuck in the dark. Literally. No one has ever really explained why the blinds stay closed, why we don't leave the house until it gets dark. Ever since I was born things have been that way, and my Mother said things have been like that for even longer. "Ever since the beginning of time." she said, but I'm not sure I believe her. Something had to have happened, something that made us close the blinds.

I've never even seen the light, or what the world looks like without the blanket of darkness surrounding it. Sometimes, the tiniest bit of light will shine through, and I'll sit for hours looking at it. No one ever gets too close when the light does go through, it could damage our skin. It could even kill us. We don't know. That's why we only leave our houses under the coat of shadow. We sleep while the light attempts to break through our shield, and leave our protection while it is safe, when no light is present. I have memorized where everything in my room is, so I don't stumble when I slide into my slippers. I don't trip as I walk through the doorway and down the stairs, where I know my family will be waiting. I never have to worry, because I am safe from the light. My Mother says that's all that matters. We can bear not knowing because it is our ignorance that keeps us safe. No one has ever gone out during the day, and no one ever will. I walk into the kitchen, and smell the bacon cooking on the stove. My Mother reaches out to me by the stove, placing a hand on my arm as a greeting.

"Good morning dear, breakfast?" she says, and holds out a plate with her other hand. I can feel the warmth of the food right in front of me, and I take the plate gratefully.

"Thank you." I say, smiling. I sit down at our table, which is three steps away. "How's the food Emily?" I say, and a gasp sounds from across the table. My younger sister is always trying to scare me. She seemingly hasn't caught on that we can all notice when other people are around. I know I have eyes, because I see the darkness. We just don't need to use them.

"Dang, you're good." She sighs.

"No, we're *all* good, that's how we live." I laugh, I hear her clothes scrunch as she shrugs. We sit in silence for a few moments, before I hear a noise. I know my family heard it too because everything goes silent, and my Mother clicks the stove off. This is a noise that came from outside, something we've never heard before. But it's daytime. No one could be out there.

"It's all right, just stay where you are." my Mother says. "I'm going to crack the blinds and make sure we didn't leave anything outside from yesterday." My Mother can look outside, very quickly. She is old enough, and her eyes are used to it. "Ready?" she grasps the blinds. I shuffle, and she takes that as a yes. The blinds whip open and I hold in a scream. Because looking back at me is another set of eyes.

"Mama!" Emily yells, and my Mother closes the blinds. She is shocked into silence and doesn't respond. She walks over and holds us close, as we hear the noise again. "How is this

happening?” Emily says, and silence follows. Mama doesn’t know. Nobody does. The front door opens suddenly, and light floods into the room. Both Emily and I fall to the floor, screaming as the light burns our eyes and skin.

“Please stop! You’re hurting my children!” my Mother yells, before being taken outside. That’s when a voice speaks up.

“Yep,” the man says, and I hear the static of the phone. “we’ve got ‘em, the whole group. Turns out they’ve been hiding out in an abandoned town for years. None of the original cult members are alive, so there’s a chance they’ve been taught to live like this. Some of the kids can’t stand the light.” he steps closer. “Uh huh, yep, you can notify the news. Tell ‘em we finally found the cult.” he pauses. “Or at least what’s left of it.”

Red Lipstick Stain  
By Nia Williamson

The red lipstick surrounding the edge of the wine glass  
Tall but round enough to hold with a palm out shadowing the bottom  
The endless talks in a dark room with only gold Christmas lights  
but the day was nowhere near a holiday  
The tall glass table with two guests sitting upon the highchairs  
Both with wine glasses but just one with the red lipstick surrounding the edge  
As you can see the champagne bubbling,  
she sits and notices two different colors in her wine glass  
Maybe it's her lipstick interfering, so it overrides her mind  
Take a sip of your champagne a deep sorrowful voice encounter  
Her white fingernails slowly walk to the glass as she firmly grips underneath  
The woman looks down as a mixture of two colors from her champagne grips around her mind.

Seclusion  
By Madison Trahan

“What's she doing here?”

“It can't be that time already.”

“I don't even know why she even bothers to show up. Nobody likes her anyway.”

Fairies dressed in all the different shades of yellow, pink, blue, red, orange, and green whisper to their neighbors and clear a path for the one fairy dressed in white. Her porcelain skin, white hair, and bright violet eyes have always made her the center of attention in the small town of the Seasonal Fairies. The spring fairies lived towards the east where the grass is green, and the flowers are always in bloom. The summer fairies lived towards the south closer to the heat and even closer to the cool refreshing lakes and streams that run through the town. The fall fairies live to the west just near the forest where the leaves are always falling, and the squirrels are always scurrying around looking for acorns to store away.

Then there's the winter fairy, Persephone, the only one of her kind. She lives in solitude towards the north where a single pond is always frozen, the grass forever covered in a blanket of pure white snow, and winds that send chills down your spine.

While the other fairies play and wait patiently for their time to bring in the new season, Persephone dreads and frowns at the upcoming of hers. She knows the others don't like her and that when it is time for winter to begin, they always stay clear of the fairy that brings life to a halt. As she walks towards the center of the town marked by the fountain that reflects the light of each season the ground beneath her freezes, the air chills, her eyes are casted down ignoring the scornful glare of the other fairies. To bring forth the new season all a fairy must do is touch the water and speak the words that will start the change and leave the past season behind.

She leans into the water and with her middle finger she lightly touches it and whispers in soft voice, “Δώστε ζωή στη ζωή και καλύψτε τον κόσμο σε μια κουβέρτα πάγου.” The world around her repeats her wish in a silent echo.

“Give life to life and cover the world in an ice blanket.”

The water glows white and snowflakes begin to sprout from the top. Persephone looks up and smiles to herself admiring the beauty her season brings while the others unimpressed begin to head back towards their sides of town eager to go play and wait for their season to come again.

Now alone in the center of town, watching the last few snowflakes drop to the ground. Persephone cries and wonders why nobody likes her, why she's the only one, why she's so different from the rest of her kind. She never asked to be this way and yet somehow their scornful glares and hurtful words are colder the winter she brings.

She heads back to the north where a single pond is always frozen, the grass forever covered in a blanket of pure white snow, and winds that send chills down your spine. For in that solitude she finds happiness.

Long Gone  
By Alex Clarke

I'm far away  
Away from a world embodied by hatred  
I no longer feel as if I am welcome  
So I must go  
To search for a place catered by love and warmth  
Because here It's cold and love is something of fairy tales  
And I don't believe that it will ever change  
This world now is rotten and showered in parasites  
I want nothing more than to put it behind me  
I'm long gone  
Gone from the things I used to love most

Drowning  
By Bernadette Pimentel

The words that  
were inscribed  
into my brain  
suffocate me,  
influencing  
my every move  
and controlling me.

I plead  
to be let out  
but I am only  
pulled  
further into  
the depths  
created by my  
anguish.

Short Story  
By Alysia Pree

The body lay still in my memory, bloodied and bruised. The captain told me not to take the case, said it wasn't worth it, but here I was staring into her files. She was almost unrecognizable by the time we pulled her body from the river. I read her file 1,000 times trying to find something out of place, something I could use to find whoever did this. Little Jane Miller didn't deserve to die, that I know for sure.

"Detective," my partner said, knocking on the door. "You've been in here all day. You're not going to find anything new just staring at the file." I sighed, closing the folder.

"I was hoping that wasn't true." I rubbed my hands through my hair and then across my face.

"Here," he said, from the door. "Let's go out for lunch. You need to relax." I nodded my head as he started to close the door.

"That sounds nice." I grabbed my coat and satchel, then headed for the door, but something told me to bring the file with me, look it over one more time. I snatched it off of my desk and shoved it into my satchel before leaving the room.

"Where are you looking to eat, Detective?" my partner asked from ahead of me.

"Uhm, sandwiches?" I questioned.

"Jimmi's?" he asked. I nodded my head as we left the precinct. The sky was stuffed to capacity and the air smelled of fresh rain. I stumbled, dropping my satchel as an unfamiliar figure ran into me.

"Hey," I yelled, startled.

"My bad man. Let me help you with that." he said, reaching down to pick up my papers.

"Thank you." I replied. I couldn't see his face underneath his grey hood but something about him was suspicious.

"No problem," he replied, handing me the last of my papers and smirking. I turned, reluctantly, looking to my partner.

"You think we'll beat this weather?" I asked Gordon as he pulled out his keys.

"I-uh," he looked to the sky for a moment. "Not sure, but we'll sure as hell try, right?" I chuckled. Gordon was the optimistic one in our little partnership. Hope lingered wherever he did and I admired that. I felt I always needed a fresh set of eyes and the Lord gave me his.

Gordon drove a little red Chevrolet, with a black hood. He cleaned it every Friday after work, the thing looked brand new every time I saw it. We hopped in the car and started driving to the diner. "What's your station?" Gordon asked, reaching for the radio.

"Uhm. Whatever is fine, I don't normally listen to the radio." He tuned into a local station and we rolled in silence.

"Do you love Cortland? Then give it the mayor it deserves to flourish. Vote for Sheldon House for Mayor."

"Still running for Mayor?" I thought to myself. "I thought that whole scandal last summer ruined his career?"

My mind drifted off back to the case as we coasted down the open road. Jane Miller was found in Wheathill River. She had two pigtails and she was wearing a white collared shirt, red overalls, lace white socks, and black shoes. She had four cracked ribs, a collapsed lung, internal bleeding, and her face was....I didn't want to think about it. I knew that little girl. I was friends

with her family, a family that I knew was counting on me to find out what happened to their daughter.

“Hey,” Gordon nudged me. “We’re here. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” I sighed, clutching onto my satchel, feeling for my papers.

“Missing something?” Gordon asked. I leaped out of my catatonic state.

“No! Nothing! Let’s eat!” I said, getting out of the car.

“No need to say it twice, Detective.” Gordon, following behind me, got out of the car.

Jimmi’s was my favorite eatery in town. Jimmi Matthews was a long-term friend of mine, since high school, and he always had a gift for cooking. When Jimmi’s opened it was impossible to get me to leave.

“Walter Nelson,” Jimmi bellowed from the grill.

“Jimmi Matthews,” I chuckled from the front door. “How you been you old fart?”

“Ah, old, I don’t look a day over 25.” Jimmi and I laughed as Gordon and I sat down at the counter.

“Nice to see you again, Mister Nelson.” the waitress cooed.

“Ah, call me Walter, Janine. Mister Nelson was my father.” We laughed as she handed us the menus.

“Don’t bother giving Walter one, Janine. I know his order like the back of my hand.” I laughed.

“I don’t eat here that often.”

“One pastrami, double meat, on rye, light mustard, with lettuce, tomato, and no pickles. Side of fries of course.”

“Okay maybe I do,” We all laughed as Jimmi started cooking. “Go ahead and order,” I said to Gordon. “I’m going to head to the john.” Gordon nodded to me and I headed for the restroom. I gripped my satchel tight as I walked past a few sketchy characters and didn’t let go until I was safely locked in a stall.

I didn’t hesitate to open up my work. I was going to find Jane’s killer, even if that meant I would have to look for them sitting on the toilet at a diner. I flipped through the first few pages, I had memorized those from staring at them for so long. I stopped at an unfamiliar page. It was new, crisp edges, fresh ink. I pulled it from the pile. It was a picture of Jane on the day she was killed, I think. Her smile burned through the page, dimples and all. She was wearing the outfit from the murder files, down to the lace white socks. She was sitting at the edge of the river, laughing with another little girl. Blonde ponytail, pearl necklace, red plaid skirt, white shirt, yellow vest, my daughter. The last person to see little Jane Miller alive.

Memories  
By Ayali Thomas

I live for the days when I can just be  
The days when I'm worry free  
And though it may never last  
I'll always have the memories  
The memories of us laugh with no care  
The memories of us cracking stupid jokes  
The memories of us eating till we can't  
The memories that I'll cherish  
The moment I won't forget  
Memories that will never fade

In Our Hands  
By Alysia Pree

In our hands, we hold the light inside us,  
A light that shimmers in the darkness of a thousand nights  
And radiates off of our skin in a rainbow of colors

In our hands, we hold oceans of tears,  
Pain and sorrow,  
Bottled between grizzled fingertips and calloused palms

With hands tied and fists clenched, we fight a war destined to be won in favor of those who  
oppose us  
With eyes closed and hearts begging for hope, we leap into the unknown pleading for someone  
to be there if we fall,  
We bear the scars of tireless warriors,  
Fighting endlessly for prosperity in whomever we choose to be  
Until the color drains from our skin

We're left, black and white,  
Stripped of who we are,  
Holding onto our light with tightly wound, interlocked fingers  
Oppressed, broken, beaten, fading away,  
And still tussling with a society who only sees in monochrome  
Yet we're still willing to shout to the heavens that we will not fall without a fight

We will stay rooted to our love for the color in this world  
We will paint this life in every shade until the silence between us has been ruptured,  
Hoping that the chains that bound our hands would release us to once again be colorful  
To once more paint our skies blue and our suns yellow  
To finally shout and have our voices be heard  
To open our hands and see the light that once burned bright inside of us  
To live life as colorfully as possible  
And grab onto the hands of those who are blind to the rainbows they hold  
To show them the color we hold so dear

Short Story  
By Aubrey Draughn

It was a typical day. The stairs flooded with students as the bell rang through the halls. I met with my friends by the security office windows and knew that I wasn't the only one having a bad day. We talked amongst ourselves until we heard the bell ring again then we separated. The next class went by slower than usual and I found myself falling asleep from being bored of silence and frustration. My eyes slowly closed and sleep pervaded me letting my dreams take over...

*~In My Dreams~*

"Aubrey Teneya- Tiana Draughn."

I heard my name, and walked up the stairs and onto the stage. I was handed the one thing that completed my high school experience for good and symbolized the next step in life... my diploma. I went down the row of administrators and principals, both old and new, shaking their hands and hearing "congratulations" as I moved from one person to the next until I reached the last person in the line up. I walked the rest of the stage and down the stairs all the way back to my seat. As soon as I sat down in my chair, the thoughts erupted in my head. *What now? What's the next step? Are you ready for college? Are you ready to fully become an adult? What does this mean for and to you? What about-?*

"May the class of 2020 please rise?"

I didn't realize that my thoughts were so deep. We stood to our feet in silence until a slow clap from the crowd around us began to roar through the arena. I looked around at my classmates and watched as we all smiled while looking up at our families. The flashbacks from the past 4 years began to flash in front of my eyes as I looked around the arena in a daze. The moments of struggle, of laughter, of cries, of so many things displayed in flashes. Then the thought came to my head... *I made it!*

"Congratulations, Class of 2020! YOU'VE ALL MADE IT!"

Cheers erupted through the whole arena. High fives and hugs began being passed around as we jumped up and down with excitement like children hyped up off of candy. Our smiles were wide and bright with happiness. *We made it!*

"On 1, throw your caps in the air. READY! 3... 2... 1! THROW!"

We grabbed our hats off of our heads and tossed them up in the air then watched the come down. We caught the hat that landed in our hands and traded it with the person it actually belonged to. Then-

*~IN REALITY~*

The bell rang which meant it was time for the next class. I stood from my seat in a better mood than before... but I didn't know that my bad mood would return but worse because of one thing... this one thing took away the last best memories of my high experience like Prom, Senior Trip, Senior Prank, etc. but the best memory that would've topped them all seems to only live *in my dreams*... Graduation. It was taken away by this one thing... the Coronavirus.

My Greatest Fear  
By Amani Hamiel

“Ok, everyone-” my mother's voice ringed throughout the entire house. “-if we want to be able to go, and get in, Water Country we have to get going.” My body jumped itself out of the bed and rushed to make it to the bathroom before my sisters.

I entered the bathroom at the pace of Jackie Robinson going to home base. My daily routine ended with me in a one-piece bathing suit underneath a pair of blue jeaned shorts and a tank top. My flip flops flopped on and off my feet as I headed for the car.

“How long is the drive?” I begged for an answer.

“Not that long,” my parents reassured me. That reassurance wasn't too accurate. It took us 30-45 to get to the park; and then 15-20 minutes to get in the park.

The sunny day arose many to the amusement park. Cars pulled in the parking lot at a speed of race cars, and at a number of fans to a concert. People in the water swimming, as well as people in the park riding roller coasters, send a maximum occupancy of the park. This left multiple poor families in the heat of their cars to go back home, and the sweat of their bodies to drown them. Nonetheless, luckily, my family and I came just in time to where our waterpark passes were scanned; and we went headed to the back of the park. Seeing that we don't ride roller coasters, we headed straight for the water portion of the park, which contained swimming races, water rides, and (my favorite) the “lazy river”. Since I wasn't the best swimmer, or a swimmer at all, the lazy river was a calm place where I could simply sit in a calm body of water. The people were also calm as they sat in the colorful tubes that resembled doughnuts; and just relaxed... but that was far from where this trip was taking me.

I stopped on the way to the water portion for a fresh, warmed, cinnamon/sugar churro. They had to be my favorite amusement park snack. “That will be \$5.75,” the cashier spoke. I paid him and carried on about my day. We found some chairs beside a table and set our stuff down. The table wobbled at the pressure of the bags, books, and shoes we brought with us.

“So, what's first?” my older sister asks.

“Well, I am going to the babies' section for Aaliyah. My little sister was born only about 2 years ago, so it wasn't much for her to do.

“I want to-”

“Let's try something different this time.” My father's face began to shine as bright as a diamond; and his heart began to press out of his chest at the sight of my terrors. My eyes widened as I looked, from the ground, at a water slide that hovered out my head like a single dark, gray cloud on a sunny day. My palms began to sweat; and the sweat was not coming from the heat of the sun.

“Come on, y'all! Let's go!” My legs and feet must have forgotten how to move, or was it my horrible fears that paralyzed the bottom half of my body. I practically begged not to go, but the words from my mother's faith took me up-

“Amani, God has you. Nothing bad will happen. He is with you.” ; and the words of my father's excitement feared me more- “It's not even that high up. It will be fun.”

We walked about 7-10 flights of stairs to reach the top of the waterslide. The view from the top looked as if I was about to travel to the depths of the ocean with no ship. The worker explained the “rules” and “regulations,” but my ears had lost the sense of hearing since all I heard was mountains of screaming. The people in front of me screamed, hollered, yelled at the momentum of the tube sliding down a long, feeling like it never ended, slide until... the sound of your tube hitting the water and all the water making room for you to enter.

We each entered a small donut tube that held us in the middle. I asked hopefully to leave, but instead was pushed forcibly down the tube and into the water. The ride down was a blur. Either it was so quick I don't remember it, or I was so terrible that I fainted on the way down; and was awakened by the hit of the water. The water made room for my body as the fear sunk me through the donut hole; and my body sank into the water. Suddenly, I was hopelessly pulled out of the water by my life jacket, that may I say... clearly didn't work. My eyes, filled with chloride and water, never stepped in water above 4ft. Again... and that was 11 years ago.

Poem

By Aubrey Draughn

My love,

You took me for granted,

And you've forgotten a lot.

my worth.

Forgot that you were a want not a need,

Forgot that I'm an independent young lady,

Who can stand on her own 2 feet,

Who doesn't need the help of a "man,"

To guide her own life,

To run her own,

I'm a boss lady,

Who has her own,

Who holds her own

My Best Friend  
By Aneesa Freeman

I haven't seen the sea.  
Clear blue sea I want to see with you.  
My best friend, you haven't heard about the sea like i have.  
It's where the kids don't drown but merge into the water.  
I want to feel the water cave in my body and know it's alright because I have you.  
You who i scream and hurt with words but still you don't go like the time.  
Time together is so powerful we freeze it and shape it for our pleasure.  
I want to always control time with you.  
When we go to the sea, I want to stop time and dance with you.  
Dance in shades we've never seen before and laugh at are weird moves.  
We dance and laugh. We don't judge but celebrate ourselves together.  
We celebrate knowing if we danced normal, we wouldn't be friends for this long.  
Our flaws bring us closer.  
Your complaining and attention needing personality bleeds but ill always have a cloth with me.  
Just like you will when I overreact and seem to lack care for you.  
I care about you. I don't say it enough because people hurt me when I use them.  
But you won't hurt me, you're not them. You are you.  
The one that laughs at my dumbness does not judge it.  
The one that wants to talk to me.  
The one that wants me to care about you, not leave when you know how special you mean to me.  
I have seen the sea but not for its real beauty because you weren't there.  
You are real beauty. You might not think so but i think your personality is so beautiful that it shows in your face.  
It shows in your smile lines, your one dimple, your skin, but mostly in your eyes.  
Your eyes that blink a thousand times when you're mad, that squint when you're glasses aren't on.  
You know how much i like pretty people, but you're beautiful  
I don't like you but love and admire you for what your worth is.  
Your worth truly seeing the sea for the first time

Abandoned  
By Bernadette Pimentel

My knuckles whitened as I gripped the knife held in my hand. The sharp blade glided through the pale cherry tomatoes and tapped against the wooden cutting board I set on the kitchen counter. There was a whoosh of wind outside my window that had caught my attention. My hand continued the motion as the pinwheel buried in the soil lazily spun. It had dirt smeared on the rainbow construction paper that had once been a vivid neon, catching one's eye. Everything reminded me of him, my sweet baby. He was gone too early, gone too fast. The image of my hands choking *her* neck flash through my mind.

"M-mom?" a frail voice behind me called. A confused expression was laid out on my "daughters" face. The pace of the knife quickened, the sound of every tap got closer together.

"What's wrong my love?" I questioned the girl. Her lips quiver as she struggled to answer, "Spit it out, it's not that hard to speak."

"You're crushing the tomatoes and turning them into a paste," she spoke up, clearing her throat. My eyes focus back on the task I was completing before the wind interrupted me again. The pinwheel had been spinning in the opposite direction and it flew away.

I slam the knife on the counter and snap my head back to the girl behind me, "THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!" I scream at her. She stumbles back as I inch towards her. My finger points at her forehead and I tap it repeatedly, "Use your brain for once and maybe stop voicing your opinions on things that are *NONE* of your business. If you just shut up *he* would still be here."

I catch her by surprise and she looks at me in disgust, "How is it MY fault when you abandoned us. You left us to rot in the streets, just to try and take us back when you needed money, something we never had. David died because of YOU. You left us and he used drugs to numb himself until he overdosed."

"So why didn't you save him? Why didn't you take him to the hospital to get better, to get some help?" I growl. "Oh wait, it's because you didn't care."

"You have some nerve to be talking, you LEFT US." She said in a pressing tone. "I was there when you weren't, so maybe you should learn how to shut your mouth."

I grab the knife I was previously using to cut the tomatoes and approach her, she has *no* reason to be talking to me like that, especially in that tone. I press the knife against her neck to teach her a lesson and she slaps it out of my hand. I immediately jump on top of her and pin her wrists to the ground. She was tiny, there was no way she could get up again.

"I'm sure he would love seeing this, you attacking me," She spat. The light in her eyes diminished, bringing me joy. I wrapped my hands around her neck as she struggled to breathe. I heard pounding on the door and I pressed harder until she was no longer breathing.

The door slams open and my hands raised in the air, I surrendered. Officers flood the room, pointing their unnecessarily large guns at me and shouting at me to back away. I do as told and they cuffed me. My head turns back to see what I've done and I chuckle, "She had it coming after she murdered David."

The Stars  
By Aneesa Freeman

Day 1

Bright broken glass glittering scattered in the sky.  
I'm down here hoping one day they'll teach me  
how to fly and march through the sky like you do  
In my mind.

So, sweat and tinted to my design I can just  
simply cry that those tinted parts match the size  
of another's hands that you call life. You might not realize that life can be a dream and you are  
my dream, so I'll stay awake instead of sleep simply because I don't want to dream about you. I  
just want to be with you, and I won't settle for seeing you in my dreams anymore.

Day 2

In my mind and in my heart was where me and you stood apart. Maybe there was something on  
my face for you to look at me that way. Filled with disgust like I was just dirt in sand. I couldn't  
say a word because your eyes did all the talking. I won't give up though.

So let the stars light the sky as I write.  
Because every day your gonna know just how  
special you are to me from morning to night.  
**Because you are my morning and night.**

Day 3

You looked everywhere else but into my eyes  
when you read **you are my morning and night.**  
And It made me want to cry that you didn't think the note could have been me that wrote it last  
night. But then you slid it in your pocket. I was scared you'd throw it away. I was scared  
you'd throw a piece of me that I gave to you away.  
But you didn't and maybe you will later but as  
long as I don't see you do it my smile will stay forever.  
**Because My sorrows for not having you as mine can tear me apart but your smile can cure the  
broken heart.**

Day 4

I shouldn't stare at you, but I do more than at the  
Stars by far. I think you smiled at my note I haven't seen you smile in a while but then your face  
became like ice when you looked at mine.  
My blood turned cold and I feared my face would make you know. But all you did was slide the  
note in your pocket like it was a precious locket and I couldn't help but wonder why you favored  
the paper more Than me? Was it by the way I laugh or the way I sneeze? I can't seem to breathe  
when I think of these things, **why can't you fall for me like leaves?**

Day 5

You've sliced me with those sharp eyes and judged me with them till I wanted to cry. It's ok  
because one day you'll open your eyes to me, and they won't be sharp.

*I can't wait till that day. It will be my favorite day. I feel it coming close when I see you falter lightly while reading the note. God it was a cute falter, but I couldn't help think you probably believe I'm pretty.*

*And when I see you, I want to be pretty if that's what it takes for your eyes to stay. Stay bright like stars when you read my notes.*

***Sorrow isn't a pretty sight on you. My notes aren't supposed to make you look blue. Smile so ill have something to smile too.***

*Day 6*

*You smiled and then I did. That's when you stopped.*

*Maybe you thought I was stalking you, hiding behind the door to see you is stalking for sure.*

*Even if your smile fell mine didn't. The sight of you is what made me fall. Fall for you again.*

*My head even fell while on the wall. Maybe that's*

*what made you look at me with appall. I didn't care, because you put that paper in your pocket unaware. But it still stung that you think I'm pretty,*

***Would it matter if I wasn't pretty? Would it make that smile Disappear?***

*Day 7*

*I could see it. You and me sitting under the stars feeling small while clanging on the handlebars.*

*Taking back our youth that we didn't know we lost with an unequal cost. I could see it, but not anymore when I saw your eyes turned sore, but it slowly softened.*

*A mix of feelings that was a little blur, but still the same smile I saw when you thought I was pretty.*

*It should have been great, but then why was he always filled with disgust when I looked his way?*

***You wouldn't want to watch the stars with me. You wouldn't want to hold the handlebars tight scared that our body would fall for feeling so little at night. I'm scared but I just hope you'll meet me in the park at night to watch the stars dance in the light.***

*Day 8*

*I never knew the ground could hold all the cold. It*

*helped since I was sweating of nerves hoping he'd come and I wouldn't end up hurt.*

*The footsteps came standing in front of me making me know he came, and I kept my head down starting to feel the stress of what could happen next.*

*I didn't look at him too scared he wouldn't be thereafter. His feet stayed in my vision till they left like a villain on a mission.*

*My heart about cracked and while I wanted to cry but the voice from the handlebars made me tilt my head upright.*

*Then there it was. The smile brighter then*

*The sun is shining on me tonight. I climbed beside him, praying I wouldn't do anything stupid.  
We laughed and stared, playing around. It was something I wouldn't mind doing with him every  
night. The stars marched faster than usual, but my eyes stayed on him.  
We didn't talk about the cruel looks he'd give me at school. We only talked about the good things  
that made are companies with each other more appealing. I wanted to tell him how much I cared  
about him, I wanted to so badly, but I could seem to speak  
When my eyes landed on him again only to see him glow bright like a star. Brighter, brighter,  
until brighter was impossible and he should have been too.  
I watched him fly up to the stars leaving me  
sitting here in the dark.  
Every night I'd go to the park and watch my star  
shine hoping he'll come back and be mine, but  
he never did and I never got to help him how  
much I cared about him. The aching pain to this day never ends, but I still wait.*

The Thing that Lurks  
By Erik Davis

04/19/04

Hello, this is Dr. Green. This is a scientific journal discussing the findings of my research. I have recently transferred to a new college and I finally have the equipment to truly look into the deepest crevice of space. I am beyond excited, to say the least, my old research area was not up to the quality I desired. The school board at my old college wasn't very interested in astronomy but for some queer reason or another, it was obsessed with things like zoology and robotics. Now I am by no means saying that these fields of study are not important but I think it's pretty strange that they don't care about the next stage of human expansion. Well, none of that really matters anymore now, does it? It's all gone anyways.

04/23/04

It's been a few days since my last update and my reason for that is simple, I've had nothing to update on. Things have been quite slow to say the least but that's changed as of today. My colleagues and I were looking at some data collected by our radio telescope and something strange was picked up. There appears to be something right behind Pluto. It's not an asteroid because the size is far too large for it to be one. We have no idea what it is, all we know is that it just recently showed up.

04/25/04

Update, the thing we spotted behind Pluto the other day it's just sitting still. It's not rotating, it's not orbiting anything, it's perfectly still. Even as Pluto is revolving it's just sitting there. My colleagues and I are planning on using the telescope to try and look at this thing and maybe we'll get an idea of what it is.

04/26/04

Update, something disturbing has happened. One of my colleagues, Phil Offerman, has just recently passed away. Authorities are saying it was a self-inflicted gunshot. It's dreadful how things like this happen. Last night while I was leaving, Phil looked fine. He told me he was going to stay here a little while longer and examine the thing a little while longer. We haven't turned on the telescope yet but it appears Phil might have used it. I don't know how this could have happened. My team and I are shocked by our cores about this. We've all agreed to name whatever the thing is after Phil. We decided it's for the best. We've also decided not to use the telescope right away, as a means of respect.

04/28/04

Update, another tragedy has struck the lab. Ashely Moore was found this morning dead on the sidewalk. Authorities are saying that she jumped off from the top of her apartment building. Much like Phil, there's plenty of evidence that says she was using the telescope last night. I'm getting scared but I know that this is just coincidental. It has to be.

04/30/04

Update, I'm starting to think that this whole lab is cursed. This morning, Carl Davidson was found in a classroom. He was sitting in the fetal position and there appeared to be blood splattered on the walls. He was mumbling some lunatic ramblings that no one could understand. Much like Phil and Ashley, he was believed to have been looking at the thing while on the telescope. The medical staff ended up coming and collecting Carl. They told us that they had no idea what was wrong with him. I never got to look at him but there's a rumor going around campus that he was apparently trying to scratch his own eyes out. My colleagues have been talking about stopping the research of the thing behind Pluto. I think it's preposterous that they would even recommend that! We might be on the brink of one of the greatest scientific discoveries of our time and they want to quit! I couldn't even fathom that idea! I'm planning on coming in later this night to look at the thing. Maybe it's time a real astronomer looked at this?

05/01/04

Don't look at it! Don't look at it! Dear brothers and sisters, I am begging you! Don't look at it! It's nothing we thought it could be, it's a thing that shouldn't exist and yet it does. It's not just sitting there, how stupid was I? No, no, this entity is watching us, it's stalking over us. It's watching all of us at once, it sees our suffering and it enjoys it. It likes that we feel pain. Its eyes, oh God I still remember its eyes, they burned my soul. I thought I could handle it but I really couldn't. If you look at it, don't look at its eyes, I hear it now. It's saying things to me. Things I don't want to know or hear. Its voice is so loud and it's not stopping, I hear every word. I hear it but it's not in the tongue of mortal men. I don't know what it's saying but I understand it. I can't stand listening to it, all I can think of is it. It has a name, it told me it's named, yet I dare not say it. I know that if anyone knows its name, they two shall suffer my fate. Why didn't I read the writing on the wall? I should have seen the deaths of my colleagues as a warning. I now know what needs to be done for salvation.

05/02/04

It's done, it hurt the last stand of rational thinking I barely have left, but I did it. The voices haven't stopped but the fire looks nice. I've sent millions of dollars' worth of lab equipment on fire, I've destroyed all the files, all charts, everything, and anything. One matchstick is what it took but my job isn't over yet. I'm listening to the words of the Elder. I'm understanding it more and more. It's old, it's older than anything in our galaxy and quite frankly may be our universe. I now know what purpose I have in this life. I'm here to serve the thing. I am to listen, and I am to obey, quite frankly I recommend you do the same. It desires blood, it craves blood, the blood of my fellow man. Paul and Ashly gave their own. Or at least that's what it told me, but I can do better. I can give you more. I have a new master, I have been chosen by the Elder, I must fulfill his desire.

Humanity's Downfall  
By Diamond Hicks

A time of hope was spread across the world,  
A new time, a new number.  
But it crashed and burned before it ever started.  
Fires burned away our hope,  
Took lives and destroyed homes.  
Lasting for far too long.  
Then like a swift breeze,  
The earth's residents got sicker,  
The wise ones beginning to drop,  
Along with the workers,  
And the learners.  
Stuck in our boxes,  
That once brought comfort and safety,  
Only resemble cages.  
Along with the wind,  
Brought along murder.  
Defenseless against their nails  
As they burn people away.  
Flying around the west coast,  
Killing those already in danger.  
Some strike back,  
But hope has decayed away.  
The earth has waited years after us destroying her,  
Now she aims to destroy us.  
Not that humanity doesn't deserve it,  
I just wish I didn't have to witness it.

At Midnight  
By Erik Davis

I should be asleep right now.  
Yet I can't seem to relax.  
Why is it that the dark brings the filth to light?  
I don't see the things I want to  
Instead, I see the things I need to.  
The demons of my past,  
My present,  
and the future  
Haunt me.  
They taught me and remind me of the misery I'm in and the misery I've caused.  
The hours seem to be getting longer  
My eyes are wide open.  
I want to sleep.  
I need to sleep.  
Yet for some reason, I can't.  
Physically I'm in a chair  
Drinking my glass of milk  
While the T.V plays nonsense.  
Yet my mind is all across time.  
I'm seeing all the mistakes I've done.  
I see all my sins  
The filth I live in.  
I feel the sorrow of my soul.  
This is life at Midnight.

Gravity  
By Elisaa McAdams

I remembered everything,  
Those summer nights spent on a kitchen floor.  
I started to remember how I fell in love with you.  
Slowly at first,  
The way a feather falls,  
gaining momentum as gravity pulls it closer.  
Then rapid,  
It was faster and faster.  
Then I started to catch myself and tried to stop, but I couldn't.  
I remember writing you those letters saying how much I did.  
Saying how I wished high school was over, and this life we're living would be behind us, and  
how we'd be happy then.  
I'm not sure if we'll ever get that, but I hope we do.  
I hope time doesn't betray us like I know it will.  
Cause the thought of never knowing you like I do now is worse than never knowing you at all.  
Knowing that these two people cared about each other and it just, dissipates

The Crusade of the Children  
By Erik Davis

The smoke rises high  
As the corpses fry.  
Children killing children.  
With their big shiny toys.  
The smell of the dead  
Bring such great joy!  
An eye for an eye.  
A coffin for a child.  
A carcass for a father.  
The angels cry  
And politicians cheer.  
The public forever stuck with fear.  
But it's seen as pride  
Which causes innocents to die  
And  
Which causes cities to burn  
Propaganda  
leader of the desensitized  
Nationalism  
the grand destroyer  
Ignorance  
the slayer of the youth  
Ashes go back to ash  
Dust returns to dust  
Children coming home in boxes  
With folded flags on top  
When children kill children: it's all for the greater good.  
For the greater good,  
Right?

Mom  
By Emily Moody

Nothing was the same  
It was as if she woke up as someone else  
She was no stranger to loss but this time it was different  
She lost her best friend  
The only person who kept her sane  
The lovely woman who helped her grow and prosper  
Her mother  
She knew today would be hard  
It was the first Mother's day without her  
But she was not expecting to feel this dull, this empty  
She wasn't expecting it to take this big of a toll on her

Show man  
By Erik Davis

Keep dancing  
Keep smiling.  
Keep up the show  
Keep up the performance.  
Dance till you die  
That's what they want.  
Keep the mask on  
That's what they want.  
Crack a joke  
Make them smile.  
Do I see tears?  
Well, make them go away!  
They can't know you have feelings.  
Dance harder  
Sing louder.  
Don't get off the stage.  
This is the only time you'll be seen  
Even if it's not really you.

Always Together  
By Fatoumata Diallo

She has become my best friend,  
but also my worst friend.  
Always wanting me to herself and never letting me go.  
Sometimes I call her by her name,  
you've probably heard of her.  
Loneliness is a very popular girl.  
It's just something about her that makes you want to keep her as a friend.  
But at the same time you know you should let go.  
She won't let you hang out with other friends  
Or even socialize with family.  
Always feeling awkward with her around.  
The worst part is even when you let her go she always finds a way back to you.  
Whispering in your ear about how much you need her  
And nobody will have your back like she does.  
Promising you that she will be with you even when you don't want or need her.  
Through thick and thin.  
She will always be my best friend and sometimes my worst friend.

Obey  
By Erik Davis

Wake up.  
Get dressed.  
Go to school.  
Try to be cool.  
Hate learning.  
Don't question anything.  
Accept indoctrination.  
Feel depressed,  
It's okay,  
It's in season.  
Go home.  
Look at the internet.  
Watch the news.  
See an atrocity  
Want to solve it  
Post an inspirational picture online.  
Forget the atrocity.  
Go to work.  
Don't look for a better job.  
Don't complain about working conditions.  
Go home  
Eat a corporate approved dinner.  
Go upstairs.  
Go to the bathroom.  
Get into the bathtub.  
Cry in said bathtub.  
It's okay to cry  
Just not in public.  
Stop crying.  
Watch mindless garbage.  
Go to bed.  
Cry first  
Then sleep.  
Wake up.  
Repeat until finished with school.  
Go to college  
Get in Debt.  
Why?  
Because you were told to!  
Graduate.

Get a new job.  
Get a spouse you tolerate.  
But not necessarily love.  
Get a suburban house.  
Have 4 kids.  
Have financial problems.  
Start drinking.  
Get a divorce.  
Drink more.  
Get fired.  
Look back at your life  
Realize that you've hated every second.  
Every aspect.  
Every path.  
Don't change  
Don't try to create a new path.  
Don't do anything.  
Don't question.  
Just obey.

Where Did the Time Go?  
By Isabella Monge

1st birthday party  
I don't remember it, but hey do any of us remember it?  
My first memories come to me around 3 years old  
My sister being born  
Pre-school  
Where did the time go?  
Last day of 3rd grade  
Also known as the last day of my first elementary  
I said goodbye to all of my friends  
It's been fun  
First day of 4th grade  
The year went by fast  
Next thing you know I'm on my last year of elementary school  
It was the best time of my life  
I miss it  
Where did the time go?  
Middle school went by just like that  
It wasn't the best time but things were less stressful  
I made some of the best friends there  
Then came high school  
I'm only one year in but I can tell you it's not the best thing ever  
So many expectations  
Where did the time go?  
Mom shows me old pictures to keep the memories alive  
This makes me sad  
I know I'll be an adult with responsibilities soon  
I miss my childhood  
I know I'll be saying the same thing when I'm older  
Where did the time go?

How Much Longer?  
By Erik Davis

How much longer,  
Do I need to keep living like this?  
How much longer,  
Will I have to deal with being talked down to?  
How much longer,  
Will I need to smile and nod?  
How much longer,  
Until I turn into another cog in the machine?  
How much longer,  
Until I stop feeling down?  
How much longer,  
Must I deal with phonies?  
How much longer,  
Until I get to smile?  
How much longer,  
Until I get to feel something again?  
How much longer,  
Will I have to wear this mask?  
How much longer,  
Until I can be myself?

The Boyfriend  
By Isabella Monge

I had just hung up with Olivia, my friend from Los Angeles. I moved to Stowe, Vermont about six months ago, and this would be the first time Olivia came to visit. I was getting tired of living a busy life in Los Angeles, so I thought I'd move out to a small town by myself and try to settle down. As soon as I hung up the phone with Olivia I had to get ready for work and head out.

Work wasn't the best that night. I had to work from 6 P.M to 2:30 A.M which was bad enough. I'm a nurse at the local hospital and it was extremely slow that night. We only had ten patients come in, and their emergencies were minor. What seemed to be decades passed, then it was finally 2:30. I went into the employee room and started to pack up. One of the walls in the employee room has a big window, and as I was gathering my things, I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I looked out the window and didn't see anything. I thought nothing of it and headed back home, assuming it was probably just a raccoon or something. When I got back home, though, the same type of situation happened to me. This time I was a little more frightened, but I still went to bed.

I ended up waking up around 10 A.M. Olivia and I planned to go get lunch at 12 after I picked her up from the airport. I hopped in the shower and got ready quickly.

I pulled up to the airport and spotted Olivia right away. The airport is small because the city is small, and it's usually pretty empty. I looked at her again and she started waving. I opened the door and ran up to her. We hugged and got back in the car. "Oakley, girl, I've missed you so much! L.A isn't the same without you," Olivia said.

"I know I've missed you too. Los Angeles is nice, but I like the quiet lifestyle here in Vermont. You know, you should consider moving here. There is so much nature here and everything is so calm," I told her.

"No way I'm never moving here. L.A is perfect for me, and I could never live in a small town. Plus it is way too cold here right now, and it's spring," said Olivia. We ate lunch at the local deli and went to my house. We pulled up into the driveway and Olivia was in shock. "Wow Oakley, this is beautiful," Olivia said. I live in a colonial two-story house. My house is surrounded by woods and I don't necessarily live in a neighborhood or have neighbors.

"Thank you," I said, giggling. We went inside and Olivia sat down in the living room. I realized I had left my phone in the basement while I was cleaning up yesterday, so I went down to go get it. It took me a while to find it because I lose things quickly. While I was searching for my phone, I could faintly hear Olivia talking to somebody. I figured she was just on the phone with someone. I eventually found my phone and headed back up. "Who were you talking to Liv?"

"You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend Oakley," Olivia said. I was extremely confused.

"What are you talking about? I don't have a boyfriend," I told her.

"Then who was that man that just ran upstairs? He knew everything about you. He knew where you work, he knew when you moved here, he knew what you look like when you sleep, and a lot of other things," Olivia told me. I felt my face turn completely white. I started shaking.

“Olivia, I don’t have a boyfriend. I think I have a stalker,” I managed to get out. Olivia and I ran upstairs and saw an open window. In the distance, I saw a man running. I told Olivia to call the police because she had an accurate description of him. The police came to my house to ask me some questions and they looked through my house and tried to pick up some DNA. They left around 8 P.M.

I ended up moving back to Los Angeles a month later. To this day they still haven’t found my stalker. That means he’s still out there, scarring another person. I don’t think I’ll ever be the same.

## Mask

By Erik Davis

I wear this mask,  
Because I was told it would keep me safe.  
I was told I shouldn't show my true self.  
I was told to be scared of speaking my own mind.  
I was told to live a lie.  
But I can't breathe with this mask over my mouth.  
I don't understand,  
Why should I not be myself?  
Why should I be hidden?  
Why should I obey?  
Why should the tradition carry on?  
I'm tired of wearing a smile.  
I don't see why the moronic dunce cap wearing mouth breathers get to have theirs off?  
If the world doesn't like me as me,  
Then to hell with the world.

To My Friend with Burgundy Hair  
By Jadayah Parker

Couldn't you just wait for me?  
I'm trying to catch up, but I'm always just out of reach.  
You move so fast; I can't keep up  
I'll drown in sweat, running for you.  
My lungs are empty, and my heart is heavy,  
My muscles will ache tomorrow morning when I wake up.  
Couldn't you just wait for me?  
My feet are pounding on the concrete and my arms are pumping as I sprint to try to close off  
The  
Distance.  
You walk faster than I'll ever be able to run  
And I don't want to lose you in this crowd of people.  
The world changes more than we do and we're both growing still.  
Please don't leave me,  
Please don't lose me  
I just want to talk,  
Wait.  
The world moves a year a day and we keep spacing.  
The crowd is closing in on me,  
I'm gasping for air,  
My heart is racing,  
I'm drowning in my sweat,  
My ankles are sore,  
My knees are buckling,  
I'm trembling in the midst of a stampede,  
PLEASE  
wait for me.

I Forgot  
By Jadayah Parker

I waked up in the morning and made an apple danish  
Continued with my morning routine  
Everything was normal, quiet and calm  
At least from what I remembered

After that morning, my mind went hazy  
My memory was wiped clean  
I had so much to do, but couldn't recall a thing  
I forgot everything in just a split second

My life was turned into a bad dream  
But I can't remember why  
I don't even remember my own name  
Was this my chance to start over

I remember needing to escape, but why  
Was my life so bad that I couldn't remember it  
My left ankle was wrapped in a bloody bandage  
Was this the reason for my need to leave

I didn't remember anything  
I took this as an opportunity  
Did I really need to leave  
Trying to remember was useless now

I packed my bags and was gone without a trace  
Got into my car and drove to another state  
Found a cheap temporary home, it was good enough for now  
I registered the home under the name Letha, a truly forgetful name

In the Mind of an Only Child  
By Janiyah Shaw

I hate the One-Child-Policy.  
Though the policy isn't as strict as it once was, I still hate it,  
**With a burning passion.**  
I hate the thought of kids who need help,  
Being only able to look towards their parents.  
I hate the thought that one day their parents will die,  
And they won't have anyone else that can cry with them,  
Hurt as much as them,  
Feel as much as them.  
Because they're the only child,  
And no one can share that pain.  
I hate the thought that the unspeakable things in a household can't be discussed.  
Can't tell your bestest friend,  
Can't tell who you consider a sister.  
You have to keep it to yourself  
Because what happens in the household, stays in the household.  
I hate the thought that they can't share laughs at 2 in the morning,  
Trying their best not to get in trouble.  
I hate the words "You're lucky to be an only child."  
"You get everything you want"  
Name 2 only children that have everything they could ever want.  
Better yet, name 3 who love being the only child.  
You can't.  
Those don't exist.  
Stupid policy.

## Igneous

By Jonathan Baumgardner

It's hard to make decisions.  
It's hard to overcome Covid.  
It's hard to accept that my life would be better than it ever has,  
Had it not been for it.  
Steel was meeting steel.  
The train of my life that has only just gotten repaired,  
Crashed.  
I didn't lose all  
of the cargo,  
But the axles and wheels aren't turning.  
I would push it, but I could hurt myself.  
As it turns out, Covid has been on these tracks.  
It was inevitable, and people didn't take the warnings.  
We radioed ahead, a few miles out, to clean off the tracks.  
To make sure that trains about to come through could pass it.  
But Now I'm sitting here on these tracks,  
As Helpless as all of the trains behind me.  
A storm is brewing, and trees ahead could come crashing down.  
Hoping that the workers will be able to fix the problem before it's too late.

Ms. Evelyn's Way  
By Janiyah Shaw

"It's rainy out isn't it?" an old woman asked Audrey. Audrey was already tired and was ready to go home but put on a fake smile and chuckled.

"Yeah. Is that all?" Audrey asked the old lady. She didn't think of herself as being rude but the way this lady was looking at her made her question herself.

"Isn't it a bit late for you to be working? Aren't you around 16 or 17?" There it is. Audrey sighed to herself and looked at the woman, trying not to roll her eyes. "I'm 18. What about it?"

The woman jerked her head back and placed her hand on her chest. "Well excuse me, you must be new here. Everyone knows who I am and know not to push my buttons but I'll give you a pass since you're new."

Audrey's patience was already thin from it being so late and the rude teen boys that were in the diner earlier. "Actually, I'm not new, I just changed shifts."

The lady looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Add an orange juice."

Audrey nodded and went to the back to prep the lady's food. "You know who that woman is out there? She got short hair, pretty old?" she said to the other girl that worked there, Riley.

Riley turned around and smiled at Audrey. "Ms. Evelyn. I love her."

"Um no, I don't think we're talking about the same person. This lady just said I was 16 and got mad when I told her I was 18."

Riley snickered. "She thought I was 19."

Audrey scoffed and poured orange juice in a cup. "At least she thought you were older than you actually are. Is she here by herself everyday?"

"Yeah. Usually there's another man here and they always sit on opposite sides of the diner but I haven't seen him lately. Here's her biscuit."

Audrey grabbed the biscuit from Riley and put it on a plate sitting on a tray. "Usually she doesn't want orange juice," Riley said, shrugging.

"Guess I'm the blame for that," Audrey said, picking up the tray and walking back out the kitchen. She saw a man in a black jacket with his hood up standing behind the register.

"Um, welcome to Speedy's Diner," she said. She glanced over at Ms. Evelyn who's eyes were calm, but alert. The man turned around abruptly and had loads of cash in one hand and a gun in the other. Audrey gasped and dropped the tray. The man looked at Audrey with a crazy look in his eyes and licked his lips before he spoke.

"Don't say anything, don't tell anyone, and you won't get hurt," he said in a husk voice. Audrey nodded and walked past him with her hands up, making sure not to lose eye contact. "Young man," a voice said from behind Audrey. Audrey turned around and saw Ms. Evelyn standing up with an umbrella. "How old are you? Look like you're in your mid 20's? Maybe 29?"

The man glanced at Audrey, making her tense, and then at Ms. Evelyn. "I'm 23," he said. Ms. Evelyn nodded and walked up to the man.

“You have potential, just get off them drugs and stop robbing diners. I’ve seen you around this area too, seein’ how many people are usually here,” she said shaking her head. “Go on somewhere boy, the cops are already on their way.”

The man’s eyes grew as big as saucers and he dropped the gun to the floor. He ran out the back door and Audrey was looking at Ms. Evelyn in shock.

“How were you able to do that? W- without being afraid?” she stammered.

Ms. Evelyn chuckled. “I call it the Ms. Evelyn way. It’s all in the stare.”

Pain

By Jordan Powell

Nobody truly understands.  
They don't see everything,  
They don't see you on the inside,  
They don't see those heartfelt moments,  
They don't see those nights filled with cries,  
Nobody truly understands.  
They don't understand what your going through,  
They don't realize how hard it is,  
They don't know how you feel,  
Nobody truly understands.  
They don't know why your acting different,  
They don't see past that fake smile you put on your face,  
They don't ever understand,  
They never will.

Drive

By Kaitlyn Gardner

Life is at its calmest when it's spent  
Sitting in the passenger seat of the car  
Looking out the window  
Watching the objects pass by in a blur  
Listening to the radio  
Finally understanding what the lyrics mean  
Forgetting anything that causes concern

Don't worry.  
Just drive.

The Den  
By Kalia Brown

my heart  
is a troublesome thing --  
stiff and rigid as the rot sets in  
but cracking with a pulse to keep me alive.  
it groans and creaks  
like old floorboards of a forgotten house  
straining to hold the weight  
of something it doesn't think it wants.

your foot presses down  
and I can hear your knock echoing  
in the cavern inside my chest  
filling the empty space with your noise.  
the inhabitants -- homeless, hollow spiders --  
jump and skitter in fright,  
but still you stay,  
never chasing or leaving.

the old crooning clock chimes  
as you take in the furniture, the dust, the webs.  
you don't move further,  
but your gaze sets fire to the building all the same.  
I wait for the ignition of grimaces and diverted eyes  
that never arrives.  
you examine every inch but only smile  
as the clock purrs its slumber.

your voice seeps into the hallways  
and your hands brush away the grime,  
listening keenly for the thrum of the heart  
with that warm, homey smile.  
slowly and gently,  
you move further into the worn house  
easing on the pained memories  
leaning against the broken bones.

my heart  
is still a troublesome thing.  
it's stiff and rigid and scared -- so, so scared  
but it begins to pulse more and more.  
your words, your stories, your laughs  
kiss each crack and blemish and tear  
as you stand in front of the den

of a once slumbering, horrible beast.

the old house of my heart finally settles  
and my heart beats, beats, beats  
to the sound of you  
filling the silence inside.

Bottled Up Letter  
By Katrina Nguyen

Dear Normalized Asian Racism,

From my eyes that are slanted  
To the food that I consumed  
I was labelled and claimed as “exotic”  
As though I was cattle to the majority population  
For them to pull jokes and poke fun at from the meat on my bones.  
With every “ling ling”,  
Every “Viet-cong”,  
Every comment about eating dogs,  
Every time I was told to go “home”,  
Back to my own country,  
When I was born in the “Land of the Free”,  
My own self worth disintegrated with every word that passed my delicate youthful ears  
Starting the age of 4  
And it’s just gone downhill from there

I was so ashamed of something that I couldn’t control  
I wanted to wipe it clean from my slate.  
Barrages of insults and normalized naive comments  
Made me forget how to speak my own language  
Which forced my parents to learn another  
Just to communicate to their own child.  
Night after night after busy work schedules  
My parents stayed up studying,  
Repeating to one another common English phrases  
Like “How are you doing today?”,  
“Did you eat?”,  
“Welcome home.”  
Just so that they could know if I was okay in words that they didn’t fully understand.  
I am ridden with guilt every day knowing that fact

Snacks from my younger, more happier days  
Were seen as “disgusting” and “gross”  
And that if I ate them,  
I was “weird” for not eating gummy bears and cheez its during lunch.  
Things like roasted chestnuts,  
Shrimp crackers,  
And seaweed came to a stop in my childhood diet.  
It went from bringing them to school to share with “friends”,  
To only eating them at home,  
And then never buying them again for the rest of my life.  
Just the other day,

My dad asked if I wanted dried squid,  
Something that I loved to eat almost every day,  
And my body immediately filled up with anxieties and fear of being ridiculed  
As my throat gagged at the memories of being the subject of vaulting rocks  
Feeling each pinch and sharp edges when hitting my skin  
For just opening up the package in public.

My culture has been fetishized from formal wear to a requirement for some men.  
It's insane as to how many people there are that are just walking among us,  
Head held up high, strutting around as though they have done something good,  
Good that is beneficial and has contributed to society and the lives of others.  
I have had people on the internet tell me I was beautiful and gorgeous,  
"For an Asian girl".

When I told a guy that I wasn't Korean,  
I was called an "imposter" and "fake"  
As though I chose to lie about the mask in which I wear that I call a face.  
Saweetie, Kasey Musgraves, and Kendall Jenner.  
3 people,  
No.

3 celebrities out of many  
Who have worn a traditional dress called an ao dai  
And sexualized something that is made to be innocent and pure.  
Things worn for weddings,  
And for coming of age parties.  
Not for the red carpet and thirst traps on Instagram stories.  
My culture is not your fashion statement.  
Don't demean it of its history,  
Don't give it another meaning.

But what do I know?  
I have other people deciding what I can and cannot be offended towards  
Because my own feelings don't matter to the eyes of society.  
"It's just a joke,"  
"Don't be so sensitive."  
Blacks, Hispanics, Natives, Arabic,  
Other minorities,  
You name it,  
They make those jokes too.  
When they fight, it's seen as empowering and fighting the oppressors  
But when I, my people, do it, it's an overreaction  
Because no one sees a problem when they tell me to go back to the rice fields  
And coal mines  
And if my dream job is to become a lawyer or a doctor  
As they stretch out their eyes to look smaller like my own.  
It's a joke, they said.  
Why are you upset, they ask.

While peers are surrounding me,  
Cornering me as my back is pressed against a wall,  
Comfort dispels from my body as my nerves flare up,  
Distress comes to replace the layer of skin on my body I called an armor,  
And I laugh.  
I tell my head and my thoughts not to get upset  
Because it was meant to be a “joke”,  
Repressing my anger and filling up with guilt for getting upset at “nothing”

So with that being said,  
From my eyes that are slanted  
So they are able to see past your internalized and blatant ignorance  
When you pick and choose what is deemed racist without consulting the community  
To the food that I consumed  
Since childhood that you are now fetishizing  
And posting on your Instagram pages,  
Screw you.  
And I hope that your world burns into ashes upon ashes  
Like you have put mine through for these last 13 years  
That I have been walking on this wretched, god forsaken planet

Sincerely Signed,  
“Ling Ling”

Comfort  
By Kalia Brown

“Ellie?”

She tries not to flinch at Leo’s voice. It’s too loud, too sudden, even after she hears the door squeak open. Sobs still bud in her throat. She hoped she’d be alone to let them bloom. Tears soak her pants from where she buried her head in her knees. The ache in her chest claws for attention. It’s so uncomfortable, inside the cage of her body and the weight of the world. She can’t breathe.

Leo doesn’t say anything else, but she hears the door softly click. After a moment, she feels his weight settle next to her, close enough to feel his presence but enough space that they aren’t touching. Her skin alights.

Neither of them speak. He’s quiet, and the silence allows her to hear his breathing. Her own flutters frantic wings against her lungs. It isn’t staccato — isn’t a rhythm she can find comfort in, comfort that she’s alive and living. It’s rough and imperfect, hurting her chest too much and not enough and leaves her gasping for more. A few hot tears squeeze out when she screws her eyes shut.

He’s fumbling with something. She finally picks up on the sound through her gasps, and it catches her interest so abruptly she hiccups in a breath. She raises her head and looks. It’s-- frankly, the sight makes her want to laugh. It’s a rock. Of course it’s a rock with Leo. He always has one on his person. Briefly, she thinks she knows why. The purple glints in the light, sparkling like a hidden secret at night and not a dumb rock in the eyes of somebody who can’t control her emotions. She wants to hold it.

Leo notices her staring without glancing in her direction and holds out the rock like an offering. He’s smiling something too soft that she can’t quite meet. His chest rises and falls. Ellie’s chest rises and falls.

After a moment — too long, he’ll get impatient and leave, his arm will start hurting and he’ll drop it, too long too long — Ellie scoots closer to him and gingerly reaches out to take it. Their thighs are touching. Their fingers brush. The rock is warm in her hand.

Ellie rubs her thumb over the smooth, gem-like surface until it reaches the imperfections, the rough, grainy texture that presses into her skin. It bites at her, playful like a nipping puppy, and some dust coats her finger from it. She pauses and watches settle. The lines and spirals of her skin aren’t dizzying. It’s comforting. She returns to the rock.

Ellie doesn’t know what kind it is; she’s sure that Leo knows. He’d be rambling about it if he hadn’t— if she hadn’t—

Her bottom lip trembles. In an urgent rush, she digs the edges of the rock into her palm. Leo is quiet, but they can feel him next to them. He’s breathing, he’s beside them, he’s alive and there. Ellie sucks in a breath, tired of how much it hurts, and tilts her body to lean on him. He’s warm. Ellie’s body presses against his side, and feeling his skin doesn’t make her burst into flames. Like the rock, she can feel every piece of her imperfections, but it slots perfectly against his skin. The rock is warm.

An arm curls under another, and a head fits against a shoulder. Together, they breathe. It’s comfortable.

I Love Her  
By Katrina Nguyen

I look at myself in the mirror. Spots cover my skin, varying in colors and shades of red, blue, purple, and brown. I wince in pain and discomfort as I put on concealer to hide my mistakes. What did I do to get into this kind of situation? What could I have done to change the way my life is today? Should I just try and leave her? I can't do that to her; she'll have no one here with her, and she doesn't know how to take care of herself correctly. She'll die, and it'll be my fault. And I don't want that, so I have to stay here. I have to stay here. I *have* to stay here. With her. Besides, I love her and she loves me, right. Right?

Now that I think about it, she does tend to get really possessive over me too, so I don't think she would want me to be with anyone else anyways. She doesn't let me hang out with any of my friends, boys or girls, for even an hour. She wants to know where I am at all times, even if she is there with me. She doesn't let me go anywhere without her permission besides school and work, and I know how that typically turns out. She usually doesn't even like me going to work, even though I'm the only financial support for the both of us. She doesn't even let me see my dad anymore. But the thing is, she's allowed to go wherever she wants to go. She's allowed to disappear with my money and different people for weeks upon weeks on end. She's allowed to bring strange men into our house, and I just have to be okay with it. And it's all fine and dandy because "she's an adult and can do whatever she chooses." I'm so alone when I'm with her. I can't even tell anyone about this. Who's going to believe that a guy is getting abused? Especially by someone like her and how our relationship is. If someone were to compare my body to hers, it is definite that no one is going to believe me with her small and frail stature. Besides, if they do believe me, they're just going to tell me to get as far away from her, and I can't do that. I know I can't. She's going to find me somehow. I know she will.

I sigh to myself as the mirror I was looking in was near to its death. With its cracks in the mirror where the lightning bolt shape seems to strike down directly between the two halves of my face. Maybe it was a sign that I was not as good as I thought I really was. Maybe it was a sign that I deserved the treatment that I was getting. Maybe she didn't want me to hang out with my friends because they're going to be a bad influence on me with drugs and sex. Maybe she wants to know where I am all the time because she's worried that I might get kidnapped. Maybe she doesn't want me to go anywhere because I might get killed without her knowing. Maybe she doesn't want me to see my dad because she knows someone about him that I don't know. Maybe. Just maybe.

I'll just have to deal with it until I can find time to think of something, of anything, but my thoughts are cut short once I hear her start shrieking with the front door slam that I had gotten used to without flinching each time. "Matthew, get your worthless ass down here! Right now!" I forgot to finish washing the dishes because my bruises started to hurt. I start to hear glass shattering against the wooden floor of our kitchen. I guess I'm going to have to buy another set of dishes. Again. I sigh to myself one more time before turning towards the bathroom door. I take a deep breath as I prepare myself for what's about to happen. I should probably leave out the concealer, looks to be one of those nights, I think to myself.

I clench my fists together to diverse the pain that was about to come. "Coming mother."

Craving Your Love  
By Kearra Brooks

Your eyes were like daggers piercing through my body  
With that fire, that spark, that burning flame inside you  
As I look sheepishly back at you with a sly expression  
Knowing what would happen within the next few seconds  
Then slash! You take me down like a lion attacking a gazelle  
So many feelings and emotions running in my head  
I'm crying because I'm craving more of you  
I'm conflicted because this pain feels good  
I'm also scared because I want this to last forever and don't want to let go  
Then the workout is over as I roll over and lay on your beating heart  
When I finally wake up I notice you're still here or maybe I'm dreaming  
Then you wake up with those beautiful eyes staring at me giving me reassurance  
Telling me you're not going anywhere and you're forever mine  
Then we do a passionate kiss which makes my body tremble  
I swear I can never get enough of you

Decaying  
By Keyami Collins

It starts again  
Constricting, painful, unadulterated  
I feel as if I'm decaying from the inside out.  
My mind is clouded,  
As the only thing my senses can feel is agony.

I twist and turn,  
A little medicine doesn't do the trick,  
It's a placebo.  
A futile attempt to alleviate the knots deep within.

Moving On  
By Kyle Jackson

When I'm gone  
It'll be like I never left.  
Leaving this life behind,  
Running away from everything,  
Just like she did.  
To never give second chances,  
Trust the process,  
Or have hope,  
That everything will just be okay.  
I used to believe in these things,  
Yet here I am,  
Following in the footsteps of someone,  
I swore I'd never be.  
Off to a new start,  
I'd move on from it all,  
Forgetting who helped me,  
And the good times I once had.  
I'm gonna be just like her,  
And forget who I am too.

Ode to Maxwell  
By Leea Copeland

on nights when I can't sleep  
I often think of things that I have lost.  
Friday night, my favorite pair of socks.  
on Saturday, my old field hockey stick.  
and on every night, restless or not,  
*I think of you.*

I could never declare my love for you out loud,  
so I hid my infatuation in places that only we knew.  
I think of how I used to whisper 'I love you'  
because I was afraid that others would  
only *laugh* if they had overheard.

I'd only hold your hand for seconds at a time  
because every time someone looked at us  
my entire body felt as if it was on fire,  
so, I pulled my hand away, *quick*  
like if I had held on any longer  
we both would have *burst into flames*.

*I only wish I had the courage to  
love you loud like you deserved.*

Music

By Sean Burns

Music is medicine to my ears  
And medicine to my heart  
Music is my best friend  
It always was from the start  
Everyone likes music  
No matter what shape or form  
Music is just music  
And medicine to my heart

The Boys of Wicker Street  
By Leea Copeland

Rebecca and Rodney lived on Wicker Street long before we moved in. I was ten, and Rodney twelve, so it didn't take much for us to get along. Our mamas would talk about the neighborhood as we played ball. I spent so much time at Rebe's house that she had a picture of me on her wall, right next to Raymond's. "Go home, Marco," Rebe told me when she caught us up late playing MarioKart. "We don't want your Mama worried."

I never heard her yell. I'm sure Raymond hadn't either, because he never complained with me when I would ramble about how my Momma was so strict. Everyone on Wicker street loved Rebe. *Everyone.*

So, when Rebe's radio didn't blast soul music from the front porch like it had done every Sunday morning, the block knew something was wrong. Twenty of us stood on the side of the street, staring at the yellow brick house and into the dark windows. We were all dressed in our Sunday best, waiting for the church van that took us to and from to arrive. Rebe was always the first one outside, telling everyone "Good morning, y'all!" as we all piled inside. "Y'all folks are doing way too much now, Rebe probably just overslept, that's all." Old Willie sighed from his scooter that was perched in the front lawn of our house. Raymond had slept over that night, so me and him stared at each other, worried.

I couldn't remember much after then, but what I did remember was Momma rushing both me and Raymond into the house after my daddy and one of the other men broke down the door when Rebe didn't answer after the tenth time calling. We both sat silent. Neither of us knew what was happening until we heard the police sirens. We peeked out of the window, and I couldn't see anything, but I remember the way Raymond cried as soon as he looked out there. He didn't get to see his ma before they took her deceased body in the ambulance.

Rebe was the backbone of the neighborhood. And now that Rebe had fallen, Wicker Street came tumbling down with her.

"You can take the boy outta tha' hood, but you can't take the hood outta' the boy. Ain't that right, Marco?" Mama was the first person to greet me when I came back to Wicker Street after I graduated University. Arms out, she shot down the front porch as quick as her legs could carry her, the old steps creaking. "Lemme get a good look at you, boy! You thirsty?" Before I could get a word out, Momma was dragging me by my arm, settling me down on the porch as she ran into the house to get me something.

Raymond and I used to sit on the curb licking popsicles as they oozed down our hands. Now, I watched him from Momma's front porch as he and his hoodrat friends shot dice on the sidewalk. "A shame, ain't it," Momma said from behind the screen door, lemonade in hand. "Ain't been the same since Rebe..." she paused. "You know." I sighed softly and looked back at Momma; whose entire demeanor had changed.

"I know, ma."

Momma came out on the porch with me, handing me my lemonade glass as she sat down on the porch swing. My eyes were still staring at Raymond, confused. I knew he had changed when I left, but I didn't know he changed *this* much. He was sagging, for god's sake. His friends were now waving goodbye to him, hopping into the raggedy Chevrolet that was parked crookedly on the street.

"Imma' go talk to him." I said softly.

Momma tsked. She took my half-empty glass and went back into the house. “Good luck, Marco. If I can’t get to him, you can.”

Raymond only looked up at me when my feet hit the pavement in front of Rebe’s house--*his* house. There was something rolled in his hand, the tiny object buried in between his fingers. “Marco, man! Good to see ya!” A big, toothy grin was planted on his face as he reached out to give me a handshake.

I stood still; arms crossed. “Drugs, man? Really?” I said.

His face fell and he put his hands back to his side, rolling his eyes. “First day back and you already tryna’ take control. You ain’t the boss of me.” He turned his back to me. “You shoulda’ stayed gone.”

“Rebe didn’t raise you like this, Ray.” I knew I had struck a nerve when his entire body froze up, and his fists began to ball up. It had slipped out. Before I knew it, he had pushed me to the ground. All of that pent-up anger he had was released through his fists. I tried to push him off, but Raymond had always been stronger. Every blow to my face hurt like hell.

“Don’t come to me talkin’ about my mamma eva’ again, fool!” Raymond bawled as he struck one last blow to my face. His face was contorted into something unsettling, something that I had only seen the day Rebe died. He was *scared*. Here was Raymond Tracy, looking the most vulnerable I had seen him in years. Fear shone in his eyes like the bullet that struck Rebe.

Raymond gasped softly as his eyes leapt from his raw, sanguinary fists to my busted-up face. I didn’t know what I looked like, but I knew for sure that I couldn’t see out of my left eye and my nose was not where it was supposed to be. He rolled from off of me and sat on the concrete, out of breath and in disbelief of what he had done. I didn’t know what else to do except hug him. I held tight onto heaving shoulders as I pulled him close, forcing him into a hug. We both reeked, bodies smelling of sweat and blood. It felt as if he were trying to escape my clutch at first, tears still trailing down his ebony cheeks as his chest rose and dropped with each shaking breath. Raymond eventually stopped struggling. We were once again those little boys on Wicker Street all those years ago. My arms were wrapped around my old friend, black, bloodied, and blue on the sidewalk underneath the turbulent Chicago sky.

Just for a moment, Wicker Street stood still once again.

Guided Shadow  
By Martina Jeudy

As the Sun goes down  
And the temperature cools  
Night falls  
Day slows down  
House gets dark

The light follows  
As you pass through  
Cast your silhouette across the floor  
Leaving a mark  
Leaving what is you

Each shadow left  
Takes pieces away  
Soul  
Brain  
Heart

Until all that is left  
Is the same shadow  
That you created under lost light

You've Been a Part of Me Ever Since  
By Maia Sigler

When you kissed me  
I felt a tiny piece of you fall into me.  
When you caressed my face, the heat from your fingertips became imbedded into my skin.  
For these past 2 months I've tried to pack it down,  
I tried to push the bowling ball into the tea cup but it broke and my feelings spilled out in the pieces.  
I cut your name into my arm with one of the glass shards, the blood felt warm just like your touches.  
I still rub the scar with the same hand that once held yours; it makes me feel like you're still here holding me.  
You're not, you're not here, you're gone.  
Time has already finished weaving its web of separation between us, and I'm caught up in the knots because I can't let go.  
I don't want to say anything.  
I've become so comfortable in my own heartbreak and I don't want to make things awkward.  
I won't tell you how much I miss you, I won't tell you how much I want to be in her place.  
I won't tell you how much my heart wants to beat with yours.  
When you ask how I am, I'll keep my pain to myself.  
I won't tell you that you were my oxygen and ever since you left I haven't been able to breathe.  
I can't talk about it, I won't talk about it.  
I'll keep the memories of me and you squashed between these pages; I'll keep my thoughts of us shut up in this notebook, it is the only place where it will ever exist.

From Martini  
By Martina Jeudy

Khali Raqhan Curry. Kahli. Lee. I want his name to be heard around the world. I want to scream his name from every rooftop until I can longer speak. Until my last breath gives out. Until everyone knows the pain. The pain of his mother that didn't get to see her son accomplish greatness, who had to walk across the stage for him. For his brother who no longer has that feeling of being secured, the familiarity. For his sister, who wasn't old enough to truly know what happened to her brother, who'll only have a small remembrance. For his dad, who won't be able to meet the future grandkids and the life Khali would've built. For his girlfriend, who loved him endlessly, who won't get to walk down the aisle towards him.

The first day I met Kahli, I remember coming to work and seeing a new face. As I took orders in the back, he stocked and bagged orders in the front. When he would walk to the back to stock, we would look at each other and stare. I was the quiet, baby of the group and he was the new crew member. As the days of work blurred past, we quickly became friends. He would tease me and say that I'm lonely in the back, and I would chuckle slightly. When we worked, it was worth the while. We were working in McDonalds, for crying out loud, but it was honestly the best time. One shift we worked together, it was just five of us, which is already low. The manager was having a breakdown and left us by ourselves. With me on orders and bagging, him on the bagging and front counter. We finished it out and cleared the peak drive thru. That night we laughed at everything. It was just so crazy how the manager was in the back crying and we were in the front basically running things.

He went to Denbigh. I went to Woodside. He was a senior. I was a sophomore. While in school we would text. I would tell him to stay focused and actually go to school. He would tell me to stay focused and keep doing good. We would send good morning and goodnight texts, keep each other on track, motivate each other, keep each other entertained, keep each other grounded. The last texts I sent him were, "Well thank you" and "Wud". The last thing that I got a chance to communicate was an acronym for "what are you doing". That text was sent at 1:19 pm, April 16th, 2019. I waited and waited for him to text back. I thought, "He'll get to me soon". That night I got hit with the news that he was shot. Dead. Four letters. One word. Changed me forever.

I cried throughout the night. Went to school in a daze, tears blurring everything that I couldn't see that day. I brushed past everyone, gone to the world. That whole day I listened to a song that I designated for him. Water running endlessly down my face. I ached, ached so hard that I could barely continue on. I went to his balloon release. I attended his funeral alone. Sat in the back, alone. I didn't know any of his friends or family, I was a separate part of his world. Yet, that day, everyone in there cried as one, stood for him as one.

It's been almost a year. I still haven't processed it. I'm not fully healed. Not even halfway there. I struggle to reread the texts that we sent back and forth, but I refuse to delete them. We knew each other for a short period of time, but our friendship made it feel like years of knowing. "Call me Lee". Lee it will be.

Bad Romance  
By Madison Trahan

Boom  
My once steady heartbeat  
Beats at my chest  
It bangs on my ribs and silence my lungs  
My breathing stops as you walk in the door  
Dressed in all black  
Like they told me you would come  
Alone at midnight  
You call to me  
And with a voice like deep smooth velvet  
I fall right into  
Never to see the morning again

Across the Street  
By Melissa Downs

The land across the street  
So close but it feels so far away  
I never thought I'd want to cross the street  
My joy was always here  
Here is where I felt the most free  
And yet I'm sure I'm not the only one  
Whose gazing out across the street  
Where people used to meet with those they'd never think to know  
Find things they never thought to discover  
What we cannot have  
Are the very same things we yearn for, they say  
They say we're social creatures,  
Only now can I say I understand.

Lonely Room  
By Norah Sheldon

In a lonely room  
Looking at my doom  
I've been staring at it the whole time, you  
You never had a clue  
The damage you did to my heart  
With all of this time apart.  
I called out to you in this lonely room  
Looking at my doom.  
I never had a clue.  
Just take all of the pain away  
Like you did the day I saw you.  
In a wandering haze,  
I was in a daze.  
Why must you gaze?  
Those deep brown eyes  
It was all a disguise  
In a lonely room  
Only feet away you glared at me  
If only I were free  
Free of this dark side  
Free of this pain  
Free to love  
I called out to you in this lonely room  
Looking at my doom.  
Realizing it was a dream you'd come back to me.

Poem  
By Rebecca Meze

Tick  
    Tock  
        Tick  
            Tock  
The tone deaf clock taunts my sleeping body  
    I can't move  
        Beep  
            Beep  
                Beep  
My alarm calls me to wake  
    To work  
        To do something other than sleep  
Dismiss  
    Unlock  
        Swipe swipe swipe  
            Youtube  
                Tiktok  
                    Ignore work  
                        Find any reason to ignore work  
Continue till overwhelming regret kicks in  
    Work till depression takes over  
        Sleep for a year  
            (or three)  
Wake  
    Repeat

Android  
By Ren Klett

The snipping of scissors by my ear snaps me out of my trance,  
The hair that had once rested against my shoulders now accumulating in a pile on my dirty  
bathroom floor.

And yet,  
The image of myself remained the same  
There was no escape from the me that someone else had created

I had been taught to become the person my parents wanted me to be from a young age  
I was taught to always be polite  
To always succeed  
Never show anger or sadness  
To never be a kid  
They had rearranged my wiring until I acted with ease  
Until every movement was perfected and they could trust I would survive “in the real world.”

But there isn't a *me* anymore.

I'd been programmed to be another person  
But the mask that had been screwed on was slowly coming loose  
However, with every loosened screw, they added another bandage to keep me from falling apart  
But I wasn't falling apart.  
I was growing out of their idea.  
I was growing into me.

It started with the scissors.  
And while I am still trying to find a way to release myself from this mask,  
While I'm still struggling to recode myself the way I want to be,  
I won't give up on trying to find  
The me I was meant to be

Time  
By Ryen Gordon

I have nothing but time  
Time to sit and think  
Time to clean  
Time to do homework  
Time to reflect  
I've never felt so free  
I no longer have a weighing pressure placed on my shoulders  
I have time to catch up  
I have time to relax  
My lungs are no longer being crushed by the weight of turning things in on time  
I've never felt so alive  
I've never felt more joy  
All the time I lost is finally making its way back to me  
I can breathe again  
I can move without feeling restricted  
My time is no longer wasted  
I am free  
And I am loving it

Short Story  
By Ren Klett

I could hear the crowd growing louder as the band we were touring with suddenly quieted down. It was almost time to go on stage and no matter how many shows I play; I just can't get myself to not be nervous.

"Jules, are you okay?" Jayden nudges me out of my trance. We've known each other since middle school so I think it's just natural that he knows when I'm getting too anxious about a show.

"I'm fine." He stares me down. "Okay, maybe not yet but I will be once we get out there, don't worry."

He shakes his head before turning towards the rest of the band. "Kota, Sae, come on. Looks like we're gonna need to hype Jules up a bit today."

Kota scoffs under his breath before standing from his cushion crease. "Isn't it a bit weird that the lead singer is the one with the most performance anxiety?"

"Come on man, not now." Sae mumbled to Kota as I stood frozen.

"I'm just saying, it's weird."

I knew why he was acting like this, Kota and I have been having troubles recently but because I refuse to acknowledge that we need to work on us rather than the band, he blows up on me every chance he gets. Still, making comments about my anxiety? A little low, even for him.

Jayden grabbed me and Sae by the shoulders and brought us in for a huddle, Kota sauntering over with a pout on his face. "Come on slowpoke we don't have all night." Finally, we're standing in a circle, Kota refusing to look across from the group at me as Jayden gives us the same words of encouragement he does before every performance we've ever done. Before I know it, the moments over and we're all standing in our places on stage as our fans chant our name over and over. I feel like it's losing its meaning, but I manage to shut the thought down before Jayden counts us off and the lights fall on me.

I feel myself dissociating as the show goes on, it's forced but it's the only way I manage not to freak out over every small mistake I make. When the next song starts up however, I find myself paying attention to every motion around me, maybe because I'm losing the energy not to or maybe because Kota has turned his volume up so much that I can barely hear myself over the aggressive strumming of his guitar.

I glance over at him hoping he'll get the message and turn it down, but he just stares at me with this dumb smirk on his face. Knowing how stubborn he can be when he's upset, I just try and get myself to finish the song. Most of our fans know, or at least suspect that Kota and I are together and based off of our fan pages, they support us. I just hope they won't look at the performance as a way to spread rumors or start drama. I don't want my private life to be the cover of some magazine.

We manage to finish up the rest of the show with little to no mistakes, but I still can't get myself to erase Kota's dumb smirk from my head. I guess he was happy he finally got to me.

Whatever satisfaction he may have gotten from his "joke" seems to drain from his body once we make it into the dressing room after our show. Our manager blows up, which isn't much of a surprise, but for some reason it seems worse than usual. The uneasiness in my stomach only rises as he stares me down, probably hoping for some sort of explanation as to what happened out there, but I don't have one, I still don't know what Kota wants from me so bad that he was willing to put our performance on the line.

“You know what, Jules, Kota, can I see you outside for a minute?” I glance at my friends before following our manager out into the hallway, Kota makes sure to keep 3 feet between us while we get scolded by him. I think I might’ve zoned out since before I know it, he’s walking away with a frown on his face, leaving Kota and I alone.

He finally turns towards me. “I just don’t get it J; you block me out completely and then expect me to act like nothing’s happening? What do you want from us? Did you only accept my feelings because you didn’t want to break up the band? Or do you actually love me like you say you do? Just please tell me what you’re really feeling so I can stop guessing.”

We stand in silence for a moment as I try to come up with something I can say that will make him feel better, that will take this pain he feels away. But there is no excuse, no explanation.

“I do love you, but the band needs to come first. I don’t want to be the reason we don’t succeed.”

He laughs and shakes his head at me. “Why can’t you just put me first? For once? We’ll adjust, it’s okay. Just put me-”

“Let’s break up.” I figured I’d regret the words as soon as they left my mouth, but I don’t. Nothing matters anymore, everything is just repetition of the same faces, the same words, the same moments over and over again until they no longer hold any meaning. That’s all this was. Repetition.

Flames

By Sarah Verbeck

In a smoke-filled room, I call out your name.  
My skin burns from the violent flames that have latched onto me.  
I feel myself crumbling to ashes.

Where are you?

Soot covers me as I disappear.  
I'm camouflaged into the remains of this house.  
My strength has disintegrated.

Why didn't I save myself?

Every time I put out the blaze,  
I find I'm still burning.  
Mama told me not to dance in the flames.  
My soul is charred, the damage irreversible.  
Somehow, I still call out your name.

Will I ever learn?

Empty  
By Steffanie Powell

I wish I could forget you  
It would be so much easier  
But you left imprints on my mind  
You never made it easy

I'm a pathetic person  
Where you never leave my mind  
Maybe we will meet in a different life  
Maybe fate will be kinder than

There's something wrong with me  
I never appear in your mind  
Yet you linger in mine

I haven't felt better  
Just empty

Peace  
By Sarah Verbeck

Life blossomed around her. The sun kissed her cheek as she lay in the soft, green grass. Each blade tickled her skin with a loving touch. She stared off into the vast, blue sky and wondered. She wondered about the breeze that carried the clouds away, the dainty flowers that decorated the field, and why she couldn't stay here forever. Madelyn has always found this field to be her safe place. The vibrant colors and fresh air never failed to brighten her mood. Ever since her father passed away, she's travelled to this safe haven to escape reality. The springtime showers had given life to the wildlife that called this meadow home. Surrounding herself with life was a great distraction, but she knew it would come to an end. As the sun sank back down into the horizon, she reluctantly made her way back home. A little farmhouse sat a little ways away, but it wasn't too far of a walk. Madelyn watched in awe as the sky changed from baby blue to brilliant hues of orange and purple. As she approached her home, she saw her mother sitting on the porch. Madelyn leaned in and gently kissed her mother's cheek. The two of them were beautiful. Both of them had long, blond hair that they always wore naturally. Their matching sun-kissed skin and bright blue eyes would easily mistake them for being twins. Her mom rested her head on Madelyn's shoulder after she took a seat next to her. "How was your day?" she asked quietly.

"Not too bad today..." responded Madelyn. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm alright. I'm still getting used to this 'new normal.' I'm not sure how I feel anymore. I just wish your father was still here."

"Me too," responded Madelyn while she tried to keep her composure. Her father fought his battle, but his heart wasn't strong enough anymore. As the two of them watched the red sun sink into the night, they sat peacefully. The crickets chirped and the stars began to appear in the night sky.

"Hey Momma, look!" said Madelyn.

"Oh, I see it. That star sure is shining bright." Her mom stared at the star in awe.

"Is it... childish, I guess, for me to think that it could be dad?" questioned Madelyn.

"Of course not, honey. To be quite honest, I was thinking the same thing." Momma stared at the star a little longer and a smile began to form. As the night went on, Madelyn had an idea. She knew that her mother was struggling to find peace, and she had an idea on how to help her. As the sun made its return, Madelyn grabbed her mother's hand and told her to follow. It wasn't long before they had reached their destination. Momma's jaw dropped at the beauty of the field. Dewy grass and a cool, morning breeze lifted a weight off of her shoulders. For the first time in months, she felt peaceful. She found comfort in the nature that surrounded her, as well as Madelyn.

Madelyn watched as her mother pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of her jeans. She curiously watched as her mom slowly unfolded it, revealing that it was a letter. Momma's blue eye met Madelyn's as she said, "I wrote this right after your dad died."

"What does it say?" Madelyn asked in a gentle tone.

"Let's just say, there are some very personal thoughts in here. My point is, I've been holding onto this anger of losing your dad instead of moving on. Now that I've been able to feel peace again, I think I'm ready to let go."

Desire's War  
By T'Asia Dixon

“I desire” is what the voices keep saying  
Desire, what a word that's so pure yet so elusive to its meaning of craving for the possible and impossible  
We all desire some kind of reality within our purpose as to what life consists of,  
But there are some who doesn't desire anything,  
A soul whose impulse doesn't take flight for what the world has to offer for them  
I commend these people, because with desires  
Only brings realistic and unrealistic wavering emotions that one can't help but to contract  
I desire many things in this complicated life of mine  
The desire of love,  
The desire of happiness,  
The desire of independence,  
The desire of tranquility, and  
The desire of acceptance  
All of which I long for within this game we all play upon the chess board of black and white of our existence  
A game so perplexed, that desire itself has no bounds  
Is this truly the only thing we all as humans bellow out when we want something  
Burning inside with the thoughts within our minds  
Surging within the depths of our core of humanity,  
That desires such bitter sweetness that either crumbles the soul or pieces it together  
Desire can be such a friend and foe  
A strange poison that courses through our blood,  
That's fixated on the idea of hope and determination  
Desire, what a word that's so pure yet so elusive to it's meaning of craving for the possible and impossible of the world that we live in

Lost

By Zachery Jenkins

Their smile is what kept me alive.

Their voice reflects the early rise of morning; soft, radiant, pure.

It'd spread throughout my body, soothing the aches in my bones and bruises on my skin.

It was my daily blessing from an unknowable force to witness and feel such tender warmth.

Their tears are what drove me to madness.

Each sob, laced with such profound agony took a slow, steady intrusion of a blade to my bleeding heart.

I would cry myself, letting rivers upon rivers flood from my swollen eyes, 'til what was left of me was a pile of heaving flesh, unable to give not even a drop.

And, all I'm left with is a stone stitched into the pit of my stomach, and a prayer to the heavens for a smile to keep us both chained to sanity.

I'd hold on to dear life, whispering honey dripped words into their ear, 'til it bleeds down to their blackened chest.

Their silence is what truly horrified me.

Without their voice, the world began to suddenly corner me, backing me up to an edge of a cliff.

The clocks of atonement began to chime, the hounds of hell began to crawl, the wails of sinners scream out like banshees, and the cackle of the devil drummed through the walls of my mind.

The void was drawing nearer. The world was crumbling. I was alone to my own dastardly brain and it's devious schemes. I had no angel to carry me off, whisking me away to a sacred island of untold joy and wonders.

Their last words....is what killed me.

My spirit died along with their fleeting breath, burning into somber ashes under the flames of remorse. Their body had felt so.... frail and doll-like, threatening to completely shatter into glass pieces from my touch.

I had no more tears left to shed, drained to the last measly drop. My eyes were dry, and so was my throat, for I could utter not a single word. The only strength I had left to wield was the will to look into their glassy, husk eyes. They saw no recognition of me, no memory of my existence.

And, maybe even their own was lost.

My bones had turned into dead branches and my skin into wet paper. The prospect of sleep was calling to me from a distance, but each call was growing louder and more defined. My mind was fading into an indescribable mist.

As reality and space drew to a close, an odd peace settled over me. A familiar peace I had felt before, in a time far too distant to recall clearly.

As I closed my eyes one final time, the image of a sweet, gentle smile buzzed through my collapsing mind.

A Physique of Scars  
By T'Asia Dixon

A body, piece by piece it makes up the anatomy of which human creation is bonded into. This female form that the woman possesses, holds the many parts that are planted upon her body, of which she looks through upon the mirror almost every day. What she sees is nothing more than just a body itself, with a meaningless soul inside no different from any other. Nothing special, nothing beautiful. A soul full of scars that seems to compliment the skin that she wears on the outside, as well as in. Scars big and small that have lingered on through her life, from child to adult. Such pain that has drowned within the very depths of her have only caused her to slowly participate in such physiological madness that no one should ever have to endure.

Every night before going to bed, the child within her quivers still for what the past has done to her, and what the future may behold for her. That child inside, makes the adult on the outside weep every night with such sorrowful tears that drowns the pillow she lays before, until the tears are no more and then the next day arrives.

During the day, the woman longed to wear such dazzling pieces of clothing that every female wrapped around their body's at least once in a while to their liking. From skirts, to dresses, to blouses, to anything that her heart desired to have, when it comes to wanting to look nice for the outside world to see of course. However, such a small luxury wasn't for her to grasp. She chose not to feel such textures that everyone should at least once feel. Textures of lightness and color that truly compliments the coffee skin of hers. But no, she holds back from such desirable beauty, because of her scars. Scars that have trapped itself upon the surface of her skin that will never disappear as long as she lives. She hates herself every day from these misshapen scars. She thinks to herself from time to time, laying in her colorless room,

How can such scars as these, be the past and yet still hurt in the present? How long will such pain continue to feast It's hunger upon me? Do these scars show strength or weakness upon this ever so fragile body of mine?

She feels nothing but hatred and weakness in her heart and mind. She felt an ounce of life's color drift away as every piece of the body and soul in which makes up the anatomy of her very existence was lost somewhere between emptiness and life itself. So what does the woman do, she hides such marks and strain. She hides them from the world. A world in which is full of judgement and hate already. A world where she knew wouldn't care about her pain or suffering on the inside and out. A world where such scars would never go away, even if she prayed that they would. She knew this, and yet sadness has truly overpowered the way of happiness she was supposed to have or find for herself. The happiness she truly longed for as a child, but never got. And so with adulthood, it's nothing but the same. Over, and over, and over, the child inside of her screams to the top of her lungs for it all to stop. For this one big eternal scar to just wither away along with her very existence all together. The child inside and the adult on the outside to be forever no more. So the world would be no more to her, and she would be no more to the world.

The Swordsman  
By Zachery Jenkins

A swordsman and a dancer are no different from each other. With such delicate, quick precision, they leap into action, dominating the stage and captivating their audience. Each step has a spring to it, free flowing, yet calculated.

The timing is on par with that of a lioness, stalking within the tall grasses, piercing citrine eyes set on an oblivious prey. She readies her body, locked and geared to attack at any moment's notice. Her sight never deviates from her target, but only enhances.

On this battle stage, Elaine is the prey, and she is nowhere near oblivious to her attacker's motivations. On this very night, in this very sparse tree forest, one thing is clear as fresh, spring falls:

*This person was out to kill her.*

She narrowly misses the kiss of a silver blade to her throat, blocking it with her own. The clash of sharp metal rings out into the late autumn air, spooking the birds into scattering across the moonless sky, crying out to the heavens of an attack.

But Elaine's heart is lodged in her throat, prohibiting her to speak, yet she can still hear the heavy, feverish thumping and drumming in her ears.

The woman's joints are on fire, being mercilessly stretched and pulled with each jet-like dodge and weave she could barely manage. Her feet are sore and bruised, each pound against the soil feeling like jagged rocks jabbing into the worn-out skin.

But Elaine has no choice but to keep running! Her only chance of outliving this man's attack is play defense! She'd have no chance in a one-on-one fight! The thought of it makes her stomach twist and her mind dip into obscure memories of lessons she'd long since thought of.

It's a miracle that she's even still alive right now to assess this situation! This mystery assailant hides like a shadow and is as fast as a blur. Their image is never constant, and their speed is always fluctuating! One moment, she can just vaguely hear the quiet pattering of their own feet, and then the next, they're right in front of her, taking a swing aimed straight for Elaine's neck!

Elaine makes another agonizing whip to the side, though she wasn't fast enough this time. The blade sliced into her cheek, eliciting a pained groan and her hazel eyes to become misty.

With her free hand, she goes to touch her cheek, finding it oddly dry. Not a drop of blood to be felt. A quick look confirms it, too. Not a single stain of red paints her fingertips. Her best guess is that this swordsman swung their sword with such great velocity that the blade caught enough heat to *cauterize* the wound mid cut.

This alone should've sent Elaine balling, verbally begging the gods to forgive her for all her sins, and to plead mercy upon her.

But this night is proof enough to her that no such deities exist. If they truly did, she wouldn't be running for life in a desolate forest, with nothing but a stolen blade and fading memories of sword tactics as means of survival.

All Elaine could do is pant out her terrors of death and pleads of mercy. The attacks kept coming, one after another, each one carrying more aggression and swiftness than the last! More and more swings manage to land, decorating various parts of the woman's body with gashes.

A few times, the swordsman succeeded in slashing the back of her neck, and those actually bled. Elaine could feel the crimson nectar slowly ooze past her shoulder line and down her clothed back.

However, her clothes are becoming mere shreds of ragged fabric that desperately clings onto her small, petite figure.

More and more of her skin made their appearances, paler than that of the non present moon.

There's no way to tell where this swordsman came from! Their feet so gracefully kiss the ground, that they're practically flying! And, once again, their speed and timing is abnormal! They never lose their edge, never slips up even once!

Elaine could practically feel the determination and bloodlust radiating off of this swordsman like steam from a boiling cauldron!

The concept of time has long since vanished. The passage of night seems to be never ending, drawing itself longer and longer with each hurried step.

Elaine's body is succumbing to this ruthless game of cat and mouse, her movements becoming more rugged and slow-paced as she struggles to keep up defense!

Her knees are caving in on themselves, her feet are screaming in bloody misery, her wrist is numbing from each attempt at shielding herself.

Is there no end to this madness!? To this drawn out duel!? What has Elaine done to deserve such a measured torture...?

*When!?*

*When will it stop?!*

*When will-*

Elaine's foot, unbeknownst to her, catches on an object. Her entire body is being thrown into the air, soaring like a swan in winter flight. Her heart immediately stops, and her blood freezes. In fact, so does her whole entire being of flesh and bone as she comes crashing down to the forest floor.

The woman tumbled until she landed front first. Her face is scratched up with bruises of all sorts, old and brand new. In that moment, her mind is blank, cut short by the sudden turn of events.

Elaine's body finally gives in, sinking onto the dirt surface. The last of her energy dissipated into the ground, and now she's nothing more but a teared-up meat bag with aching bones inside.

A sharp kick to her ribs flips her onto her back, giving forth a dry heave of distress. She shuts her eyes as the newly found pain in her side eases in.

But...before she dies, she just has to see who this terrorizer is. Elaine cracks one eye open, peering up at a woman, with her blade drawn, ready to lash out her final attack.

Peering back down is.... *herself*.