



**Edisto River Review
2021**

EDISTO RIVER REVIEW

2021

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FROM THE EDITOR

I open this note with a reiteration of the critical importance of our 2021 Edisto River Review theme: George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. With that, I also want to look forward to the theme of our 2022 edition, Living with Covid, by asking a question: what does it mean to be ‘away’? For some, being away means to be at rest. In these cases, being away translates to a time of peace and recreation that sorely needed idyll can bring: a relaxing with family or on a winter retreat on some sunny beach somewhere. But, for others—those quarantined from loved ones as the world struggles with a once-in-a-century pandemic, or those truly gone, no longer of our mother earth because of sickness or violence—to be away is a barrier, a hazard, a debilitating and even a deadly condition.

As we come to grips with what we have suffered through this past year—whether through life-altering discrimination or The Pandemic—as we try to make sense of the fractured world we live in, many of us feel as if we are ‘away,’ in the most notional sense of the word—isolated, absent; hesitant and unclear. This kind of confused diffidence is a state of being with which we, as citizens of the world, are not comfortable. Humanity wants to know, to understand, to solve.

Some are aware that I am teacher by training. A core component of pedagogy is teaching our students to navigate ambiguity. Because in academia, in corporate America, heck, in our everyday lives, ambiguity is a persistent and draining condition. What I teach is that, for the prepared, ambiguity also can bring opportunity for growth, leadership, excellence. The work in this, the seventh edition of the Edisto River Review, are manifestations of artistic excellence that explore what it is to be ‘away,’ in all the nuances of meaning that this word offers. This seventh edition—the George Floyd edition—is an invitation to travel with our Claffin student artists through states of isolation, confusion, absenteeism, and still emerge whole. Within this issue, you will find our favorite creative pieces, including submissions in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Work, for example, from Tiana Wilder (the first-place winner of both the fiction and the poetry contests) and Faith Lomax (the non-fiction contest winner).

With an eye to align with our mission of one hundred percent student content, two years ago we added the art contest. And for the

second year in a row, the first-place art contest winner is Wayne C. White. His drawings adorn both the front and back covers. Also in this edition, for the first time, we have included with the internal art, the second- and third-place cover art submissions. We hope you enjoy viewing and reading these unique and original works as much as we have. Before I turn this virtual podium over to our next speakers, I would like to give a round of applause to our students who contributed to our 2021 Edisto River Review, and to those students who have or will be contributing to our 2022 Edisto River Review. Please give these student artists a huge round of applause.

I begin my conclusion with thanking Drs. Sharon Gile and Charity Adama for serving as associate poetry editors. I extend a sincere thanks to Dr. Dennis Bormann for his work as associate prose editor. A huge thank you to the Art Department judges: professors Ott, Bailey, Glover, Quinonez, Keith, and Rahman. It was a pleasure working with Tiana Wilder and Terrecia McPherson, the student interns who were responsible for tracking, organizing, copy editing, formatting, typesetting, and completing the final ERR document assembly work. Thank you, Ms. Jennifer Clark and Ms. Carolyn Ravenell for your unflagging support and assistance. Mr. Dakota Carlson and particularly Muhammad Hossain's formatting work have been critical for bringing our last two issues to publication. We are grateful to Dr. Mitali Wong for support from the Department of English. We are especially appreciative for the support of Dr. Isaiah McGee, Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Verlie Tisdale, Interim Vice Provost, Dr. Karl Wright, Provost, and Dr. Dwaun J. Warmack, President, and the Claflin University Board of Trustees.

Last, as the Editor of the Edisto River Review, I want to invite you, our readers, to submit to the 2022 journal's Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, and Cover Art contests, which, if you are reading this shortly after publication, are in progress. If this is your first time with our journal, with your journal, thank you for cracking the covers. If you have been with us before, thank you for coming back!

Nick R. Robinson, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English

Editor, *Edisto River Review*

2021 Department of English Creative Writing

Awards

Claffin University

Art

First Place: Wayne C. White, George Floyd (Front Cover)

Black Lives Matter (Back Cover)

Second Place: Malachi D. Wright, Black Lives Matter

Third Place: Alicia D. Parson, Black Lives Still Matter

Fiction

First Place: Tiana S. Wilder, Extra! Extra!

Second Place: Terrecia McPherson, Cecil's Story

Third Place: Gervaris T. Wearing, Blood Drips to the Floor

Honorable Mention: Kristopher A. Dunbar, Black is the Color

Non-Fiction

First Place: Faith A. Lomax, The Love of a Father

Second Place: Jaliah I. Robinson, Through My Eyes: America's
Pandemic

Third Place: JaMariya A. Mason-Price, Truth Hurts

Poetry

First Place: Tiana S. Wilder, Double Dutch, Double Dutch

Second Place: Ariel A. Meriwether, Tell Me

Third Place: Alicia D. Parson, Insert Name Here

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First Place Fiction Winner

Tiana Wilder

Extra, Extra!

The principal's office was cold and drab. The walls were an ugly dark green color, and the carpet was dark blue. A layer of dust covered the file cabinets in the corner and the leather sofa near the door. On the corner of the wooden desk sat a spider plant that had seen better days. Even the chair that Kim found herself sitting in was worn and started to make her back ache. Kim wrapped her cardigan tightly around herself and allowed for her gaze to finally fall upon the principal before her.

Kim had heard that Mr. Olsen had been quite the looker in the past. His infamous affairs were a testament to that. Yet as she looked the man over, taking in his bloated body and sagging face, she wondered how anyone could have ever even considered sleeping with him before.

Mr. Olsen cleared his throat. "Mrs. Harper?"

Kim's eyes snapped back up to meet his. "Yes?"

"I've asked you to come down today concerning an issue with your daughters, Gwendolyn—"

"Gwen," Kim interrupted. "She likes to be called Gwen."

Mr. Olsen narrowed his eyes at her. "...Gwendolyn and Britney." Mr. Olsen typed away on the computer, and the fans of the ancient machine started to whirl. "Over the past month or so, I've noticed an increase of reports in both of their files concerning their behavior. There have been several instances of backtalk, coming into class late, and skipping class altogether."

Kim nodded. She had been getting more and more phone calls recently. But she and her husband had talked to the girls and made sure to punish them as she saw fit. She simply attributed this change in behavior to teenage hormones and nothing more.

“But,” Mr. Olsen turned the computer monitor towards Kim, “this is what concerns me most.”

Kim squinted at the computer monitor. On the overtly bright screen, Kim saw the website of the school’s newspaper, The Oak Valley Chronicles. On the page was a photo of Britney, tucked away behind the school. She was kissing a boy that Kim had never even seen nor heard her daughter talk about, but Kim could tell that he looked like trouble from the photo. The fact that her daughter was kissing someone was an extra surprise. The headline of the article read EXTRA! EXTRA! OAK VALLEY PRINCESS CAUGHT LOCKING LIPS WITH JUDE MONROE! Kim skimmed the article, her eyes zooming on the words “the shrew has been tamed” and “self-righteous bitch”. As her anger grew, her eyes traveled further down on the page and she gasped as she read the name of the person who wrote it.

Kim shook her head fiercely, her blonde curls bouncing as she did so. “...Gwen?! What?!” Kim looked back up at Mr. Carlson with a serious look on her face. “T-This has to be some sort of mistake. Gwen would never write something like that! Especially about her sister.”

Yes, the girls had their spats from time to time, but she knew that Gwen would never do something so malicious to her own sister. Kim tried to think back to earlier this morning, when Gwen and Britney had fought over the last applesauce muffin, wondering if a muffin, of all things, caused all this.

“I’m afraid your daughter was the culprit,” said Mr. Olson. “After asking some of the other students, we found out that Gwendolyn enlisted one of the students in the Coding Club to hack into the website and post the article without the advisor of newspaper knowing. We discovered the article around lunchtime, but by then, a number of students had already seen it. The newspaper advisor is trying to take the article down now.”

Kim rubbed her temples, trying to come to terms with what Gwen had done. A flurry of emotions ran through her. She was angry, disappointed, but most of all, upset with herself. What did she miss? Had she not been paying enough attention to the girls? “I-Is she going to be punished?”

“Well, she is in ISS right now, but her formal punishment is

a 3-day suspension, starting Monday.”

Kim nodded. “I understand. And I’ll talk to her. Both of them.”

After signing a few papers and gathering all of Gwen’s schoolwork for the next three school days, Kim walked into the lobby. Kim decided to sign both of the girls out for the day. She was sure that they were both tired of hearing all of the gossip and that some rest would do them well. As she did so, Mrs. Parrish, the front desk assistant, attempted to start a conversation with her.

“Hi, Kim.” Mrs. Parrish waved her fingers in the air, her red acrylics catching Kim’s attention. “How are you today?”

“Pretty okay, Nancy, despite the circumstances.”

Mrs. Parrish nodded. “Yeah, I heard about that.” Kim almost rolled her eyes and commented on Mrs. Parrish’s nosy nature but instantly thought better of it. She simply nodded and listened as Mrs. Parrish continued on.

“You know, it’s always sad when siblings start to fight.” Mrs. Parrish nodded solemnly to herself. “I had a similar situation back in college. My roommate, her name was Jessica, and she was a big girl—.”

“Um, Nancy?” interrupted Kim, hoping to get Mrs. Parrish back on task, “Do I need a paper slip for the girls? I know it used to be like that last year.”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Parrish. “Everything’s in the system now. They’ve got this new, fancy little thingamajig— I don’t know how to pronounce it—but it’s really fast. And it tracks everything. It’s so amazing.”

As Mrs. Parrish rambled on even further, Kim texted her husband and informed him of the situation, though she was sure she wouldn’t get a response. Erik rarely texted back now, and even if he did, he only replied with a simple ok or no. Even his activity in the family group chat was starting to dwindle, but—

“Kim?” Mrs. Parrish’s nasally voice brought Kim back to reality. “Did you hear what I said?”

Kim shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I was trying to text Erik.”

“That’s who I was asking about.” Mrs. Parrish chuckled. “My husband was wondering where Erik got his new watch from.”

Kim raised a brow at the other woman. “New...watch? His Fitbit?”

“No, no, no. The fancy one. The one with the black leather strap. Erik wore it when they all went to go play poker on Saturday.”

Kim tried to hide the shock on her face. She had never even heard her husband mention anything about playing poker. Hell, she didn’t even know that he gambled. She put on a false smile for Mrs. Parrish. “Oh! I know which one you’re talking about now. I-I’m not exactly sure, but I’ll ask him and get back to you.”

Mrs. Parrish smiled, “Thank you! You know, it is really hard to—.” Before Mrs. Parrish could finish her sentence, the phone started to ring. “Oh, I gotta take this.”

Kim walked over to the chairs and sighed, happy to be away from Mrs. Parrish and her gossip. As she settled into the cold, plastic seat, she made a mental note to ask her husband about his new watch. After a few minutes of playing Candy Crush on her phone, Kim spotted her girls walking towards her.

There was a large gap between them, almost four feet apart. Gwen had her long dark hair in a messy bun, and her bookbag slung over one shoulder. It was obvious from the paint on Gwen’s face that she was in her art class before she had been sent to ISS. Her dark jeans, Doc Marten shoes, and a t-shirt with the musical Hamilton logo made her look more casual than her sister. Britney was dressed in a simple pink sweater and knee-length plaid skirt that clashed with her twin sister’s style. Kim could tell that she had been crying; her red, puffy eyes and smudged eyeliner were obvious signs. She carried all of her books in a simple, fashionable tote and her make-up in a cutesy purse that Kim got her for her high PSAT scores. Britney had recently cut her dark hair into a bob that she liked to tuck behind her ears. As they got closer, Kim noticed that both of their matching necklaces were missing from around their ensembles. As they stopped in front of Kim, they both shot each other a quick glare.

Britney wrapped her mother in a hug. “Hi, Mom.”

Gwen looked down at her boots. “...hey.”

“Hi, girls.” Kim hugged Britney back and then made a point to hug Gwen as well. “I heard about the...situation that happened today.”

Both girls turned bright red. Kim assumed Britney’s was from embarrassment, and Gwen’s was from shame. “But,” she continued, “We will talk about all of this after dinner.”

The girls relaxed a bit, but Kim could feel the tension between them. Even on the drive home, Kim could feel it weighing down on her neck, trying to push her down into her seat. She knew that she had to remedy this situation as fast as possible. Gwen and Britney had been close ever since they were born. They considered each other their best friend, despite their differences. Gwen supported Britney throughout her vegan phase and Britney supported Gwen throughout her goth phase. They would often tell each other secrets that even Kim didn’t know about. For them not to be talking, for them not to be friends, was a strange, gray area that Kim didn’t feel comfortable stepping into.

When they arrived home, Britney and Gwen went to straight into their rooms and shut their respective doors. For the moment, the house was oddly quiet. There was no humming of musical numbers, no soft study music playing, no giggles, no banter. Just silence. Kim sighed and started wringing her hands together. Her husband and the boys would be home soon. She wanted to at least hear both sides of the story before they got home.

Kim knocked on Britney’s door first. From inside the room, Kim heard a muffled, “Come in.”

Moving to a new house allowed the girls to get their own rooms and personalize their space as much as they liked. Britney’s room was filled to the brim with pink, white, and little hints of gold. Her studious nature was reflected by the wall calendar that hung above her desk and her bookshelf stuffed to the brim with test prep books. The vanity next to the bed was a new addition, reflecting Britney’s growing interest in make-up. There was minimal art on the wall, but all of it was handmade by Gwen, from the abstract oil painting that hung above the bed to the watercolor painting of peonies that was by the door. Britney sat on her bed, her face buried in one of her many fluffy pillows. She looked up briefly at Kim, her brown eyes wet with tears, before laying her head back down.

Kim sat at Britney's vanity, careful not to mess up the neat organization of her daughter's eyeshadow palettes. "Hi, sweetie. How are you feeling?"

Britney sniffled. "I don't know. Angry? Sad? Confused?"

Kim nodded in understanding. "Can you tell me what happened so I can understand? Please."

Britney sat up and took a deep breath. Kim couldn't help but notice how her daughter's shoulders slumped as she did so. "So," asked Kim, "who exactly is Jude?"

"He's a guy."

Kim rolled her eyes. "Well, I know that. Who is he exactly? Is he your boyfriend?"

"No!" said Britney, "He's...just a friend."

"Last time I checked, you weren't kissing your friends on the lips."

"Fine. He's..." Britney scanned the air for her thoughts. "I don't know. We're not dating, but we're together, I guess."

Though Kim was not satisfied with that answer, she nodded and moved on to her next question. "Okay. Does Gwen know Jude?"

"Yeah. They're in Drama class together, and they kinda hang out in the same friend groups."

"Okay. Now can you tell me about what happened at school today? From the beginning, after I dropped you two off."

"Well, I went to go hang out with Katelynn and Jayda before classes started, and Gwen kinda rushed off towards the library, but I didn't think anything of it. And then the day was going normal until second period when Jayda texted me and told me to check the newspaper. And that's when I saw it." Kim could hear Britney's voice start to break. "And...I just don't know why she would write that about me! Why would my own sister call me a bitch?"

As Britney began to cry again, Kim stood up and wrapped her daughter in a hug. "Sweetheart, I don't know either. But I'm

gonna talk to Gwen and get to the bottom of this. Okay?”

Britney nodded. Kim consoled her daughter for a few moments more before going down the hall and knocking on Gwen’s door. There was no answer. “Gwen? Can I come in?”

There was silence again. “Gwen?”

Gwen finally answered, her voice almost a whisper. “... yes?”

“Can I talk to you for just a minute?” After a brief pause, Kim added, “I promise I’m not going to yell at you.”

“...come in.”

Gwen’s room was a clash of her many different interests. Posters littered the walls, almost hiding the fact that the walls were painted purple, and none of them looked like they belonged in the same room. There was a Wicked poster signed by a community college student above her bed, a handful of rock band posters on the wall next to her self-made reading nook (which was just a beanbag chair under decorative string lights), along with some comic book posters scattered throughout the room. On her bookshelf were books of poetry from writers like Emily Dickinson and Amanda Lovelace, and a few test prep books that she had borrowed from Britney. Gwen herself sat at her desk, drawing in her sketchbook. Or rather, mindlessly dragging a pencil across the paper since the drawing didn’t make much sense anyway. It was a blob of lines and watercolors. Kim would never be able to give the drawing any type of meaning. But Britney would.

Kim sat down on her daughter’s bed, careful not to disturb any of Gwen’s plushies. “Gwen,” Kim said, her voice soft yet stern.

Gwen turned towards her mother, her hair hiding her face just a bit. “Yes?”

“You realize we need to talk about today, right?”

Gwen gulped and nodded.

“First,” said Kim, “I want to know who this Jude guy is.”

Gwen shifted in her desk chair a bit. “He’s...a classmate.”

That's it."

Kim raised a brow. "That's it? You wrote a whole article about your sister kissing this guy."

Gwen sighed. "He's in my friend group. We're in third period together. I thought he was cute." Gwen then dipped her head, her voice growing smaller. "...I liked him."

"Ah," said Kim as she came to understand the situation. "So, you liked him."

"...yeah."

"And Britney knew?"

"Yeah," said Gwen with a hint of anger in her voice.

"So, you were so upset over a boy that you decided to hack into the school's website and write an article calling your sister a bitch?" At this, Gwen cringed. "I don't think that was very reasonable."

"I just—." Gwen huffed. "It's not just that."

"Then what is it?"

"...is it normal for people to grow apart?"

Kim blinked. "What?"

"Is it normal? Just, like, after a while? Friends stop being friends, sisters stop being sisters?"

Kim reflected on this for a moment, thinking about the number of friendships and romantic relationships that she had gone through throughout her life. Of course, people grew apart. She knew that very well. It happened with her best friend in high school, with her ex-boyfriend in college. It was a natural part of life. But Kim had to admit, she didn't think that Gwen and Britney would ever grow apart, mainly because they had been together for so long.

"They can," said Kim. "Why?"

"It's just...I feel like Britney is trying to leave me behind."

"What do you mean, sweetie?"

“She’s just...she’s studying for the permit test already, and she scored super high on the PSATs. And now she’s talking about college, and she’s trying to get a job at the daycare, and she has a boyfriend and-and-.” Gwen started to cry. “She’s gonna leave me all alone!”

Kim sighed. “Gwendolyn Jane Harper, you and your sister are never going to stop being sisters. Sure, you may grow apart a bit, but you know she’ll always be there for you.”

Gwen sniffled. “Even after what I did today?”

“Even after what you did today.”

Gwen nodded. “I’m sorry. I guess...I was just feeling so bad that I wanted Britney to feel bad too.”

“You know you’re going to have to apologize to her, right? And, you’re still getting punished.”

Gwen nodded in understanding. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay. We’ll discuss this further after dinner, got it?”

Gwen nodded again, and Kim gave her daughter a quick hug before leaving her room. As she went into the kitchen, her thoughts drifted back to what Gwen had asked. Drifting apart happened so often that she rarely thought about it now. Then, almost unconsciously, her thoughts started to creep over to her husband. She thought about his behavior, the way their conversations grew shorter and shorter. Kim then shook her head, shooing the thoughts away.

Kim decided to go ahead and prep dinner. That way, she could just pop everything in the oven once dinnertime came around. She settled on cooking a simple casserole that she knew both of the girls would love, as well as some broccoli and fresh dinner rolls. As she worked in the kitchen, she heard the sound of the garage door opening and closing. That sound was soon followed by the loud chatter of her boys. Luke came through the door first. He greeted Kim quickly before making a beeline towards the living room, obviously heading towards the Xbox. “Hey,” Kim shouted after him, “Homework first, you know that!”

Luke’s useless protests fell deaf on Kim’s ears as Tyler ran

through the door, her six-year-old rushing to hug her and tell her all about his day. “Mommy, we learned about owls today! And they had an owl come and talk to us.”

Kim made a face. “An owl came and talked to you?” Kim thought for a moment. “You are sure that wasn’t a parrot?”

Tyler pouted. “No, it was an owl!”

“It was a parrot, buddy.” At last, her husband, Erik, walked into the house, “Ms. Jackson told me so.” Erik had already started to undo his tie, the one accessory he hated having to wear as a professor at the local community college. He ran his free hand through his receding hair before finally speaking, “Hi, hon. How was your day?”

Tyler, realizing he was not going to get the attention he wanted, ran upstairs to bother his sisters. Kim narrowed her eyes at her husband, hoping that her suspicion wasn’t too obvious. “It was...I texted you. Did you see it?”

“Oh!” Erik patted himself down for his phone before finding it in the pocket of his khakis. He squinted as he looked at the screen. “Sorry, we had a couple of back-to-back meetings today. They’re trying to start some new interdisciplinary program with one of the other colleges,” Erik shrugged off his suit jacket, “I had my phone on silent.”

Kim nodded slowly and turned her attention back to the chopping board before her. “So, how do you think we should go about this?”

“About what?”

“...Gwen. Her article about Britney?”

“Oh!” Erik said then shrugged. “Whatever you think is best.”

Kim frowned, glad to not be looking him in the eye right now. “...okay.”

It was silent for a few moments as Kim listened to the sound of Erik unpacking his briefcase. She then turned to face him again. “Did you buy a new watch?”

She noticed Erik jumped a bit before attempting to recover. “A new watch? W-Where did you hear that from?”

“Nancy.” Kim watched as Erik not so subtly cursed Nancy under his breath. “She told me that Rick saw it when you were out playing poker.”

“Uh, yeah. I did get a new watch. It’s just a cheap one, from Wal-Mart.”

“And you started playing poker?”

Erik shook his head, “It was just a one-night thing, hon. Rick was telling me about his poker group and wanted me to join in.”

Erik then made a comment about having to grade papers and quickly scurried off into his office. As Kim finished prepping dinner and helped Luke with his homework, her mind kept drifting towards her husband. Why had he gotten so nervous about the watch? And why didn’t he tell her about it before?

Dinner was quieter than usual. While Tyler and Lucas were able to fill in pieces of the silence, there was only so much one could say about schoolwork and the new episodes of *The Amazing World of Gumball*. Even Erik was oddly quiet; there were no comments about how well his lecture went or any of his frustrations with the registrar’s office. As Lucas and Tyler finished up their dinners, Kim sent them upstairs, leaving her and Erik alone with the girls.

Kim took a deep breath. “Okay, girls. I’ve heard both sides of your story,” she said, trying to sound as diplomatic as possible. Erik sat beside her, his chin resting in his hand, his expression showing only mild concern.

She turned to Gwen first. “Have you apologized to your sister yet?”

Both girls nodded, and Kim felt some of her stress melt away. “Okay, good. Gwen, you’re grounded for a month.” Gwen pouted but didn’t protest. “I’m putting your phone on lockdown mode, so you can only text or call. I’m taking away your fancy Copic markers and your comic books, and you are not allowed to watch any of the streaming services. So, no Netflix, no Hulu, no

nothing. I'm changing the passwords, and you can get them after your month is up."

Gwen nodded in agreement. "Yes, ma'am."

"Britney," she turned to face her other daughter, who was looking marginally better since they spoke earlier this afternoon. "Is it true that you knew Gwen liked Jude?"

Britney scoffed. "Mom, you can't—."

"Britney," said Kim firmly, "Did you know?"

"...yes." Britney tucked a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear. "But Gwen said that she didn't think she would ask him out, so I did."

A puzzled look appeared on Erik's face. "Wait, I'm sorry. Who is Jude?" Kim and the girls rolled their eyes.

"Listen, Britney," continued Kim. "While what Gwen did was far worse, I still think you should apologize to her too. You knew she liked Jude."

Britney nodded and turned to her sister. "I'm sorry. Mom's right." Britney wrapped Gwen in a tight hug. "I should've told you that I was thinking about dating Jude."

Gwen hugged her back. "It's fine."

Kim watched the scene for a moment, content that her girls had finally made up. She then sent them upstairs and started cleaning up the kitchen. Erik joined her. As Kim washed and Erik dried, Kim found the courage to ask him a question.

"Honey, do you think people can grow apart?"

Erik haphazardly dried off his travel mug. "Hm?"

"Do you think people can grow apart? Just stop being...being friends for no reason at all?"

Erik shrugged and furrowed his brow a bit. "I don't know, hon. But I don't really care for those philosophical questions. I'm not Aristotle, you know."

First Place Poetry Winner

Tiana S. Wilder

Double Dutch, Double Dutch

Double Dutch
Double Dutch
Don't you dare touch
My hair, Xavier
I just got it pressed
My Momma had stressed
Not to let it get messed up
by little boys like you

So, go on, get gone
And let us play
You see this the championship
and I got the crown in clutch
So, go and find your cousin
And leave us here to
Double Dutch
Double Dutch

And it is here that I rise up
out of my body
Looking down on the city
The nitty gritty looks so pretty
in the memories

How could something so bad happen
beneath the summertime trees?

Double Dutch
Double Dutch
I can only hear
The skip of the rope
on the hot street,
my breath and my feet

DJ is keeping score
and he is the one that hears it
The police sirens
The screaming
The Crying

And you know us,
Too nosy for our own good
And even though it is that type of neighborhood
We slink towards it
Creep against the brick
Double Dutch
Double Dutch
All forgotten, just a blip

We stand off in corner
And we see him, Chiron
Skin slick with sweat
And his eye are wet
He's got his hands
in the air
And his girlfriend is crying
And he is steady denying

The crime but the officer
says he's lying

And here, it gets blurry
It happens too fast
I remember hearing shots
and seeing the broken glass
DJ had grabbed me
And we all started to run
But it was too late
The image was burned in my mind
The horrid memory of a white man
holding a gun

I don't remember it always
but I do remember it often
His cold stare
His grip
The way his shoulders were steady
The way he lied on T.V. and told them people
that he wasn't ready
That he was scared and feared for his life
That he didn't know if the other man had
a gun or a knife

So he shot
Not once, not twice
But six times
Decidedly taking
another man's life

Sometimes I see his wife at the Food Lion
I ring up her groceries
and want to tear out her hair
and rip off each acrylic 'til
she's begging and pleading
I want to stomp her ass
and then get all in her face
and ask

Do you know what your husband did to my neighborhood?
Do you know why the kids don't play in streets anymore?
Do you know what he did to
Double Dutch
Double Dutch?



Courtesy of: **Malachi D. Wright**, *Black Lives Matter Back Cover*
Second Place Art



Courtesy of: **Malachi D. Wright**, *Black Lives Matter Back Cover*
Second Place Art

First Place Nonfiction Winner

Faith A. Lomax

The Love of a Father

It's August 2, 2014 and I am in the third row of the decked out, suede interior SUV. With my chubby arms crossed and the rest of my body tucked into the corner closest to the window, I had sworn myself to seclusion only to speak when spoken to. The aroma of the black ice scented Little Tree air freshener filled my nose as the air conditioner circulated it back and forth. As we rode down the Orlando, Florida strip, I kept close watch on my father's freshly shaved milk dud colored head which sat under his adjustable Dallas Cowboy's cap. After pinching my lips together for 30 minutes I muster up the courage to break my oath. "Dad, what you got planned for today?"

He hesitates to answer. "What you mean?" He replied puzzled with a look of uncertainty.

"Well, it is the 2nd, my birthday."

His silverback of a girlfriend quickly turns her short stiff neck my way and says, "Oh, Faith! I didn't know it was your birthday! Why didn't you say sum, Paul?!"

Paul, my scumbag of a dad, never ceased to amaze me. I'm his youngest and only biological daughter and his newfound family not knowing my birth was his birthday gift. My mother persuaded me to go on this trip thinking he was back to himself and wanted to take me on vacation like we did every year when they were together. She convinced me that he wanted to rekindle our father-daughter relationship just as my young mind did. My body went numb as I fought back tears of disappointment and regret. Another failure noted and he had proven my educated hypothesis; I was a mistake that he was trying to escape. A burden.

~

Here it is. August 2, 2015. The anniversary of my heartbreak. My mother and three of closest friends had just touched down in

Greenville from a quick birthday trip to Georgia and I was exhausted but excited because I had made plans to be laid up with my boo on the 3rd because my mother was returning to work. As we were retrieving our luggage from the trunk, my phone rung. It was him. "Hello?" I answered sternly, trying to hold back the instant frustration that attacked me as soon as I saw his name. "Hey, we goin' to the mountains first thing in the morning and I was seeing if you wanted to celebrate the rest of your birthday with us." I was frozen, left hand tightly gripping my light-weighted suitcase while my right hand almost crumbled my phone into pieces. Did he not know how much heartache his last stunt had caused? I rushed him off the phone with a simple, "I'll text you and let you know." I knew for certain my answer was "no", but I soon found out that wasn't an option. As soon as the phone went click, my mother turned to me and asked who it was. "Paul." I never planned on sharing the invitation with her, but she was aware. "I told him to call and ask but I told him you'll be ready in the morning." All that rage I had just successfully held in erupted and I spazzed. "I'M NOT GOING! I REFUSE! HE CAN TAKE HIS FAKE ASS FAMILY UP THERE AND GO STRAIGHT TO HELL AFTERWARDS!" She gave me that look only a mother can give with her bug eyes staring directly into my soul. "Oh, you're going."

"Y'all go ahead call your rides for in the morning and you go pack your bag." I felt her eyes follow me all the way to the door as if I had just spit in her face and smeared it. "You done lost your mind," she hollered from the driver side window of the gold, big body GMC as she reversed and drove off into the distance. She didn't know that was the last time she was going to see her only child.

~

This room is so dark. I used to know exactly who I was, but my demons had overthrown my savior, Jesus Christ, and devoured my soul. This room is so dark and cold even though it was the middle of summer reaching high 80 on the Eastside of Greenville. I had now swallowed what had to be a total of 20 something pills. Most were prescribed to my mother and the others were PM pain killers. "What is the least painful way to commit suicide?" sat typed in the safari search engine of my black iPhone 4. A recording of the BET awards traveled faintly from the living room followed by the smacking of lips. Tavia and Kari were enjoying the short time

they had left together before their early departure. My birthday was always a “celebration” for everyone else but me. 1...2....3-----My heart was giving out. I was losing oxygen and my eyes started to roll to the back of my head. 30 minutes later I woke up to a solemn whisper. “I am here, my child. I’m not finished with you yet.” It was God. I started foaming at the mouth and throwing up mushy, undigested pills. I felt a tingle rush down my spine like fire shut up in my bones. I still reeked of depression yet, every breath tasted of sugar cane. The Lord reclaimed my spirit.

~

“Hey Faith, how are we doing today?” Ms. Nicole said to me as she held the door open, welcoming me in. She was a petite brownskin woman with natural two strand twists who was my mother’s former coworker but had claimed the role as my guardian angel. Two sessions a week for 3 months. I gave her a hard time, but she was patient and took the time to learn me. Those demons haunted me for four more years. In 4 months, it’ll be August 2, 2021. My 21st. I realized there’s no rulebook on parenting and my father could only love me as much as he loved himself. I had to go through the shaping, molding, and making because to become a diamond, you must go through fire.

Second Place Fiction

Terrecia McPherson

Cecil's Story

The rumor mill congregates downstairs. Cecil – although not yet fully awake – can hear the agitated whispers stealthily climbing the stairs.

“You sure?” mama’s voice returns to somebody who sounds like the Reverend. He wasn’t really a reverend, just that his voice wanes and booms just like one and everything he says seems to bear the weight of God on it. But no man of God carries as much rumors as the Reverend. Unable to find rest among the ears of working men such as Cecil’s father the Reverend forms his own congregation with mama, Miss Matty from two houses down the road, and Miss Jackie the seamstress.

The Reverend, a raving mad drunkard with no money or family, resents anyone questioning his authority. For a second he gets angry, “Liz, it is not a man’s place to run around crying that the world is coming to an end if no such thing is true. Of course, I know what I read. As a matter of fact here you go.”

Peeping round the bend that leads the staircase into the kitchen, Cecil watches the Reverend put a piece of paper in the middle of the table. The women gather around to look. Cecil wants to know what is on the paper to cause their eyes to open so wide. Miss Matty swings little Jeremy from one bony hip to the other and straightens herself up.

“Well, I don’t see what we can do about it anyways.” She offers.

“Nothing to do huh. Is that what you all think?”

The women murmur under their breath not sure what the Reverend is really asking of them.

“I say we send the boys to warn their fathers to come home before dark is all.” Adds Miss Jackie. Her husband – Jasper – left last year to go work somewhere in New York. While hiding in this very

spot just last month, Cecil overheard the rumor mill read a part of the letter Miss Jackie receives from him monthly:

Friends, there are opportunities here a negro in the South could never hope for. I wish one day you will join me for it is not as your imagination makes it to seem. Would I not be a fool to settle for less than I can have in that wretched town of Orangeburg?

A wretched town indeed. That is if what the Reverend is claiming rings true. "The Ku Klux Klan is having their rally tonight I tell you."

"We aren't saying that is lie you telling Paul, just that there is nothing you expect us to do. We might as well turn up with fire and kerosene and march ourselves to the cross for all it is worth going down there."

Suddenly a vivid image appears in the back of Cecil's mind. He runs back to his room and grabs his box camera. Mama had gotten it for him last December although his father thought it "a wretched waste of an otherwise good \$2". The simple square brown-paper-wrapped parcel held no interest to Cecil all the week before Christmas day when mama told him what was in it and that it was his. He ripped it open to find a sleek, heavy black plastic camera with Brownie Kodak Hawkeye written on the front. There was a shiny metal trimming outlining the lens. In no time Cecil had set about attaching a piece of string to both ends at the top. Overjoyed, Cecil never leaves the house without it. Especially not today. A Ku Klux Klan rally is definitely a picture moment for the little eleven-year-old.

The Klan terrorizes Orangeburg from as far back as Cecil can remember. "A bunch of good-for-nothing devils" mama says to father whenever she mentions them. But she never talks ill about them to the rumor mill. On several occasions Cecil had heard her say how the Reverend could never truly keep his thoughts inside his head. Nobody trusts him with any information but they aren't opposed to listening to what he has to say about everyone and everything else. The activities of the Klan are his specialty. Especially whenever they have a rally like this one, or the time they burned Maas Joe shop to the Earth, or even that time they hung Miss Dawn's fourteen-year-old son for waving at a white girl just two streets over on Magnolia.

Cecil walks to the kitchen, camera around his neck, and yawns as though he is still tired.

“Good morning Maas Paul” – he says to the Reverend – “Miss Jackie, Miss Matty, good morning ma’ams” and nods to each woman in turn. Then focusing on mama he asks, “Good morning mama, anything for breakfast?”

“Yes child, there is some grits and bacon on the stove. Remember to take some for your father when you are done eating and hurry back. He is over by the Roberts farm helping out.”

“Yes ma’am.” As Cecil talks he memorizes the information on the piece of paper the Reverend never retrieved from the table. Not too far from here, he thinks.

The congregation grows weary. Not sure what to do with the Reverend’s information they decide it best to do nothing.

Never one to give up so easy the Reverend asks, “Are you then to just bunker down at nightfall with your children and husbands while the enemy like a roaring lion walketh around seeking whom he may devour? You people are stark mad I tell you. Mad!” His bald head starts perspiring like the pastor at church on Sundays and he wiggled his finger in the same accusatory manner.

“You making it sound like we have an option.” Miss Jackie gets up from her seat at the kitchen table and starts to adjust her frock.

“Well, enough of such talk! Everything is going to be alright. If we let everyone know to stay safe at home tonight then there is nothing to fear.” Mama never allows Klan talk to persist around Cecil.

And he didn’t dare ask for there was only one rule whenever the rumor mill meets, “children should be seen and not heard.”

Miss Matty catches on as well, “Paul, why don’t you and I go round and tell the others. That should be something helpful don’t you agree?”

The Reverend is outnumbered and his sermon is as good as finished. He hisses his teeth, puts his hat on, and leaves with the women and baby in tow.

~

“Carry that bucket of water here, child.” Cecil’s father welcomes the boy.

Cecil offers him the plate of food and follows his pout to rest it on the ground by the row of plants he is digging. Crouching there on hands and knees in the dirt he looks like a raised mound of South Carolina Earth. The pale orange of his flannel shirt and the dusty brown trousers makes it even more so for Cecil had seen these colors in the dirt when him and Johnny dig it up in the summer times. That was the only time mama will allow him in the fields.

“That is no place for a boy,” she believes.

But father always counters that “there is nowhere else for him in this world but digging in the earth.”

“Yessir.” Cecil struggles with the bucket wishing it to be lighter. Cecil doesn’t mind helping his father especially since he knows the man thinks of him as weak.

“How many times must I tell you not to come into the field with that camera ‘bout your neck boy? This is no place for taking pictures. Here men work, not play!” his father’s tone is always stern with him.

I will show him tonight that I am not weak. I am as strong and brave as they come. I am going to that rally to take a picture! Cecil thinks to himself.

Despite his opinion, Cecil’s father never pushes it too far and so the camera always stays. Yet it is not Cecil’s intention to stir his father’s wrath so after handing him the bucket he asks permission and wanders off to see Johnny, the Roberts’ boy, Cecil’s best friend. A stone’s throw away Cecil sees John Sr., the boy’s father, who tells him where to find Johnny.

“Haven’t you heard?” Cecil asks when they are out of earshot of the men.

“What is it this time?” Johnny’s broad nose flares out on either side as he speaks.

Cecil whispers the whole story for fear that someone else might overhear. He anticipates the small smile that will play over Johnny’s mischievous face anytime soon. It never comes. Instead,

almost yelling, Johnny starts on Cecil, “You is a mad light skin negro is what you are if you think I is going anywhere near that cult with you. You can go on. I is staying right here on my daddy land. As a matter of fact if you go I am telling on you.” The boy turns in the direction of the men and Cecil starts laughing to the point of tears – as real as he can make them under the circumstances – and begins to convince Johnny that he is just pretending to see how he would react.

“You should have seen your face. It look so frightened!” Cecil doubles over and slaps the ground.

~

Cecil, unsure what to do after that, hurries on his way back to the house. Johnny is now convinced that Cecil is heading home to help mama with the chores and return later to play ball with him. Cecil cannot even begin to imagine what his friend will think when he does not show up later. But if everybody wants to act like a coward he resolves that it is his duty to be the brave one. What they will think is a matter for later. Right now the concern is putting together a plan for tonight.

By the time evening starts to creep over the horizon Cecil resolves never to ask mama if she needs “help with anything at all” ever again. That foolish question got him stuck for several hours helping mama to clean up the house, gather provision for dinner from the garden in the backyard, and now dragging one last bucket of rainwater off the porch steps and dunking it into the big drum with water for use in the kitchen.

Exhausted, he manages to convince mama that he is going to run by Edisto River and take a swim to wash off before dinner.

“Hurry back before nightfall, Cecil. Your father will be home soon no need to get him angry that you are late.”

“Yes mama.” Cecil is off to the spot he hid his camera earlier on his way back to the house. He was right thinking that mama will notice if he leaves for the river with it but not too much so if he ran to his room and pretended to put it away once he had gotten back from the breakfast trip. Helping out was a good idea too, it made sure mama will pick up for him when his father asks to see the boy on his return home.

Yet instead of going to Edisto River – which is sure to be too cold for his wispy body anyways – he turns down Glover Street. Turning onto one of the dark side roads Cecil follows his memory to where the paper in the middle of the kitchen table had instructed: Wannamaker Lane.

Panting just a little, Cecil crouches down behind a boulder-sized brush just a stone's throw from a group of voices. He is here. Cecil peeps between the leaves. The confederate flags wave their hex over a little clearing nearby.

There, bodies outline in white robes with black stripes around the arm sleeves, reverently listen to someone on a podium. On their heads more sheet with two eye holes and a pointy end at the top.

Sheets? How ridiculous. Cecil almost says aloud. He clasps his hands over his mouth and reminds himself where he is.

Cecil looks around at other brushes lining the entire area except for where the men stand. He slings the camera string around his neck and checks to make sure the lens are focused.

Perfect!

The potbellied figure on the stage is sending a frenzy through the crowd. Suddenly everyone, filled with the same rage, start marching with torch in hand. They stop in front of a wooden cross mounted on another platform. Outrage pours from the men and onto the wood which passively submits to the flames.

Cecil gasps. It is now or never.

He tries to get on his knees so that he will have both hands to work the camera. As if on cue the men start shouting “White power! White power! White power!” providing him enough cover not to be heard ruffling in the bushes.

Quickly, camera at the eye, finger on the button Cecil takes his shot.

Yes!

The night instantly grows quiet. The air grows tense up ahead.

Dark orbits molded into fabric meet pupils dilating by the nano-second. Cecil holds his breath. His heart is in his ears. His palms

become sweaty and he loses his grip on the camera.

“You hear that, Jim?” one sheet asks another.

“I do. Nicholas, take your torch to that bush over there.”

Nicholas starts in the direction of Cecil.

Cecil drops to his stomach. In his haste the camera hit against the ground and slams into his small chest. It knocks the wind out of him.

Then Cecil hears it. Right in front of him.

“Fellas I is just curious is all. I ain’t done a thing, you know.” the Reverend’s drunken slur pierces the air.

A loud commotion starts among the men. Cecil gathers his wits and looks up just enough to see the Reverend being dragged to the burning cross.

Oh No! Cecil thought. I hadn’t seen him earlier. But before he could do anything the ground moves from beneath him.

No, he is moving up.

Cecil looks up into the flaming eyes of his father. No words pass between the two as the man bundles Cecil under his arms and runs away from the sheeted bodies.

At home, the fury of God rains over the boy. Somewhere between playing hide and seek with the man’s belt and begging for mercy from mama, Cecil found out the story.

An hour prior his father had returned for dinner and heard the rumor of the Klan rally from mama. Immediately he had set out to find Cecil at the river but couldn’t. When he doubled back to the house he realized the missing camera and put two and two together.

“Lazarus that is enough, mind you kill him.” Mama is a few licks too late but better late than never Cecil reminds himself.

“What you thinking going to that rally boy. Don’t you see what they do to our kind?” father asks.

Through hiccup and tears Cecil explains himself ending with, “ev-

erybody always think of me as weak. I is not weak.”

“No-one says you is weak, boy. You staying out of trouble is not weak? It takes a lot of strength to do that. And trying to get yourself killed don’t count for strength either ways. Think of that next time you think of leaving that room to meddle in what doesn’t concern you.”

“Maybe the camera was not such a good idea after all.” Tears well up in mama’s eyes, “Don’t bother taking it to your room.”

Cecil turns on her in alarm, “But --- but.”

“But nothing boy you hear your mother.”

Second Place Nonfiction

Jaliah I. Robinson

Through My Eyes: America's Pandemic

On the last day of summer, I think about the first day and vice versa. This year was different. I don't know when my summer began. It is as if after spring break the concept of time ceased to exist. Days blended and nights were blurred. There was nothing to distinguish the days apart from each other. Even Easter went unmentioned. Everyone was living in quarantine. Our normal was suddenly only a memory.

For some people, this summer did not change. They went to parties, had sleepovers, went on trips, and so on. They lived as if there was not an indiscernible killer on the loose. They used conspiracy theories when confronted with their carefree living. They were enjoying life, and no one could change their minds. Others lived more cautiously. They stayed in the comfort of their own homes, to avoid any interaction as much as they could. They shopped online to reduce the risk. Their actions depict living a temporary, moderate life. My truth, there was no adventure. There was boredom and the underlying feeling of redundancy from doing the same thing day in and day out. Home improvements and crafts are what occupied my time. Painting walls and rearranging furniture, even just adding decorations. I might as well be an interior designer at this point. I thought the days would play on a loop in my mind, that not one moment would stand out to me. I could not have been more wrong.

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. Peace, peace, they say when there is no peace.” Jeremiah 8:11 NIV

Protests. The world is enraged. At first, people were upset that they had to stay in the house. They wrote signs about needing haircuts and talked about how it is their right to live how they want. Then came uproar about a taken life. Another black corpse to add to the pile. Tears were shed, bricks were thrown, fires were started. People took to the streets, ranted on social media, whether behind the cause or not. “I'm not raising my son to be a target,” a mother

shouted. Uncomfortable. People were beginning to feel uncomfortable. Friends were no longer speaking, some families stood in a civil war. If the sky could be painted a color it would bleed red. Red for bloodshed. Red for hate. Red for love. Red for the uncompromising, blind ignorance that was interwoven into the foundation of America. This “great” country that so many have so much exhibited pride. A divide between black and white with red pouring in the middle. A tale as old as time with details skewed ever so often. The pandemic, the broadcaster of this unjust system. All media had their eyes on this situation. The world was watching as week-by-week people were fed up with the despicable treatment of black people.

As with every movement there were people who used the time to cause trouble and there were people who criticized. Some demanded peace but used violence in the drop of a hat. Others were peaceful but violence was used against them. Video after video showed the first amendment being dragged through the streets. Onlookers questioned the motive of violence. Who was to blame? Who is the victim? Whose job is it to tell a different tale than the whitewashed story?

“Doubt is the brother of shame.” Erik Erikson

Doubt. A lingering storm with dark clouds and a cold breeze. Causes chills up their spine and goosebumps all over their body. Creeps into their life in the form of leaky sink faucet. Drip after drip a picture begins to form. Water morphs into a question mark but what is it asking? The longer they stare at it the quicker it disassembles. A reoccurrence of subtle signs starts the turning of wheels. This was the time that some people realized the rose-colored glasses in which they viewed America blinded them to the reality that was. How then does one come to terms with their role in society? How does one begin to rectify their unbeknownst position in the problem? There was doubt spreading like the plague through the American people. Ones who had faith in the government no longer looked to them for support. It’s as if the tectonic plates began to shake under their feet and their world started to crumble. Some began grasping at straws to make things make sense. Reconfiguring puzzle pieces, adding and subtracting events from their brains, this was the dance of doubt.

“Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth.” Albert

Einstein

Willful ignorance. A warm blanket that wraps them snug in their beliefs. The filter that erases all blemishes from view. The red, white, and blue safety net. One that would cover the 50 states with a few holes piercing through. The truth was too much to take. There were people taking to social media to explain that the media is the problem. Some even said that racism does not exist anymore. It was as if to say racism is in the eye of the beholder. White privilege was then introduced to the mix and the internet went ballistic. This notion was not accepted for the mere fact that people did not want to accept it. They used any excuse they could muster to discredit what was happening. What was worse was that there was a divide within the black community as well. Some believed that the outcry was more damaging to the black image than it was good. They did not support the cause orchestrated by their own people. It is said that ignorance is bliss but at what point does it become a menace to society? It is easier to think a certain way when one is surrounded by confirmations.

On the last day of summer, I came to realize that the pandemic going through America was much more than Covid-19. Protests dressed the streets, doubt slowly crept into the air and willful ignorance was a shield of armor. Bubbles were burst and lines were crossed. There was so much trauma and pain in America. So much blood shed and so much hate. America bared its ugliness, there was no more hiding. This is our new normal.

Second Place Poetry

Ariel A. Meriwether

Tell Me

Explain to me what it is you're doing to me.

Explain the power. Stress the control.

Exert the pressure on your mind into fragments.

Cypher the fragments and give me sentences then take that and piece together your thoughts

Words in the air travel to my soul.

Engulfed in my bed and trapped in my pillowcases.

Swarms of power and waves of control wrap themselves tightly into threaded sheets.

Tell me power. How do you do it?

Enlighten me control. Where does it end

Shards of body stiffen the air. Heat entangles the mind.

Give me some type of hope.

Tie me down and stop my ears so I can hear.

Shut my mouth and focus me to speak

Allow thoughts to control my spirit.

Give my unbearable soul a source of belief and tell me

I'm begging you

Stress to me

Explain to me

Make me believe that the thoughts of my spirit will survive

Encourage my hope

Because I'm not sure how much more I have, if any, left.

Third Place Nonfiction

JaMariya A. Mason-Price

Truth Hurts

It's two in the morning and I suddenly jolt awake. Tears come pouring out of me attempting to cleanse my broken soul. It's the year of 2020 and the month of February, the month of rediscovering myself. The pitch-black room tries to keep me company, but yet I'm alone. My brain shutdown from overthinking. My heart gasps from its final bruising that left me battered. Here I am...having my first panic attack.

I tried shutting my brain off. That didn't work. My own body got tired of me running from this ugly truth. Running from acceptance. Running from disappointment. The time had finally come; I was nowhere physically, mentally, nor emotionally prepared. I've come to the conclusion that I may have never been prepared.

A couple of days ago I joined a group at school for fatherless daughters. Not by choice. My professor, also my advisor, thought it would be good for me that one day I stopped by her office. She told me, "JaMariya you could benefit from it. Maybe this will help you heal. You can't keep running from it." But I wanted to.

I replied, "You know that I hate opening up to people and letting folks know my business."

Then she looked at me, mind already made up and face full of determination. "You're joining. This will give you a good chance to bond with others that are going through what you are going through."

She could be right, but I don't want her to be. I sat in my dorm room that night contemplating. I even allowed my mind to drift off, rooky mistake. I thought back to when I was younger and thought that my dad was perfect. However, I always knew. I'll never forget at the age of 10, I was in my mom's room. I tried to get a hold of my dad all week long. My phone at the time was a hot pink Motorola RAZR V3 flip mobile phone. No answer. The more I

snapped that phone down the more something inside my little mind snapped as well. Then I got triggered. I began crying and asked my mom, “Does my dad not love me anymore?”

My mom tried her hardest to calm me down. She even kept up with the lying king’s lies and told me, “Of course he loves you. He may be busy. Why don’t you text him what you told me and see what he says?” I did as told. I remember seeing her type something else on her phone then she turned on Bratz because she knew they would calm me down.

He responded. I should have known that that would only foreshadow the next ten years of my life. It became routine after a while: I’ll hear from him, he’ll pick a random day out of the year (other than my birthday) to come see me, then next thing I know he’ll disappear. Our relationship was strictly money. Speaking of which, he was supposed to give me my allowance two days ago. I guess I gotta play dirty and tell my mom so she can work her ‘magic’ and tell him a thing or two and before I know it, I’ll be getting a CashApp alert. It sucks but that’s how he set everything to be.

Maybe just maybe I will go to this meeting in a couple of days. I may even give this group a shot. However, I absolutely will not tell my story. It’s always harder reliving your trauma when you’re still going through it. Then it’s like once people see pass that tough exterior you’ve spent years perfecting and you show just a crack in it, you’re seen as weak. And I refuse to make anyone to see me at my lowest and think that I’m weak. It’s bad enough that I finally opened up to my professor.

I begrudgingly went to that meeting and sat near the front. I was prepared to have my other persona come out and play. She greeted everyone. She smiled. She made conversation. She acted like she wanted to be there. She better not lose control and keep my actual self at bay if we know what’s good for us.

What shocked me the most that meeting was hearing my friend speak about her relationship with her father. She went first, having decided to break the ice.

“My father and I had our good days, and we had our bad days. He wasn’t perfect but he was my daddy and I loved him. I’ll never forget how I was mad at him when he did not show up for my graduation and gave me some lame excuse. I ignored him for months until

I could no longer ignore him. I got the call that he passed away while I was working. It tore me up because I was not ready for him to go and because of the way we ended. Till this day I still feel guilty, and all of this happened in 2018. Never got that conversation, never got to express my disappointment. So if you have a father that's trying, please try harder as well. You never know when it's too late." She then teared up a little and I sat there shocked and sad for her. Who would've known? However, pride still did not allow me to tell my story and I was glad that my professor did not push me even after the others told their stories.

Here I am now, almost 21 years old and a first semester senior in college in the year of 2021 still healing. I tried telling my father how I felt...nothing. I tried reaching out...nothing. I have had enough. My dad will never be the man that I need him to be. As I sit here now on a Tuesday night writing this, teary eyed, and even a little saddened. I know that I made the right choice letting go and putting myself first. I have my days where I am happy. Then, there's those bad days – especially when holidays hit and I realize my father doesn't care. Overall, I am stronger and at this place in life where I can freely talk about it. I no longer need to hide.



Courtesy of: **Alicia D. Parson**, *Black Lives Still Matter Third Place Cover Art*

Third Place Poetry

Alicia D. Parson

Insert Name Here

We march again, tear-stained cheeks steady glistening
We're screaming "Say [their] name!"
But, is anyone even listening?
A different face but the story's always the same

The pain is the always there
Ripped anew with every hashtag
Insert Name Here?
I can't take anymore, I've raised my white flag

You're telling me it's not just us,
I'm telling you there's no justice

Please! Whoever is listening, you have nothing to fear
Must I really insert another name here?
My sign is old, and my marker is drying
Along with my hope, my faith in you is dying.

What did you ever have to fear?
Your existence was always held dear.
It's faces that look like mine that should be afraid

Our very lives are the prices we paid
Just to feel seen, and just to be heard,
And just to feel like you've felt our word.

We shouldn't be fighting for our right to breathe,
No, we shouldn't have to fight for this.
We shouldn't have to fight to exist

Third Place Fiction

Gervaris T. Wearing

Blood Drips to the Floor

Blood drips on the floor. I immediately run to the sink to try and get it to run down the drain instead of the tile. The stains are so hard to get out. “Why the hell did he pick yellow tile? Too hard to get the blood out.” I grab the white towel that I keep underneath the sink for times like these. You learn to keep something nearby to catch the blood. He looks at me with beady, bloodshot red eyes and tries to hold me while I run the water to stop my lip from leaking any more blood. He snuffles twice as he watches me wince from the warm water trying to heal the wound that keeps opening. He slowly lifts his head and questions, “Why can’t you just listen to what I want baby? This ain’t supposed to always happen. You know how this makes me feel to hurt you like this? Baby, just do what I say, and I ain’t gonna hurt you.” This time it’s more blood than I anticipated, and he knows it too. Tre has never seen me bleed so much, however, he’s become shocked over less, and over nothing by any means. He moves himself towards the kitchen only to see a blank spot for his countless beers.

“Budweiser!” he shouts at me. “What do you mean there isn’t any more, Key? What man you had in here drinking my beer?”

“You drunk your case last night when you dragged me.” My body involuntarily jumps from him glaring at me. My body got so used to being hit that it prepares itself now. It has become natural for my body to be in this state. He comes closer and reaches towards me to look at his damage. I try to draw back, but he caresses my face and kisses the cheek that he damaged. I quickly place my hand on top of his to move him from the damage he made.

He tosses the handset, at that point scowls at me, fuming. However, he stays away, holding on to the door to dismiss me from his

presence, I'm certain, so he can pull off pulling out the hefty belt, the earthy colored one with the oval clasp that hasn't been around his abdomen since we said I do. He yanks off the belt and goes upstairs for him to go to bed.

I sneak a look at my watch: four minutes and twenty seconds. I know in less than two minutes he will go back to the Treshawn I married. As I open my phone to look at the camera to see my damage, he peeks his head down the steps and asks to come upstairs to cuddle before bed. "Keyshia, come upstairs honey. I wanna cuddle and talk about what happened." I gulp and slowly move my head to look at him and say, "Okay sunshine. I'm coming, so we can talk about it." He slyly smiles and says, "I love you Key. I'll never hurt you again." I smile and nod as if the blood is not still dripping on my white shirt.

I hesitantly maneuver to the kitchen to clean the tile and head to bed. I know I'll come to our bed with him and his manhood waiting for me, so he can apologize and promise that he would never hit me. He would run his fingers through my black wavy hair and tell me that we are together forever, and it will get better between us, but this time, I am not willing to hear his empty promises. And once we finish, I will roll away from him and he clings to my thigh as tears roll down my cheek.

The most profound wound from Tre last night, the card-sized one to the left side of my face, had expanded then blued then yellowed; touching does no damage anymore, even now, surrounding our willow on the trimmer, taking a few knocks. As I look at my face in the bathroom mirror, I see him in the reflection. I see his face elongate as he comes closer to see the damage he created. His jaw tightens as he looks at the damage he made to my light skin. Tre sighs heavily as he stands behind me to hug me and watch me apply Dermablend to mask the bruise. He abruptly leaves to go to the carport to self-pity as usual. I sigh as I can still see the damage still laying there boldly. I know it will take more than Dermablend to cover this up, so I grab my makeup to do a full face. "Got to keep

a good image, so the neighbors don't catch on to our mess." At the point when I leave the bathroom with a full face of makeup, sharp blades cause me to notice smoke spilling from the carport window. Also, on the off chance that we were living in suburbia — neighbors inside earshot — the thrills would've shocked them, as well.

My drive is to run, and I submit to the adrenaline, acknowledging halfway there that moving into fourth would've gotten me to him faster. I arrive at the rear of the carport, on the off chance that you'd hit a design where an awkward sets up a one end to the other machine shop with no fire douser a "carport." The darkness darkens whether Tre's gotten away out front. Better to check there prior to taking any risks, at that point move up the carport entryway to clear the smoke.

Another scramble. I petition God for him to be anyplace but inside, that today he's not in a tanked trance before lunch... not once more.

In any case, when I turn the corner, just the charger is in the carport. I'm still alone.

I pound the entryway. "Tre!" Bang, blast, blast! "TRE!" Smoke is spilling out the top crease and leaking around the sides, making my eyes water. I snatch the handle and hurl, to save my adoration. Damn! The bastard kept it bolted! A speedy look about, at that point check my watch: two minutes before the commander shows up. Rush around, salvage my adoration.

I rush to the secondary passage and reach for the handle, at that point stop. I nibble my lip. Consider the possibility that it's excessively hot. I shake my head — I need to save my love, regardless.

Shoulders tight, I tap the metal. Just warm. Enormous spat, muscles unwind. More smoke than heat, up until this point. I open up the entryway and get impacted by an irate cloud, an observer drawn away by the breeze. "Tre! It is safe to say that you are in there?"

Time for my dive. I hold a full breath and walk in, blinded, arms outstretched. Four stages. I was unable to inhale on the off chance

that I attempted. I drop to the ground, prepared to slither in reverse; yet nature's left a couple of clear crawls of air, similar to the educators guaranteed. But I can't see Tre from the solid, simply the bottoms of certain sawhorses and his air blower. I rotate on all fours, running winded, monitoring the entryway, I think, while I'm checking. Most of the way around, lungs consuming, a shine from outside, not far by any means. I attempt a breath. Hack! Hack! I creep. More smoky breaths, really hacking, even some frenzy.

It accepts twice the length I'd speculated, however it was a couple of feet, and I breakdown on the grass. I can't return for my adoration — we shouldn't both kick the bucket.

I hear an alarm, the commander's alarm. At the point when he shouts, I'm panting for air. He crushes glass, and I call, "I believe Tre's in there!" And my throat is crude. Once more. As the commander would anticipate. About equivalent to twenty minutes back, when I was breathing in smoke from a slick cloth and breathing out profound into that oppressive mouth, stage one of concealing that I'd killed him by siphoning the cutter's fumes under a covering I'd laid over his head. My love consistently moved his drinking sprees to his workshop when spring showed up, and I was unable to risk the warmth finder waking him after I dropped his fastening iron into the overstuffed wastebasket.

The coroner would check for sediment buildup in Tre's air routes notwithstanding carbon monoxide immersion; the fire skipper would censure Tre rescuing that repulsive floor covering leftover and being so arrogant about the oil splotches; and the sheriff would analyze my recollections of attempting to save him, judging in the event that I made them continuously. It's been seven years. No statements of regret.

Arielle J. Wiggins

Carmel Newyork

The smell of OFF and dried chlorine is burned into my nostrils from those days in the summer.

Our already chocolate skin got even darker when we refused to wear the sunscreen

That had already been expired.

Every time we came inside for a water break, they yelled at us for smelling like “outside”.

Now that we are older, I know it is a mixture of petrichor and mildew.

I still remember the swing set that was missing chains for the swing and bolts from the slide that eventually gave you a black eye.

Back then, our days started at 7:30 am and ended at 11:45 pm because that was around the time our parents made us “cut out all that noise and cut the lights off”.

That was before you got a full-time job being someone you weren’t, became taller than me and went through puberty.

That was when life was simpler before distance and our lives kept us apart,

Before you stopped being able to answer the phone and respond to my texts,

Before you were less involved in my everyday life and me in yours; it has been over 5 years since we have been back to that place or back to who we were while we were there.

Faithe A. Stallings

The Draining

It sucks the life out of me
That every day, I wake up and I am a natural enemy
When I wash my face and the color does not change
I wish I could put a mask on to erase the deeper pain
But still, even with the weight on my shoulders
I rise for a better opportunity
A chance to escape the struggle
If I act a certain way, maybe they would see my rebuttals
That I'm normal, that I wouldn't hurt a fly
The shade of my skin is like the other side
Right? No, wrong.
For decades, our ancestors have been shunned for too long
One person like me couldn't change a nation's tone
And it sucks the life out of me.

Honorable Mention

Kristopher A. Dunbar

Black is the Color (Of My True Love's Mind)

The sun rays filled the beach of Menemsha of Martha's Vineyard Island. Black bodies were scattered across the sands sunbathing, castle building, and simply playing. There was a homely presence about the surrounding island. A history rich with blacks who were first brought here as slaves in the 1600's. Yet they would go on to transform the island through generations.

Book pages were constantly being flipped as the sun laid on her honey-brown skin. She would wear sunglasses to reflect the sun back as if the sun did not have permission to invade her eyes. The sea-salt ocean breeze would push against black-brown twisted locks. Collecting sand between her toes and smiling at the sensations. Most importantly, the color of my true love's mind is black.

For her name was Danielle and I Alexander-Lacroix. For we saw ourselves as planetary bodies in alignment with each other. Traveling far as the sun and moon travels the sky. Love to us was free as the given breeze. Love is the color of our skin and black is the essence of our beings.

Removing her gaze from her book and closing it. "You know that I could watch the ocean caressing the land forever. Watching the black little children play to the adults walking the beach. From the lightest complexion to the darkest" Danielle voiced." I smirked as a slight breeze touched my face.

Listening to Danielle, I began to see what she saw. Even though out of the two of us, I did not speak much paraphrase what she says. Funny enough, Danielle never got me for copyrighting.

"Yes, it's a beautiful experience that we both can take in" I voiced back. I believed that we the both of us took in enough trauma for a change. The trauma that I was referring to be the past summer of

2019. That involved the pivotal efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement to bring justice to those served with injustice. The injustice of police brutality and unequal system that does not bring benefit to minorities.

There were some many times that I had to turn off the television for Danielle, because it was getting too much. I remember her and I witnessing our city of New York going up in protest. I recall Danielle saying “I don’t know how much more of this that I can watch. Watching them killing and treating us like animals...if this is a small percentage of what those before us faced. Then I don’t know how to stomach this.”

It got to the point where I had to remove our television from our bedroom. A temporary solution to stop the news cycle of pain that they were building in our minds. Agony that was the news foundation of showcasing police officers being acquitted and getting away with murder. I remember going into a primal yell of how I yearned for justice and respect for the color of my reflection. “Where is the world built for people like us” I exclaimed in the silence of our apartment.

I remember also when I was pulled over first time for speeding. Never before has my heart jumped to the base of my skull. I thought for a moment that I was going to be like another victim of this police onslaught. The flashing blue lights, the white officer in dark blue with a silver badge, and my hands nervously on the steering wheel. My eyes starring ahead of me hoping to see a future far from this present.

A minor traffic ticket later and I was still sitting idle, calming my nerves. I would go on to call Danielle and voiced my anxiety. Never have I ever been so scared. I thought I would be next. A grown man reduced to a child ready to cry out of control from a controlling world.

I tend to watch my speed and still get nervous around police cars. Yet even I find myself trying to trust my thoughts or predict where an officer may be any given time. The twisted gut feeling and evaporation in my mouth feeling. I never want to feel that again

unless I accidentally cut myself shaving my face. I cannot even fathom how the others felt when they could not escape with their lives. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the many others.

Snapped back into reality as Danielle closed her book in my face to remove me from my thoughts. “Someone’s head in the clouds, when the clouds are above your head.” I glare towards her with a sigh of relief and say, “I’m sorry, it seems like as the wind blows the clouds follow me.” I sit up collecting myself looking at the collective black bodies having fun in the sun. The laughter from the children and dialect from the adults.

I began to smile as I feel a chance that a possible change may come. A small teardrop comes from my eye to my cheek. I look towards Danielle and remark “Through every challenge my true love’s mind is forever black.”

Brooke S. Jacobs

Think Outside the Box

M , F

Two squares I loathe to fill.

They mock the very existence

That I have come to find tranquil.

iMposter , Fraud

They ask me to choose

“Just fill in the blank”

(You have nothing to lose)

Male , Female

Neither fits

It hurts to consider

In which I shall sit

Once I know it does not take long

Kill my ego, bury its song

Crack and bend it to a shape

Silence the cries, let it ache.



Courtesy of: **Jireh S. Funnie, Strength**

Kristopher A. Dunbar

Flowers in the Attic

You can't go back to yesterday cause the petals won't stop blooming when you grab the flower by the thorns.

With your blood running down fertilizing what you planted.

You can't take back the seeds.

Just have to hope it grows and the petals go somewhere in the wind.

So far, I left my petals in the attic to wither and collect dust to show how many times I've been tired.

The thorns aren't as sharp as they were, frankly, I'm tired of this constant photosynthesis when I'm stuck in winter hoping for a spring.

These are tales from a manic who watches the world from his bedroom window.

Jaliah I. Robinson

Here Lies

Black.

A color

A race

A people

A movement

Pride.

In our roots

In our people

In ourselves

Resilience.

We are not broken

We are not weak

We are not animals

Peace.

We are chosen

We are smart

We are strong

We are unapologetically

Black.

Nia-Semone C. McIntyre

Silence

Silence!

The complete absence of sound to cause or become silent; prohibit or prevent from speaking.

Silenced.

Like Emmett Till a little boy who went to visit family in the depths of Mississippi

was silenced, beaten to the point beyond recognition because he offended a white woman in a grocery store when he whistled.

Silenced.

Like Denmark Vesey, the ringleader of the revolt called “The Rise” was

Silenced.

lynched with 30 other black souls with a verdict of guilty but not one white person was killed or injured.

Silenced.

Like the Charleston Nine, after they welcomed an evil coward into their Bible study at Mother

Emanuel Church, were

Silenced, as he shot rounds from a semi-automatic into their bodies in order to provoke a race war.

Silenced.

Like Walter Scott, an unarmed black man who was shot in the back by an officer who swore an oath to serve and protect us.

Silenced.

like Muhiyidin d'Baha, a Black Lives Matter activist who tore down the Confederate flag in the streets of Charleston SC, was

Silenced

as he was shot in the thigh and left to bleed out in the streets of New Orleans.

Silenced

Like a tree that falls in the forest but no one's there to hear if it made a sound.

Silence no more.

Lift up our voices until they form into a roar.

This silence we feed into the lie and webs we weave, we will no longer submissively take it

we choose to leave.

Extinction of the secretion from the fabricated story that lurks in our history books.

Is a sharp hook in the mouth of a bass

not aware of his inevitable fate to be cooked.

These tragic tales that leave you shook.

Isn't one that many choose to look for, but as I said many times before we will no longer be Silenced.

We are the kings of the jungle; we will speak our truths and Roar!

Silence..... no more.

Alicia D. Parson

Heart Ache

It still hurts. There's still an ache there whenever he tells me about someone else. Whenever I imagine it. Them. Her. Whoever she may be, how she must look. How she's not me. It hurts. But it doesn't hurt every time. Sometimes I'm okay. It's almost like I've been pretending, no— faking it so long that I actually manifested it as a part of my reality. For a few moments I'm completely over him. I can truly be his friend. But then something happens that reshapes my reality once again. It may be one of our mutual friends mentioning how they thought we'd always end up together, and suddenly I snap right back into the time where I thought the very same. Then that ache blossoms in my chest again, pressing gently yet firmly on my heart.

This ache is all it takes to shake my foundation and question any other person in my life at the moment. It makes me question myself. After this last time I realized I can't just be his friend. The only chance I'll ever stand in being truly free of the ache is to be away from him, cut him off completely. I know this. But how do I do that when I talk to him every day? How? The real problem is that I'm not strong. I look strong, and I act strong but I'm not. He doesn't know I'm still feeling this way. And I've never known how he's been feeling. I wish he'd tell me that we'd, never, ever happen. Then this ache would disappear. Maybe. Hopefully. but I know in my heart if he ever wanted something more, I'd be the one to say no. Isn't that crazy? Doesn't it sound like someone who likes inflicting pain on themselves? Or is it like the saying "can't live with or without them" in true form?

It doesn't make sense, but at the same time it does. So why do I ache? I don't know. Maybe for the past? For what could've been but never will be? Maybe. All I can think of is Frank Ocean saying "Unrequited Love" over and over and over again. And how I don't think my heart can take anymore squeezing aches.

Brooke S. Jacobs

Fate

A hand reaches out

A hand reaches back

A touch, a hold, an embrace.

The strings, blood red, tangle effortlessly

To hold them together.

The clock marches on, tick tock tick tock

Gears turning slow and steady

Some of the strings tangle in and then snap

But the rest will keep them together.

Time sometimes adds threads, maybe one more

Rewards for the challenges unfair

A selfish request to keep two together

When she certainly knows much better

When at last the threads all snap

The grip hard to maintain

A slip, a reach, a lonely heartbeat

A hand ready to hold once again.

Noah. D. Thomas

What is Blackness?

What does it mean to be black? What constitutes blackness? On the surface, the answers to these questions may seem simple and obvious. Some say that blackness is merely a race or heritage. Others say that it is simply a culture or lifestyle. Truthfully, all of these answers are correct. However, they are not definitive. Blackness is historical; blackness is difficult; blackness is diverse. Above all, blackness is multifaceted.

For centuries, black people have been denied authority over their own blackness. Stripped of their original culture, African slaves were regarded as subhuman and primitive. They were degraded, commodified, and dehumanized. As freedmen, black people were conditioned to believe that they were inferior. They were admonished to have low expectations for themselves, and they were expected to exhibit subservience to all whites. White people dictated what the very definition of blackness was, and in many cases, black people complied with this status quo. In minstrel shows, blackness was mocked; black people were portrayed as foolish and degenerate. In films and television, black characters were often the stereotypes and caricatures. Even today, black people have very little control over how they are represented and perceived.

Truthfully, blackness can be difficult. Institutionalized racism has not been obliterated; it has only evolved. There remains a lack of equity in education, housing, and employment. As previously stated, we often struggle against stereotypes. We are rarely expected to be well-read, articulate, or affluent. Oftentimes, we face pressure to assimilate into white society. Many of us have to adopt a second identity to protect ourselves from white ostracism. Our precarious position has even affected the way we interact with other black people. Oftentimes, we impress upon each other the same stereotypes that white people have impressed upon us. Internal issues like gang violence, self-hate, broken homes, and colorism cause great strain within the black community. Because anti-blackness is

embedded in the fabric of this nation, it is virtually impossible for black people to avoid challenges.

Importantly, blackness is diverse. Commonly, black people are regarded as a monolith, when in all actuality, the opposite is true. Black people come in a multitude of shades, and the black community is comprised of multiple ethnicities and cultures. Black people are diverse in lifestyle, religion, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation. Also, black people are diverse in behavior and thought. Usually, if a black person conducts themselves in a particular manner, others assume that he or she “wants to be white.” Such rhetoric is harmful, as it pushes a false narrative while placing black people within a box. Black people can be eclectic, urbane, awkward, and nerdy. Black people do not have to perpetuate stereotypes in order to embrace their blackness. Black people have just as much right to be different as everyone else.

Despite adversity, blackness is something that is worthy of celebration. Historically, the black community has exhibited unwavering tenacity and unfeigned strength. In the face of marginalization, black people have still managed to produce and progress. We continuously set trends, and countless innovations have resulted from black thought. There have been numerous black philosophers, writers, scientists, artists, and academics to break ground in their respective fields. The conscientiousness of black people has vitalized some of the greatest social and political movements known to man.

The complexities of blackness cannot simply be denied or ignored. History has shown us that the Black Experience is exceedingly rich. There are times when we mourn, and there are times when we rejoice. There are times when we reel, and there are times when we rest. When we embrace our blackness, we are not simply embracing our race or culture, but we are embracing a profound testimony of strength and faith. We are embracing wisdom born of adversity and tenacity born of struggle. When we embrace our blackness, we are embracing an experience that is truly incomparable.



Courtesy of: **Wesley V. Hickson**, *Different Lights*

Kristopher A. Dunbar

The Downward Relapse

It was the middle of senior year that I fell into a grey area once more. A blurred perspective of loathing everyone and everything around me. I didn't care if the grass was greener on the other side or that the grass was giving off a brighter pigmentation. I just knew that I was going under the same mutation in my higher mind. Yet I was comfortable with this symbiotic cancerous growth that was feeding off me at small intervals of time. Ripping my skin back and having Elliot Smith on constant airplay. By the way, a wonderful, underrated artist during his time. My dear Melancholia felt more like a lover who would come by and take me at a moment's notice. Singing harsh monotone harmonies scraping her tongue to clash with her teeth, letting me know how worthless I am to her. Yet she held me when no one else did as I sunk into my despair, with her hands burrowing into my back, grabbing at my heart to make me feel the weight of it. For she was my gravity. For she was my relapse since her and I had waltz to this similar tune of self-anguish, self-hatred, and bitterness towards everyone who was better off than me. Yet this time it wasn't waltz; her and I were dancing above seventy beats per measure. The measures contained no rest, but a constant repeat of the downward spiral.

Gervaris T. Wearing

I'm Tired

I am tired of the same thing every day.

Every day, as if my life is a total cycle.

I'm Tired.

It's too much pressure for a young man like myself.

Nothing but negativity and derogatory comments coming towards me.

I'm Tired.

When will all of this stop?

When will I have the energy to care or try again?

I'm Tired.

I hope one day all of this will change.

And I will no longer be tired of the same thing every day.

Take the time out of your day to encourage someone.

Because there are many people who are just like me.

And We are getting tired and more tired each and every day.

Jaliah I. Robinson

Series of Unfortunate Events

2020 deceived us like smoke and mirrors

January blindsided us like a deer in headlights

February was like the calm before the storm

March trapped us like a video vixen traps a rapper

April isolated us like an inmate in solitary confinement

May oozed red like a gunshot wound on an innocent jogger

June suffocated us like a knee was glued to our necks

July erupted with protests like Mount Vesuvius

August ripped through hearts like the San Andreas fault line

September virtually shattered all hope that things would get better

October broadcasted political debates like a big screen TV

November gave some of us hope like the jingle from an ice cream truck

and now

we wait for December like a convict on death row.

Arielle J. Wiggins

The Fire That Never Stopped Burning

“I can’t believe my Xbox was burned.”

I elbow Tyler in the side, he winces. Honestly, I shouldn’t be surprised he said something stupid like that after our first fire; I believe it was along the lines of ‘dang it, I just bought those new sneakers, now they are ruined’. Sometimes I can’t believe we are related, let alone twins; he can be so insensitive. All around me, there are ashes; it smells like when they let Uncle Michael fry the turkey on Thanksgiving, and he burns it. As I stand in the charred remains of my grandmother’s house, my mind flooded with memories of when I was younger; back then, it seemed like our second home, even if it was a few hours away. The house is unrecognizable; there were no pictures of my mom when she was my age, family reunions, and my favorite, the one of my cousin holding me when she was 2 and I was a newborn.

I blinked my eyes, hoping that this was all a dream this couldn’t be the second house in the past three months that has caught on fire. As my eyes peel open, I see my mother crouched on the ground, eyes wide and hands covering her mouth in disbelief. My mom has never been one to hide her emotions, and frankly, it’s a pretty good quality to have, or at least it works in favor of everyone else because we can tell exactly what she is thinking. Right now, I know she is in shock and is uncertain for whatever reason; tragedy seems to be following this family recently. How could something so catastrophic happen to us, not my immediate family but grandma and grandpa too. They offered us to stay with them after our old house had been burnt down and while our new one was being finished. All the while we were staying with them, they never complained. I know we were inconveniencing them with our crazy schedules and contributing to the utility bills’ increase; it was a little concerning; they never said anything considering they are easily irritated and tend to speak their minds. What is the likelihood that there would be two fires within our family within three months.

Why would God allow something like this to happen? I mutter a prayer under my breath; even though he allowed this to happen, I know the only way we will get out of it is with God.

Terrecia McPherson

Defining Black

Black Is....

The color of my skin,

The color of my eyes,

The color of my hair,

Not the color of your lies.

Or the perpetuating hatred you try to feed my mind!

Black Is....

The color of the earth's crust

Within which diamonds lie,

The color of freedom,

And the color of pride.

Don't try to brainwash me, for you are blind!

Brooke S. Jacobs

Adoration from Nowhere

Who knows your beauty, if not I?
Though you care not to hear it
I adore the very sight of you
When I know you cannot feel it.

Who knows your beauty, if not I?
I've seen it almost daily
Even though you cannot stay.
I wait 'til you come to see me.

Who knows your beauty, if not I?
The years that you spend sitting
Fixing the perfections you think are flaws
For no one deserving to see it.

Who knows your beauty, if not I?
The wrinkles setting deeper.
It suits you well, even now,
When you are growing weaker.

Who knew your beauty, if not I?
The room my only company.
You've gone and left me all alone.
I pray you rest easy.

Faith Lomax

The African American Succession

Rhythm with the rhymes
Devils in disguise
He's been lusting after flesh
With that red look in his eyes
Trying to hold on
But it's crazy how time flies
See Peter's got a pan
With some razors in his hand
Cutting off the heads
Of the raiders who stole our land
Making money on the soil
While we pick the cotton out the sand
They hate us
But they rape us
Mulatto babies
Light brown and tan
How could you kill our brothers?
But turn our sisters into mothers
We got potential and a purpose
We make history behind the curtains
Living in the shadows
'Cause the caucuses have cursed us
Label us as savages
Say we just black and angry

So you lock me up in chains and shackles
Cause you say you gotta tame me
But when we think about it
You're the only one that's yelling
Acting like an infected mutt
With the foaming, sniffing, and smelling
Tryna justify my actions
Because of your unspeakable attractions
See you can't blame my people
For your flaws and imperfections
You used our talents
To ace your first impressions
We were your limelights
Your meal ticket was our birthrights
We paved the way
So you could have your fancy rides
And get stamps every time you take flights
But I refuse to let you take advantage of me
God is the finisher of my fate
Not master Becky, John, or Pete
I hold the legacy of my ancestors
My people didn't face defeat
They were just under oppression
But our time is now
This is the Great African American Succession

Nia-Semone C. McIntyre

Breaking Chains

Breaking chains gutted and deveined, chained and oppressed,
Lashes cross their chest, Shackled and lynched

beaten down to quench

Their thirst for freedom.

Rounded up like cattle and forced to assimilate, regenerate, and
incinerate into the ideologies of democracy.

Or is it hypocrisy that mocks he who tries to be truly free?

Breaking chains

stripped of their names

they suffered in pain

and were never the same.

No credit or fame

for the land that was built on the backs of the many.

They provided plenty but never got any. It's over now

the time is up

the things they endured

helped lift them up.

Once open wounds are now little cuts

That left battle scars.

So will never forget,

they come from a culture where they're fortunate because no matter
how bad things may get no

chain, brands, lynchings, or whips

Will ever hold them down.

It is their nature to rise from the ground and reclaim their voice

Once lost now found.



Courtesy of: **Wesley V. Hickson**, *Drama in the Garden*

Quiana L. Wilson

The Embrace

“Anya is a wii-itch, Anya is a wii-itch! Don’t play with her because, she is a witch she will cast spells on you.” That was the first time I was bullied for the family’s business. We were at this school for smart kids and it had new paint over the wall, so new you could still smell it drying. It was in 1992, I was only 6 years old and already tired of the jokes.

“I am not a witch! My family is different, but we aren’t witches!” It was already hard enough to make friends last year, no one wanted to be friends with the dark-skinned girl with pink lips and green eyes, if you look close enough you will see this red hair of mine too, but it just looks dark brown luckily.

After school my aunt Cint picks me up in her brand-new Lexus truck, I’m always the last on her carpool route so I am able to get a seat by the door. “Anya did you make any friends today, it’s the 2nd week of school?” Aunt Cint is always pushing for me to make friends, it obviously was easy for her in school, especially since she is so beautiful. She has these slanted green eyes and normal looking brown lips and even her hair makes sense, dark brown and curly. Her hair goes well with her peanut butter brown skin and her kids (Jasmine, Jessica, and Jade) look just like her.

“No ma’am, not yet they keep calling me a witch, and I mean I don’t blame them, how did I end up being the darkest female in our family, but still have these green eyes?!” Aunt Cint then looks at me through the rear-view mirror.

“Well baby girl your beautiful deep green eyes came from my father and your rich dark brown skin came from my mother; you were the only one to get the perfect mix of my parents. Your cheek bones are high like the tribe my father came from, your hair is just like my mother’s texture and color which is so naturally beautiful. You should learn to embrace your beauty.” I didn’t know my looks come from family members, I thought they cooked me up in one of

their rituals.

We finally arrive at the family shop, where my mom is working. The shop is nearly 100 years old and you can tell too. The wood is starting to crack again and the paint on the wood is chipping. You would think since the building is so small, they would keep it up better.

“Those kids been bothering you today, Anya?” I still don’t know how she always knows everything; she says I will develop this too one day. My mom has the family green eyes with brown tint, complimenting her brown skin and black hair. She is only a little taller than my aunt at 5’ 5”. I have a short family even with our dads being tall, that doesn’t seem to matter.

“Yes, ma’am they started calling me a witch today” I see the frustration set across her face. She knows why they are calling me a witch; my birthday is in a month and the family will start me in the root practice. 7 is the number of completion so when each girl in the family turns 7, she will learn the root work. My family only gives birth to girls if we didn’t seem weird enough already. I am dreading this year because I do not want to turn into a witch.

“Anya baby doll, you gunna have to be strong and ignore them, you are not a witch you just come from a very blessed and powerful family.” Sometimes I forget we live in California when my mom starts talking in her New Orleans accent, that usually means she done with the conversation.

~

“Anya wake up!” Mmm the smell of the French toast, I know my mom is up moving around when the sweet aroma hits me before I hear my mom yelling for me, the extra cinnamon is the only thing pulling me out of bed. Before I go downstairs, I make sure to do my morning rituals, it is the only way to keep mama off my back.

“Grand risings mama” She is staring at me like I did something wrong. I know I did my prayer; I washed my feet, lit my candles for today, and even did my meditations this morning. I don’t know

what her issue is. “Yes ma’am, what have I done wrong?”

“You forgot to make your bed Anya, haven’t I raised you better than that?” Everything I’ve done this morning and she is upset with me over my bed not being made yet on a Saturday morning, during spring break, I chuckle to myself. Sometimes I forget I am still a child and things like that matter to mama too.

Aunt Cint and her 3 girls come over for breakfast and for the usual morning rituals. “Are y’all ready for the 2nd quarter of 2000 to start? Grand risings everyone!” Aunt Cint is always loud, Jasmine is the oldest being 16, Jessica is 15, and Jade is 14 with me. Ever since Jade and I started learning the root work, spirit has taken keen to me. I don’t know why but it just comes easier for me. Mama said it’s because I have the strongest connection to her parent’s since I look just like them. Nevertheless, it makes my cousins resent me because, aunt Cint pushes them to be more like me. I will be honest I was not liking this root work thing, the only benefits to me were being able to dye my hair. I mean Aunt Cint would never let one of her girls walk around with purple hair. Mama says we shouldn’t ignore what spirit feels, and spirit wanted me to color my hair with whatever color I was seeing that week. Who am I to complain?

~

“Anya since it is your birthday today you can lead this morning’s ritual.” On today July 7th, 2007 I turn 21 years old, 7-7-7. I am considered the strongest on today and I can feel it. I have changed my hair color back to its natural reddish brown to fully embrace today and I am glad I did. Today is the day I fully become a “witch” and I couldn’t be more excited. It took some time to embrace my family’s work but I did not understand it yet. All those kids who used to pick at me now come to the shop for services from me. They say I’m the best in the state, did you understand what I just said? They said I am the best in all of California, and all those around me have accepted it too. I am fine with being this dark skin witch with pink lips, green eyes, and red-brown hair. She is blessed and powerful. She is me.

Nia-Semone C. McIntyre

Rise Up

Rise.

I said RISE!

Rise up from the ashes that they burnt you into.

Rise up out of the oppression that wasn't meant for you.

Rise up like a clenched fist in a sea of pain.

Rise up off the ground your body aching from the pain.

You see, this country was built on your back with no disdain

So rise up or your life they will claim.

Rise up out of that hole that they dug for you 6 feet deep.

Striking down lashes blood dripping to your feet.

Until you finally fall back into that hole Descending into a permanent sleep.

Rise like Jesus of Nazareth on the third day, Rise like the sun in the sky at the break of dawn peeking out of the blanket of night that covers it. Rise up like Assata Shakur hand up yet the bullet still stuck in her core.

From black liberation to terrorist of nations lies.

I can take no more

Do waves flow away from the shore?

Do lions howl and wolves roar?

No more, rise up.

Like Maya Angelou, because even after she closed her eyes

Still, she shall rise.

Rise up from the ashes that they burnt you into. Rise up out of the oppression that wasn't meant for you.

Rise up like a clenched fist in a sea of pain. Break free from the chains that hold you down.

That mute your voice from making a sound.

From speaking your truth

With words so profound.

Open your eyes, it's our time to rise.

Rise out of diversity like a rose out of concrete because that stone that crushes bones is no match for your roots.

Roots that have been sold, burned, and hanged.

Roots that continue to grow and remain the same. Roots that are nurtured and gave rise to mankind. Rise from your roots

And blossom.

Rise from the pain

And thrive.

Rise from the bones of your ancestors they chained,
maimed, and claimed. Wake up and Rise up. Rise up and Wise up.
Wise up because time's up.

Terrecia McPherson

Make Up

We made up our minds
To make up our bodies
Because we hated our bodily make up.
But before you add lashes and powder to eyes that haven't yet
wake up
Think,

What else could I be doing to sharpen my vision
and help not only my eyes, but body and mind to wake up?
Is adding contour and blush
Just hiding my fears and insecurities in a rush?
I agree,
It may not be.

But instead, maybe
You're falling
out of grace with this world
and falling
right back in love with your face.
But don't haste
Think

Instead about making a mud paste
And plastering your face.
Aligning yourself
with traditions of our forgotten race.

It strengthens your contour
And rejuvenates your blush
So, next time in a rush,
Let's go back to the dust
and use the makeup that inevitably we all must.

Jaliah I. Robinson

Living

Night falls
Days bloom
There's a break in the system

Our normal is gone
Our world is sick
A lot happens in a day
So much pain
So much hate

Sun rises in the east
Sets in the west
Sunrise to sunset
The rise and fall of my chest

We take a breath
Suffocating
Blink our eyes
Tears fall
Move our jaws
Spewing hate
And smack our lips
Tasting bitter

We second guess

Judge and overthink
Misunderstand
With haste we sink

This is living
Living effortlessly
Free but not
This is life
This is living

Tasha Y. Skinner

Situationship

I think about you 24/7 throughout the day
Simply wondering if you're okay,
I even check my phone more frequently than most
To see if you've texted or called me.
My heart races rapidly when I get a notification from you
It makes me nervous but in a good way
I think about what the future may hold for us,
But I'm scared to know the outcome.
I don't know what this is,
Or even where life will take us,
But I know for a fact that I need you there.
I couldn't see you not being here with me
I don't know what to do about it either,
Especially if you move on with someone else
Yes I know we're not together,
But you drive me crazy in the best way yet,
It's like I'm willing to deal with anything that comes to you.

Jaliah I. Robinson

Society

Who am I?

Who do you want me to be?

Certain way I need to walk

How I need to talk

Things I need to change

I can't be the same

You say this is what I need to do

In order to succeed

I am who you want me to be.

Put in the box that humbles me.

Told to watch my tone.

My voice is not my own.

Change the way I dress.

Under so much pressure and stress.

Culture there is no such thing.

Assimilation we tend to cling.

My roots are my home.

Yet my identity is still unknown.

Tiana S. Wilder

Flip-Flops

It was Monday morning and Jesse had the day off, but he was never the type of man that liked to sleep in. This morning happened to be an exception, as his back was messing with him more than usual. He woke up sometime just before eight to the smell of fried eggs and instant coffee. He grumbled and rolled over, trying to fall back asleep, but his stomach got the best of him. After fighting through the pain of his back, he got up and made his way down the hall and into the kitchen.

From the state of the kitchen, it was obvious that April had been up for quite some time. On the counter sat April's coffee mug, or rather, the one she liked to use the most when she spent the night. It was pale yellow and had a chip in the handle. Zoey's lunch box sat on the counter next to the cup. It was already packed, the pink, horse-themed lunch box opens to reveal a peanut butter sandwich with the crusts cut off, a Ziploc bag full of strawberries, a Debbie cake, and a juice box. Zoey herself sat at the table, her horse-themed bookbag was already on, her shoes, however, were half-off her foot, dangling above the linoleum floor. Her eyes were glued to the television as she munched on a bowl of cereal. April stood at the stove, frying herself an egg. She wore gray yoga pants and a simple, teal T-shirt that read I'm Allergic to Mornings.

Jesse lingered in the hallway for a moment, unaware of the blissful smile on his face, and watched the scene before him. It seemed so different from how he was living two years ago. There was no yelling, no venomous words, no throwing of pots and pans. If Jesse was still with his ex-girlfriend, he would have been getting yelled at right now over something completely childish, such as buying the wrong brand of eggs or running out of paper plates.

April turned around, the bangs of her brown bob framing her rosy face. She smiled, just briefly, and said, "G'morning. You snored last night."

“Good morning.” Jesse kissed April on the cheek, “Did the phone ring? Did Naomi call yet?”

“No, not yet. If she doesn’t call by eight, I’ll just take Zoey to school myself,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “Not like I haven’t done it before.”

Jesse nodded. His ex was known for this; either calling at the last minute with a lame excuse or not bothering to show up at all. There had been several times where Naomi promised to pick up Zoey or go to one of her school plays, but never showed. It often frustrated Jesse to no end, but thankfully, April was more than willing to help out when she could.

Jesse walked over to Zoey and placed a kiss on her head. He quickly checked Zoey’s bag to make sure she had her reading book and homework folder. He then started to fix himself some breakfast, toast and microwave bacon, before sitting down at the table. April joined them a few minutes later, her now slightly cold coffee in tow.

“You go to work at 10, right?” asked Jesse.

“Yeah. Gotta open up the boutique for Nancy.” April took a sip of her coffee and eyed her boyfriend suspiciously. “Why?”

Jesse shook his head. “No reason.”

April made a face but said nothing, and the rest of breakfast was filled with chewing sounds and the occasional comment from Zoey about what was happening in her cartoon.

At 8:10 a.m., Naomi was nowhere to be found, nor was she heard from, so April and Zoey made their way to the elementary school just a few blocks down from Jesse’s apartment. He watched them from the window for a moment, Zoey clinging onto April’s arm as they walked. After making sure that they were gone, Jesse rushed back into the bedroom.

Jesse dug through his dresser drawer. Underneath his half-folded shirts and socks, Jesse found the small box that he had held onto

for almost three months now. Inside was the ring he hoped to give to April soon. Despite his confidence in himself, and despite how sure he was that she would say yes, Jesse hid it away right after he bought it. He never felt like there was a right time, a right place, or a right way to propose to April. Not only had they been friends since they met in a Dungeons and Dragons group in community college, but she was one of his most supportive friends during his breakup with Naomi. April helped him through every crazy twist and turn, from the custody battle to the incident where Naomi somehow got into the apartment and ruined all of his clothes. It felt surprisingly natural when she started spending the night. Soon after, she started dropping Zoey off at daycare in the morning and storing an extra set of clothes in his dresser. Now, she practically lived at his apartment, save for the nights she didn't want to drive halfway across town to work.

He weighed the box in his hand, thinking about whether today, a simple Monday, would be the right day to propose. The weather was nice, and she would get off work at around 7. He could have Zoey dropped off at his mother's house and get dinner prepared before April got home. Maybe even flowers if he was able to stop by the flower shop before noon. As he debated on the matter, there was a sudden knock on the door.

Jesse rushed to the door, assuming that April and Zoey had forgotten something. Instead, there stood Naomi with one hand on her hip and car keys dangling in the other. Jesse couldn't help but notice that she had kept the key chain he got her on their trip to Myrtle Beach. The tacky, glittery flip-flop was a reminder of their past, and it made Jesse cringe. At times, he wondered how they ever got together in the first place.

The blonde woman looked him up and down, her judging gaze making Jesse uncomfortable, and then leaned forward to peer into his apartment, "Where's Zoey?"

"She's already gone. April took her to school."

Naomi frowned at the mention of April. The two of them had never gotten along, and the fact that Jesse and April started dating after

their breakup certainly didn't help the situation.

"You let her take Zoey to school?" she asked.

"She's my girlfriend."

"It wasn't necessary."

"Her new school starts at 8:15. I've told you that."

"I could've gotten her there in time."

Jesse looked at the clock on the wall. "...It's eight 8:15 right now."

Naomi crossed her arms and squinted at him. "Like I said, I could've gotten her there." Naomi stepped forward, inviting herself into the apartment. She looked around and Jesse watched as her expression grew more and more sour. "She's still into that cutesy bullshit?"

Jesse frowned and looked around the apartment. April's additions, while noticeable, certainly weren't overt. Yes, he had a few more plants than he was used to and yes, he now had throw pillows of all things, but he felt like the changes made the apartment feel homier.

"It's not cutesy," said Jesse. "It's just...nice."

Naomi scrunched her nose. "Hm. I see she got rid of my coffee table."

"I got rid of it. You broke it, remember?"

Naomi opened her mouth to retort but quickly shut it. They both knew that she was in the wrong. The two lapsed into silence for a moment before Naomi looked down. "What's that?"

Jesse followed her gaze and realized his mistake. If it truly had been April at the door, he would have ruined everything. "I-It's... It's none of your business."

"Is that a ring?" Naomi snatched the box from his hand.

"Hey! Give me that back!" Jesse reached over to grab it back from her, but Naomi shoved him back.

She opened the box despite his protests. Inside the box was a ring that the seller had as “vintage inspired”. It had a white gold band and a pear-shaped diamond. The ring certainly wasn’t anything to brag about, but it was still nice, and Jesse knew that it was something April wouldn’t be ashamed of showing to her co-workers the next day.

Naomi’s face fell. “Is this an engagement ring?”

“...yeah,” said Jesse warily.

“Why?”

“Why? What do you mean why?”

“Are you marrying her?”

“I hope to.”

Naomi turned towards him with a hurt expression in her face. “... you never tried to propose to me.”

Jesse looked down at the ground, unsure of what to say. He had thought about proposing to her at one point, before everything went downhill. But as things grew more tense between them, as the fighting and yelling occurred more often, he had to ask himself one question: Is this what I want for the rest of my life?

“Naomi...April and I have a pretty good thing going. This just seems like a step in the right direction.”

Naomi glared at him. “But it wasn’t with me?”

“Look, Naomi, I get it. You’re jealous.” At that, Naomi scoffed. “We were together for a long time. But I’ve known April for much longer. She’s been a great friend and wonderful partner. What we had...it was... something. But I’ve moved on. I hope you have too.”

Naomi’s eyes grew wet, and Jesse watched as she tried to blink the tears away. “Here.” She quickly shoved the box back into his hands. Jesse wrapped his hands around tightly, afraid that Naomi would try to snatch it away again. “Do what you want,” she said

and turned to storm off.

At that same moment, April walked in. The two women almost ran into each other before stopping and staring at one another. As they stood in front of each other, Jesse realized how different the two women truly were. Naomi was tall, blonde and lithe. She was the type of woman you would expect to see splayed out in an advertisement in a magazine, body bent in a foreign yet alluring way. April, on the other hand, was short, curvy, and a bit plain looking. The exact opposite of Naomi. Naomi was known for her erratic and dramatic behavior, and April was known for remaining calm even when situations were dire. Even as they stared at each other, one could see how Naomi readied herself for a confrontation, squaring her shoulders and fixing her posture to make herself seem taller, while April put on a more friendly demeanor.

“Hey, Naomi. How are you?” asked April, her voice chipper.

“Fine. I heard you took Zoey to school.”

April nodded. “Yeah, just got back. She did say that she hoped you would come by tomorrow.”

Naomi narrowed her eyes at April and said, “I’ll see what I can do.” Without even saying goodbye, Naomi pushed past April and stomped away, the fierce click of her boots echoing down the hall.

April let out a sigh. “Phew. Felt like there was a bomb in here.”

Jesse quickly attempted to hide the ring box in the pocket of his sweatpants. “Yeah. I-I’m sorry about that,” he said, hoping April wouldn’t notice his strange behavior.

“It’s fine. She’s Naomi.” April rolled her shoulder backwards. “Though, you know if she wanted to fight, I could take her, right?” April jokingly put her fists up and laughed.

Jesse smiled. “I bet you could.”

April gave her boyfriend a quick squeeze. “I’m going to get ready for work, ‘kay?”

As April got dressed and put on her make-up, Jesse placed the ring back into his hiding spot in the drawer. He cleaned the kitchen and straightened up Zoey's room, putting away all her toys. By the time he started folding the load of laundry he had left in the dryer, April was done getting ready. She gave him a quick kiss before heading off to work.

As soon as Jesse was sure that April was well on her way to work, he sprang into action. He called his mother and arranged for Zoey to be dropped off at her place. His mother, of course, was ecstatic, and it took Jesse almost a whole hour to get her off the phone. He then ran to the grocery store and picked up all the ingredients necessary for his signature chicken rigatoni. He stopped by the flower shop, picked up a beautiful bouquet, and even bought a few tealight candles to go on the table. When Jesse arrived home, he started setting everything up, placing the fragrant roses and lilies in a clear vase. He began prepping dinner, chopping up the chives, garlic, and fresh parsley, the herby scent filling the air. By the time he got done, Jesse had wished he had eaten a snack before trying to cook.

At 2, Jesse picked up Zoey and dropped her off at his mother's, who promised Zoey that they would have a girl's night full of Barbie movies and cookies. This was enough to distract the six-year-old into complying, and she happily went with her grandmother. Before pulling off, Jesse's mother tried to give him a few words of advice, telling him to time it just right, and if April came home angry, just scrap the whole thing and save the proposal for another day.

Jesse made a quick stop at the liquor store, grabbed a bottle of fancy champagne, and returned to his apartment. As he drove up to his apartment building, Jesse couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off. His worries were confirmed as he opened his apartment door. The kitchen had been ransacked. The flowers he had set up were thrown onto the floor, all of the petals ripped and smashed into piles of mush. The dishes were thrown out of their respective cabinets and shattered on the ground. Food had been smeared all over the counter and walls. The living room was not much better,

with all of the books thrown off the shelf and a number of photos missing from their spots on the wall. The throw pillows had been ripped open and the television had been smashed.

Jesse ran quickly into Zoey's room and let out a sigh of relief when he found it untouched. The bathroom was the same. He then cautiously stepped into his bedroom, hoping that no one was inside. His room had been completely ruined, his lamps broken, all of the drawers in his nightstand and dresser pulled out. Jesse felt a cold chill rush over him. He hoped, prayed even, that the ring was still there. He didn't care about the dishes, the television, or the couch. But if the ring was gone...

Jesse quickly searched through the drawer and found the box. But all of the joy that seeing the box gave him quickly went away as he opened it. Inside was not the ring that he planned to give April, but rather, a tacky flip-flop key chain. Jesse took the key chain out and flipped it over. He was immediately greeted by the phrase "Fuck You" written in sharpie on the back.

