

Edisto River Review

2022



Edisto River Review 2022

Claflin University

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FROM THE EDITOR

A look back at the short history of the *Edisto River Review* reveals enduring storylines relevant to Claflin University's student population, to South Carolina, America, and even the world: South Carolina's Orangeburg Massacre, recent racial issues haunting America as called out by Black Lives Matter and the killing of George Floyd, and, in this issue, the social, economic, and human cost of a once-a-century global pandemic, Covid-19. As I am writing this, there is the Russian invasion of Ukraine with Vladimir Putin looking to recreate the old Soviet Union, Donald Trump's attempt to overturn the election and change the face of American Politics in the form of The Big Lie, and the Supreme Court turning back the decision on women's right to abortion.

Whatever flaws the world has—and we certainly have plenty—life on our planet is not solely defined by our latest politics, economics, and social challenges. Human culture and art, including literature, are not simple mirrors of history. In fact, though it may reflect history, our art often reimagines the world. Art is capable of high achievement even during the worst of times.

To these last points, the winner of this issue's fiction contest, Jerrell A. Alston's 'A Road Trip through Life,' reimagines the road trip of a girl and her dog in a surprising way. Our winning nonfiction submission, Aleona K. McQueen's 'Jeans,' is a triumph of personal identity over repression. On the other hand, McQueen's First Prize-winning poem, 'Pretty Girls,' grapples with a smothering repression of spirit. Assiya Desoky's Art Prize Winner, "Untitled," which make up the front and back covers of the journal, is

unexpected with its upbeat and colorful rendering of a masked humanity. What you will also find in this edition, along with selected internal art, are second- and third-place cover art submissions. We hope you enjoy viewing and reading these unique and original works as much as we have.

I will start my conclusion with thanking Dr. Sharon Gile for serving as associate poetry editor. 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, and Keith. It has been a pleasure working with Jerrell Alston, the student intern who was 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. We are grateful to Drs. Mitali Wong and Peggy Ratliff 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 in-progress 2023 Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, and Cover Art contests. I am hopeful that submissions for our 2023 theme—Gun Violence: How has it Affected You and your Family?—will bear out art’s capacity to elevate and surprise.

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. Happy reading!

Nick R. Robinson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English

Editor, *Edisto River Review*

**2022 Department of English Creative Writing
Awards**

Claflin University

Art

First Place: Assiya Desoky, *Untitled*

Second Place: Austin G. Reynolds, *Untitled*

Third Place: Breeze O. Smith, *Untitled*

Fiction

First Place: Jerrell A. Alston, *A Road Trip through Life*

Second Place: Aleona K. McQueen, *Peanut Butter and
Honey Sandwiches*

Third Place: Don' Quese J. McCoy, *A Woman Scorned*

Non-Fiction

First Place: Aleona K. McQueen, *Jeans*

Second Place: Essence H. Perkins, *Living with Covid*

Third Place: Aleona K. McQueen, *Summer of 2020*

Poetry

First Place: Aleona K. McQueen, *Pretty Girls*

Second Place: Jerrell A. Alston, *My Forgotten Caretakers*

Third Place: Leilani Waters, *What Alice Forgot*

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A Letter to
Society

First Place Fiction Winner
Jerrell A. Alston

A Road Trip through Life

This was the moment when the world held the dichotomy of time and space in their hands. Forgive us they said, forgive us.

Nola Sanders was never much of a road hog when she drove. She would hold the wheel firmly and shoot her eyes at the edge of each blind spot before making left or right turns. She would turn on the a/c before and after she reached her unimportant destination. She would carefully prey upon the speed limit before, unnoticeably reaching the speedometer's breaking point. The only difference was, no one would ever raise a finger or raise their tone when she made these resolutions. Her potent presence brew new emotions in the people she met and knew. Even her father would simply ease into the backseat with his black-toed feet out and read a small, black-sheeted newspaper. He and along with every other foolish soul would ignore the world that she built and destroyed.

During their daily morning drive to the farm, her father leans his left arm against the left backdoor handle and lifts his head onto the seat cushion. At that moment, he saw a massive, black police tank drive on the opposite section of the road, hidden behind a large forest of trees. The speed from this massive tank manages to shoot gravel fireballs far enough to hit their Ford's left door, creating small dents.

"Those damn things can surely put a damper on our mornings. Always rushin' down the street like some liquor carrying street junky who finally got his hands on a hot rug. Makes me sick, I swears it to ya, Nola." Her father sighs

softly and ingests a green pill from a small, red plastic cup after his emotional rant.

“Nola....you came home last night without turning on the moon, shiner machine. Ever since-”

“Pah, stop it!” Nola jerks her head sideways and effortlessly throws a plastic bag at the back seat.

Her father wails his arms to block the slow, floating bag, “What?!?! Y-you just don’t talk about him much. Him and your mother just moved into that baby blue house down on Holly street last week. and I want to know what-”

“You just want to know about mother and why she came back to Glossington. You don’t give a rats hoot about my half-brother.”

Her father bats his eyes at the car ceiling. His lips and cheekbones snarl at the ceiling, proving to be a formidable adversary.

“Yeah well, I have a right to know about the stupid boy. Just cause he ain’t mine, don’t mean I can’t worry about him. We are in the middle of the hiatus, after all!! Hell, we’d all be lucky to survive within the year.”

The hiatus grew on most people in Glossington. Glossington’s Special Authority Corp and Secret Operatives Force were at odds for the first time. It all started when The United Bureau of Protection lost its 56th commander and former war veteran, Dowson Clowly. Many believed him to be an outright lunatic who plagued the world with his infectious war tactics and his past fallouts with his predecessors. The United Bureau became a clashing organization that divided many different units and districts. Glossington was one of the few that preserved the traditional philosophies of the Late Commander Clowly. Some felt too self-conscious about furtively poisoning the water mills in the area or exacerbating the area’s financial state. Some

departed from their profitable positions and left the town or became what they hunted, every day.

As the morass of the morning fog dissipates, Nola continues to drive her route and calmly reaches for a piece of gum left in the driver's pocket handle. Nola was always reaching out for the smallest of things while driving. At age seven, Nola snuck out of the house and took her father's brand new 2001 Dessert Green Jeep Cherokee. Unfortunately for her father, Nola was the quickest of learners and she was never taught about disciplinary boundaries. When she sped down the streets of Glossington, her eyes emboldened by the exhilaration and adrenaline, she quickly noticed that her five Blueberry Puff Dollies were facing the cushion of the passenger seat. During this prolonged getaway, she grabbed each doll and placed them on their plush bottoms in the passenger seat. The most memorable part of that night was the delicate, dry smell of watermelons and cantaloupes refreshing her spirit to the point of no return and indeed she never truly did. Her inner child became one with a mature reality.

The road to their nursery continued on. Nola begins to tap the steering wheel as she drives into a marsh road with long-haired weeds growing in the cement. The warm air flails large gusts of fog onto the windows as Nola is driving by. Nola's father simply rocks his head against the cushion.

"Someone's gotta be the villain, father. Why not us?", Nola smiles into the rear-view mirror.

"Ha! You couldn't sound anymore foolish!" Her father chuckles as he pushes his face toward the window.

Nola drives the large, rusty black Ford into the gated lot of a massive fruit and vegetable farm. The countless time of entry never ceases to amaze her young mind. She almost feels bad for aging. Near the farm is a swampy collection of

two large summer marshes, a forest of cranberry vines and grey molasses, and thirteen feet of green-sloshy water. Next to the columns of plants and fruits was a large tower releasing gold dust from the rooftop. On top of the surface was a small black wooden cabin with three large tractors parked in the front lawn. The farm itself, is covered with peaches, mangos, and pineapples. The peaches had yellowish-green flowers blooming from its stem. A beautiful chasm that causes most to sink in a long-forgotten pit of purity.

Nola places the car in park, her hand pushing with great force to keep the loose handle from detaching. The two get out of the car and walk through the skyscraping yellow and orange sunset fields. Suddenly, a large grey Shiba Inu runs from the cabin door. With its long, lengthy legs, the dog reaches Nola with a benevolent bark. The dog presses the back of his ears against Nola's thigh.

"Hey Percy!! You want me to scratch your ears, huh?" Nola says playfully. She reaches down and packs her hands with Peach Rose Flowers and places them against Percy's ears.

She rubs them against her backside, near her cranium.

"There, now does that feel better?" Percy whines softly and lowers her head with appeasement.

Nola takes a white folded note from her back pocket. Percy lays against her chest and stomach and drops her head on the ground. Nola lays her elbows softly against Percy's body and opens the note.

Nola smiles softly at the subpar handwriting and plucks a small Peach Rose from the nearest peach. As she stares at the wrinkles and deep folds, the thoughts of her brother emerge.

Seeing him every winter was her time to grow as a local farmer and a beloved sibling. Her brother grew up on a farm but loathed it. After planning for brutal periods of the agricultural year, she and he would build gardening gadgets with old tools, nails, computer pieces, glue, shower curtains, and bed sheets. Nola would spend every blinking moment with this unforgettable partner of crime. She would spend her mornings cooking the eggshells and juicing the oranges while laughing at his corny jokes and ridiculous humor. She would chase him as they ran down nameless streets and sun shined corners. Her small arms wrapped around him as she fell asleep on his chest. Love brought them flowers every day and family finally felt real. Seven years later and she still sometimes hold onto those dreams.

“As much as I hate to say it, Percy, I don’t think of him as my real brother anymore. I just hope he can live up to their expectation. I think he’ll make a great soldier.” The wind skins her face with cold air, her eyelashes abruptly disrupt her vision. As the soft stomping of weeds and roses increases, Percy barks at the aroma of old-fashioned men’s cologne and spring water.

“My father isn’t that bad, Percy.” Nola chuckles under her breath.

Nola’s father walks up with Mr. Holland. Mr. Holland is the proud, rotund owner of the prosperous farm. He is wearing black and green striped collared shirt and blue jeans. His well-known family name has carried Glossington through the thunderstorm and beyond the Reaper’s Harvest. His great grandfather grew the now popular ground fruit, which saved Glossington from starvation. His grandmother brewed large amounts of pineapple seeds that provided the town with much needed Vitamin Z nutrients. Even Mr. Holland has experimented with plant-based foods and has

even created a new hydrational bean that can be used to replenish people suffering from dehydration.

Mr. Holland sets a large black bucket on the ground. His voice was scratchy and groggy. He would casually speak without warning and he never knew when to stop his ongoing banter.

“Gosh, looks like ya’ll two husband and wife, Nola. Don’t get too close with that one, she’ll leave you faster than my Navy-Seal daughter. Hahahaha. Ask the grimy golden retriever sitting the house watching all five of her pups. Ain’t that something! since, when does the father watch the pups. This one is a true heartache. Man, did I ever tell you she ate all my damn fried bacon on the stove. Somethin’ sure as hell told me to wrap that sucker up and place it in my duffel bag, but I didn’t follow my first mind.”

Nola averts her eyes, “Mr. Holland, she’ll be back. I promise.”

Mr. Holland picks up a peach from the garden and bites into it with his first seven front teeth. The juice of the peach leaks from his yellow bones and flushes his lower gums and eventually sits on his tongue.

Mr. Holland stares softly at Nola as she continues to read the note, “When you thinking about leaving your father?”

Nola’s father laughs and leans onto Mr. Holland’s shoulder and leans into his ear.

“Don’t give her any ideas, Daquan. She’s all I’ve got.”

“We all know that.” Mr. Holland turns to his small cabin.

“Alright Nola, you make the roundtrip around town and we’ll pack these babies off for the market tonight.”

“That depends if I come along, father.” Nola stares at the ground and sharply looks upward at her father’s gaze. The two lock eyes like two rattlesnakes surrounding a deer carcass. Both inches away from striking without fear or mercy.

“You’ve worked hard enough this week. Just say hi to your mother when you see her tonight, okay.”

“You can always just go there yourself. She would like to see you. Breathing and well.”

Nola couldn’t tell exactly if her father was still breathing. She could faintly see his blood through his brittle brown skin. The garden whistled as the three sat in silence. Percy, then stands on all fours and walks back to the cabin.

“Maybe I will, one day. But today, you get your butt in that Ford and sell those orders. You need to sell about 300, if you want that new record player for your birthday.”

“Okay, father.”

Nola would compare her days with little logic, she always based it on paper in a bucket. The bucket of tickets were more desirable than the tickets of BC Greece Theatre. As she contemplates her life, Nola grabs the bucket and rushes over to the car. Her silky-smooth almond skin reflects out of the driver’s blind spot as she prepared to turn on the Ford. Nola’s father beckons the dog towards the black Ford.

“Come on, Percy.” Nola ducks as Percy leaps into the driver’s window and climbs onto the passenger seat.

“Nola. Don’t lose my dog. She’s the only one that actually gets out their kennel in the morning.”

“I won’t, Mr. Holland. Love you, father! I will be back home by midnight.”

Nola’s father places his right hand towards his heart, creating half of a heart. Nola sticks her tongue out and places her left hand by her heart. She turns to face a summer’s night.

Within an instant, a fretful blue jay creates a flow of darkness in the sky. A swarm of bees melt the trees and boil the puddles created by the fruitful field. A sweltering voice brightens the way as Nola turns the ignition key and speeds away.

The large and hybrid town of Glossington had historical trenches and many potholes where businesses and houses sit. The people originally came to the town for its substantial income and high success rates in the work field. The town's founder, Glossington Flourel was one of the many cash cows that invested millions into a town of little to no residence. After the epidemic, the population scheme transition to economic growth and preservation. The morass of citizens were highly respected doctors, politicians, business owners, and stockbrokers. Middle class workers realized where the currency flowed and soon the town became a river of abundance. Even with the many catastrophes throughout history, the town stayed afloat and the people knew what came first.

Cooper Street, a carnage filled wasteland that devoured all of its predators. The streets were hollow, yet perfectly structured and polished. The street shops were in fact abandoned, but newly built. The people rested in their dens, with the outside deceiving most travelers. Nola always believed this particular neighborhood was cursed with wicked success and prosperity. The highest of incomes came and the most volatile of the criminals stayed within their bodies.

Nola arrives to the street and reaches back for the black bucket, now filled with white tickets. As she opens the door, the small creak of the hinges push all sound out of the street. Doors suddenly flashed open; darkness is the only visible sight. Politicians, Board of Directors, Journalists,

Nobel Prize Winners, and their flock of disobedient underlings storm towards her Black Ford with large wads of cash, credit cards, and blue coded diamonds. Uproar circulated throughout the street.

Nola wisely pushes holds the handle and pushes the window up. She grabs a small loudspeaker from the back of the Ford and opens the car's built in sunroof.

"Everyone please jus-just make a line directly in front of the driver's window. I will lower the window slowly to make a quick and easy exchange. If you attempt to attack me...well, my dog will hurt you."

The slight pauses in her voice loosen the crowd's attentive behavior. Nola lowers the car sunroof and turns back to the front seat. Her heart pounds through her spiral tie-dyed shirt as the anxiety grips the back of her neck and her entire stomach.

"Okay Percy, time to make some money," Nola pats Percy on the back of her neck. Percy simply sticks her tongue out and breathes out of her mouth.

Nola turns to her car window. The crowd of homeowners engulfed every part of the window, many fading into the distance. The first customer was Anderson Vools, a council member and infamous politician. The former senator was dressed in a black blazer with a business casual white-collar shirt, black dress pants, and soft toed church shoes.

"Hello Senator Vools, I hope all is well at home," Nola hands him the ticket as he hands her the wad of a cash.

The former senator solemnly looks up and glares into the eyes of Nola. His pompous attitude caressed his distinguished posture. His voice was grainy and dilated.

“Young Nola, it’s always a pleasure to see you and Percy here. If you don’t mind me asking, why aren’t you ever in school? My boys say they never see you there.”

Nola’s chest noticeably twitches as she places the money in a small lockable compartment under her seat.

“Well, I-” Percy walks up to Mr. Vools and reaches his head out of the car window. Percy licks Mr. Vools greasy blonde lock sticking out above his small forehead.

Mr. Vools steps backwards with his left arm in front of his face, “Ugh. How repulsive!” Nola chuckles and hands Mr. Vools a wet wipe sitting in the car’s glove department.

“I’m sorry, Former Senator. Here,” Mr. Vools scoffs softly and snatches the wet wipe out of Nola’s hand.

Mr. Vools walks off and places the white ticket into his right pocket, the former senator carrying his pride in his briefcase and his morality in between the bumps of his round, wrinkled face painted on a canvas.

Nola worked tirelessly as the wads of currency were thrown at her like change at a street performer. After three hours of sales, she reaches into her bucket to feel only half of the tickets remain. She turns away from the crowd and raises the window firmly. The remaining crowd suddenly chants and hollers at the sight of Nola changing gears. They begin to push the truck back and forth. Percy wearifully barks and leaps back and forth in the seats.

Nola attempts to change gears, but the teetering truck locked in place as it went up and down into the air. Without a second thought, Nola reaches into the bucket and begins to tear off the inkless white pieces of tickets. She continuously rips apart the paper, sorting the black from the white. In Nola’s mind the worst was yet to come. The enthusiasm that showed with her quick hand movements explored a dawning predilection. Her calm body frolicked as the car rose and fell.

As the black, worn tires aligned with the edges of her blind spots, as the soft air of anxiety and fear hit her face; her mind finally stood on a new staircase. The hissing of the car engine harmonized in her eardrums and navigated her heartbeat to an endless highway. Nola allowed the excitement and horror of life to run its routine like currents into the electronic diorama of her enchanted world.

Nola quickly throws the bucket through the slanted sunroof. The bucket bounces down the street with small pieces of paper flying out. The crowd drops the truck on its tires and flies towards the bucket in a large herd Nola then proceeds to back out of the street and makes course to the next world, awaiting her.

“Woaah! We got em good, Percy!” Nola turns towards Percy and notices her gnawing on the torn pieces of paper with an unapologetic face.

“Percy, noooo!!” Nola whines softly and leans her chin against the wheel.

Nola sat on this wheel and began to think of Senator Vools’ words.

She contemplated the morning doors opening and walking into the throat of a dystopia. The classes were illuminated with black smoke. Small black spiders crawled from the lockers and air vents. For nine years, Nola hid in her trenches, fought her enemies with pitchforks and stakes, and ate her own mediocrity as the grades piled onto her. The professors analyzed the deluded, intellectual apparatus that kept her alive for so many years. They deemed her unworthy of learning a vast amount of knowledge within a 180-day school year. And they deemed her useless. After a long day’s work, she wept in the corners of her bedroom doors, in the backroom dryers, in the attic’s dusty atmosphere, and in the bed of a corn field. The more she thought about her constant

derailment, she sank and those mistakes ached like bites. Small, restless bites. The black Ford began to rock and leap off the road as they sped through the brittle concrete.

The drive through the shadows of black trees and thick vines became aggravating. Nola scorched the steering wheel with her fiery palms as she sped past pedestrians. Nola forgot about the days where her injuries kept her body and soul vulnerable to the world. When she was just nine years old and her white, flurry tail barely wagged from her cargo shorts. Her and her father would go out searching for the mighty dusk frogs every night during the summer. These dusk filled nights gazed upon reality's true virtue and certainly questioned it. The temperature was always chilled, yet lasted in small intervals of warm, the animals mimicked each other to preserve life, and the dusk moon shined throughout the blind world. It's grey, misty moonlight surprisingly drowned the sorrows of many. Tranquility smiled on the people, but Nola sat in silence most days and nights, thinking about ways to catch the dusk frogs. She caught over one thousand dusk frogs and released them in the in a small dugout in the baseball field.

It was one particular evening where her father thought that it was appropriate to leave her concentrated and playful spirit in the woods with a hot dog wrapper and the house key. The sun stretched its eyes out at the ceremonial dance. Nola squatted near a large rock with grass fuzzes on its chin. Nola leaned her body against the smooth texture of the rock's back. Her heart raced with little signs of wavering and her hooves kicked off the ground, hoping for a clear and graceful finish. Their eyes were dark blue and their glossy skin glowed dark orange from the constant stalking of their overseer. Nola watched their bulging throats exude air and life. The dusk frog's soft heartbeats pounded the ground like

the feet of giants. Unfortunately, these three dusk frogs were aware of everything. The sun finally started to falter, and the sky grew purple. These creatures were smart enough to know the dangers of being oblivious to their surroundings. One eye looking at the drenched green leaf hanging from a water plant, but the other was looking at the light brown dirt that covered the earth's naked heart. These frogs, sat like statues and questioned nothing as the dusk decimated their lives, with every existing moment. Nola continuously watched them grow and their presence still remained small. Suddenly, one of the dusk frogs hopped onto the large rock. Nola cowered behind and as she timed the movement of her childish nerves, a matured spiraling bullet struck where her imagination expanded the least. Nola was hit in the upper left side of her throat.

She sank to the ground with her neck gushing. Her voice was quaint and breathless, her arms felt like tree trunks ripped from its first-born roots, and her chest ached a tender feeling, but carved out every emotion with an unsteady in and out process. The night began to look so clear; her skin became the dirt and her eyes looked into two different worlds. One eye socket lazily laid in front of the smallest speck of paper and the other looked into the wide mouth of a reptile. Her father came twelve hours later, horrified, and betrayed by the wilderness, but entirely relieved that death was not there. Somehow this hunter evaded death with the most fatal strike that even God cannot stop. Dusk finally fell on its knees in relief, winning the night for its people. Still as Nola's white whiskers grew in length and thickness, as her tail curled around her plump bottom, and as her eyes changed from a soft almond brown to a dark bronze; she survived on. Her wits slowly catching up to her hardened

will and her heart closing the wounds left by an arbitrary slap to the face of humanity.

The evening was nigh, and Percy started to become restless. During the fiasco of Cooper, Percy cut the inside of her paw on the seat buckle lever at the bottom of the seat. Percy simply slobbered with its tongue at sat in the passenger seat.

“Well, we don’t have anything left...so, I guess Holly street it is. Are you ready Perc-!?!?” Starstruck, Nola slows the truck down and places the car gear shift in park. A moment’s time passes on the underfloor of the passenger side chair sat a large, slippery white tail. A long and egregious hiss came from the side of Percy’s chair, leading onto the passenger floor. Percy’s fur began to protrude outwards, and the tips slicked into frozen picks. The black Ford’s engine roared with a formidable surge of power and energy. The snake begins to peer his eyes over the sunrise. Its black pupils flowed into Percy’s chest and chatted with it gracefully. In seconds, those ruthless eyes could rip out everything that both Percy and Nola loved.

Nola carefully placing her left hand against the glove department, softly taps it with her knuckle. Her eyes glared with resilience and fear. Her chattering teeth sank within her jawline, but they didn’t ache or bleed. She just concentrates on the terror that resembles an identical twin. Nothing came to mind. How did the snake get into their fortress through the secretive forest? Why didn’t Percy bark, scream, or even turn to Nola for security as the snake intruded its space? Why didn’t Nola notice this devil creep into her heart? Now, was not the time to hesitate on the dusk of the night or on the possible bullet waiting for her head to pop from the impenetrable rock. Nola needs to act quickly to save what

she loved. To save what she is, this time, quicker than any swing from the hands of God.

The snake's thick, scaly body ascended into view, exposing his position and stature. Nola has never encountered such a specimen in person. Her father would go on about killing pythons and anacondas during his days overseas as a Potato Vender in The Wet Water Regions, and she believed him. So, she did what any young, impressionable fool would do. Nola looks into the creature's eyes. Their breath inches away. She lifts her hand near the temple of the creature's head, it hisses back away quickly. The creature opens its mouth; fifteen large, sharpened teeth dripping with white venom posed beautifully. Nola continues to look into the snake's eyes, seeing through the facade. She continues to push forward, placing her hand onto the temple of its head. Her fingers felt each scale and bonded quickly like the blood of any defeated animal. The creature leans into her hand and the venom accidentally leaks into the scriptures of her palms. The venom simply slides from her light brown palm and drops into the car's leather fabric. She leads the drooly mouth snake to her side of the car and out the window. As the snake leaves, her hand shakes with purposeful movement.

"Percy, you okay?" Percy licks the side of Nola's face.

"You make we wanna cry sometimes. If that snake would have bitten you, I don't know how I would live with myself. Especially with knowing you would have died before seeing Mr. Holland," Nola turns on the engine and drives into the wavy evening of her secretive forest.

"It's getting late. What do you say we go off course? Just this once," Nola grabs Percy's paw and squeezes it. Nola

was glad that her soul was taken as Percy's lived on for them both. Nola sets off once again, this time off course.

Holly Street was not as grand, nor as lively as it was during the epidemic. Many of the real estate owners were hesitant with Flourel's plans because of the obvious signs of depreciation, but his investments proved to be effective, and Holly Street became plentiful. Even though, the property value wasn't the cause of its dignified reputation, it did contribute to their fabulous aesthetic. Their real source of glory came from dog tags line around the crown of its head. Thousands of military cadets, sergeants, and commanders crowded the cul-de-sacs and apartments. Glossington's military requested specific land reservations for their troops and thankfully, family members.

Nola drove down the road of high-top roofs, spiraling stairwells, low-cut hairstyles, and one hideous-looking statue of a half-burnt horse named Toto. This horse was one of many that were burnt during the early century battles of Glossington. A special firebomb was set at the barricades of the city lines. The horses were stretched wide across the front lines and the soldiers firmly grasped their saddles. The army of fortitude stood and waited for the enemy, but there was no enemy. Not a single opposition stood at their solemn posts for miles. Just one single bomb. A bomb that summoned flashfires with its unforgiving spell book. A care free demeanor that lit hundreds of soldiers into the sky like fireworks. The horses ran in different directions, their skin and hair peeling off their bodies like potato skins. Within minutes each horse sank to ground and contorted their bodies into an awkward position before meeting death. Somehow Toto's body was still in his primary position. The thousands ran away, but Toto could not flee. A simple horse was all it took to remind the people of how the body breaks down from

a familiar heat. The skin folds and rolls down the body, the flesh sizzles into a bubbly black welp, and the bone turns into a solid artifact, stiff as charcoal. But what happens to the heart? Does it burn or does it hide within its cartilage walls, breathing in smoke? What did Toto's heart do that day? After the hoses sprayed down the front line, one soldier decided to spray Toto's body, feeling sympathetic to a once useful tool. The people stood in awe as they watched the last piece brown skin shredded off his right side. The symmetrical beast stood, one side burnt to a bloody, pink crispy, the other a deep brown layer of mystery.

Nola always hated the story of Toto, she felt it added salt to the wound of animal cruelty. Either way she drove along, ignoring the history that created her town's story. Nola began turning the black Ford down the cul-de-sac of triggering joy.

The closer she got to her mother's house, the more she thought of her father. Their separation was a promise to stay the hell away from each other. Nola was conscious of both of her parent's flaws. One was a neglectful, drunk who wanted the world to raise a troublesome child. The other neglected to realize that true, unconditional love lasted longer than ten years. Especially, when you have two separate children.

"I wonder what they are doing right now. Eating, chatting, or unpacking. Oh man, I hope they'll be happy to see me. I hope he'll be happy to see me." Percy leans her head onto Nola's lap.

"Aw Percy, my mother hates dogs, so you'll have to stay in the car for a bit. Don't worry, I'll just say hi and we'll be on our way back home. I promise you."

Nola parks the black Ford onto the sidewalk, opposite of the bright blue three story house. The lawn,

perfectly cut to the right length. The bushes were trimmed to make five perfect little hearts planted in front of the first window. The driveway was spotless and polished with a fresh coating of grey paint. Bells and golden wind chimes hung from the front door ceiling. Everything was new. As she walks to the front door an awful aroma scarred her nostrils. She placed her left hand across her nose and closed both nostrils before enduring more of the stench. She knocks softly, no one answers. She knocks again, no one answers.

“Hello, Willis!! Mom! I’m here. I hope you guys got into town safely. Guys?” Nola turns the doorknob and walks into the house, specifically the living room. The lights are shot out, glass shards engulf the entire wooden paneled floor, and blood leaks from every object of the house.

“Mommm!?!?! Mom!!!? Willis!?!” Nola runs through each part of the house, barely keeping her balance as she glides across the floors and staircases.

When nothing is discovered, she walks back down, spinning and turning with tears brimming in her eyes. This was the last thing that swept across Nola’s mind. She imagined a nice course of rolls, buttered corn, fried pork, and mashed potatoes waiting in a wrapped piece of foil in an empty. A large box of chocolates or animal cookies sitting on the table counter. She anticipated arguments, fights, and even hurtful words being thrown around the room like a football, but not this.

Nola pulls out her phone, while pushing back the frantic locks of hair crowding her face. Her first thought is to call her father.

“Hello!?!? Dad. Dad. Dad. No, no. I’m at moms. No!! She’s not here, Dad! There’s blood everywhere and glass!!! I can’t find them!!!!!! I don’t know where they- No! I jus- just walked to the house and there was blood

everywhere- there was blood-” Nola sinks to the ground in tears and places her hands across her chest. Her chest accidentally hits the speaker phone button.

“Nola!!! I’m on the way! Okay!! I’m on the way!!” Her father hangs up the phone.

As Nola drops her head to place her phone in her pockets, her knees began to soak in blood. As Percy’s barking increased, the neighborhood began to search for the victim’s hollow screams. Eventually, Nola burrows into the floor as her skin melts into the bones of her precious garden.

First Place Nonfiction Winner
Aleona K. McQueen

Jeans

Growing up there was always this idea of boys against girls. This was also found in the gender identity of clothes. Except the matter of jeans. Jeans were always an in-between that anyone could wear.

At Ruth N. Upson, an elementary school in Northeast Florida, there was only a handful of games that anyone can play, regardless of what identified you and foot-racing was one of them. I knew that if you could beat the older kids in a foot race you would be considered one of the best. I held prowess in the classroom as I was in the gifted program, but I wanted to shine on the playground. In my well-worn and dirty shell-toed K Swiss sneakers, I made my way to the basketball court where the races were being held during recess. The fourth and fifth graders still had another five minutes before they had to go in.

“Are you sure that you can run today, Kristine?” One of the twins, Carlie, had asked me. Carlie and her brother Jackson had been my best friends since kindergarten, which was a long time to a second grader. I trusted her opinion, but I knew she was the most careful, the most girly of the three of us.

“Course I can! I run every day! Today I’m gonna beat Isaiah.”

“But you’re in a dress today. Girls shouldn’t run in a dress.”

My face contorted. I had forgotten about the orange and white striped dress that I had been wearing. My mother made me put it on to match my older sister, a fifth grader. I didn't think anything about it because she let me slide on a pair of jeans underneath, but I hated the reminder. I didn't like the dress. I stood at the edge of the court gripping the front of the clothing in small fists.

"It's fine cause I'm wearing jeans."

I had gotten a sort of comfort from the feeling of denim. It was the only thing that I had gotten to wear as a kid that I didn't feel the need to fight with my mom on. Anytime she got me into a skirt, dress, or pair of shorts I would pull at it all day. I didn't enjoy it and eventually, when she realized my rough and tumble tomboy lifestyle would not just leave, she relented to jeans. Jeans wouldn't leave cherries on my knees from skating and bike riding on the street or climbing trees with the boys. Jeans could be for girls or boys. A few years later, as I sat in tears on the side of her bed saying that I never wanted to wear skirts or dresses again, she sighed and let me fill my drawers with denim. At least, until middle school.

Middle school meant no more denim. KIPP: Impact had a uniform of khaki or navy pants and skirts. I had never chosen the skirt. I was also taking the longer bus routes than I had in elementary, so I had time to learn what wasn't taught in schools. Bus rides had become a place of transition for me. I transitioned to listening to rock and alternative instead of pop. I learned that Sydney Fleming was really cute, cuter than the guys that a lot of my girlfriends had crushes on. The bus was also the place where I had learned that being "one of the guys" had apparently taken on a different meaning than it normally did.

“You know, you’re just Kris.”

“Huh?”

It was another bus ride home after a long day. My best friend, Rita, was leaning against me. She liked the feeling of uniform hoodie that I wore every day, no matter how hot the Florida heat beat down on us. We were sharing a headphone set blasting old Skillet music. I grabbed my phone and paused the song.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she sat up to look at me. “I don’t think of you as a girl or a guy, you know? You’re just Kris.”

I sat and thought about it for a second. It made sense. I didn’t like the same things that most of the kids like. I didn’t want to anything but prove myself equal to the boys in the same year. I knew I wasn’t a guy, but I felt closer to that than being a girl ever did.

I nodded at Rita and smiled. “Yeah, I’m just Kris. I get it.”

It wasn’t until I was in high school that I truly knew what those words meant. Lying in bed late at night, scrolling across the internet trying to find answers, watching youtubers such as Miles Chronicles, Ash Hardell, ARROWS, and Jade Fox. I began trying new pronouns at school with close friends, finding new names for my sexuality, styling my clothes to match various pride flags. Finding various styles that made me more comfortable. Suddenly, denim had come back into my style. My jeans became boxier and baggier, I began layering more and more but one thing had become clear, I was not a girl. I wasn’t a guy either, but I was very masculine, and I was starting to become comfortable.

“Are you heading to Pride?”

I looked up from my spot on the couch in my dorm room suite. A few of my friends had just walked into my room in jeans and t-shirts that said Claflin Pride. One of them threw a lanyard at me, knocking against the laptop on my lap. My roommate and closest friend, Folade, walked out of her room at the sound of the door closing.

“Pride where? It’s October”

“The Columbia Pride parade is today! It’s LGBT History month. Some of us are heading up!”

I had a paper due on Monday that I was working on, but it would be my first pride if I went. Folade looked at me as if she could sense my indecision.

“They have a paper due,” I sighed and picked up my phone.

“Janelle, what’s your cashapp? I have to finish this paper, but I want a non-binary flag.”

“Yeah alright, I’ll see if I can find you one, but I got it don’t worry.”

“Thanks, y’all have fun. Folade, you going?”

She denied and said she had her own work to do but asked them to bring her back a plate of food from a vendor. As they left, she looked at me.

“We’re gonna make it next year.”

We never made it the next year, due to covid and I never got my flag. However, I eventually made it to the university bookstore to buy a Claflin Pride shirt that I wore with my favorite pair of jeans. During the course of quarantine, I had fallen into the idea of not having any specific pronouns but telling anyone who decided to ask that it was He/They, so that I could have a chance of living in the

masculinity besides just the jeans. The jeans that never changed.

First Place Poetry Winner
Aleona K. McQueen

Pretty Girls

If these walls could speak they would only know how to
scream
They would scream about the hole graciously placed by the
window
Of the splatters of dried red that had nicely settled into
clawed divots
The cracks of the plaster that danced around the room

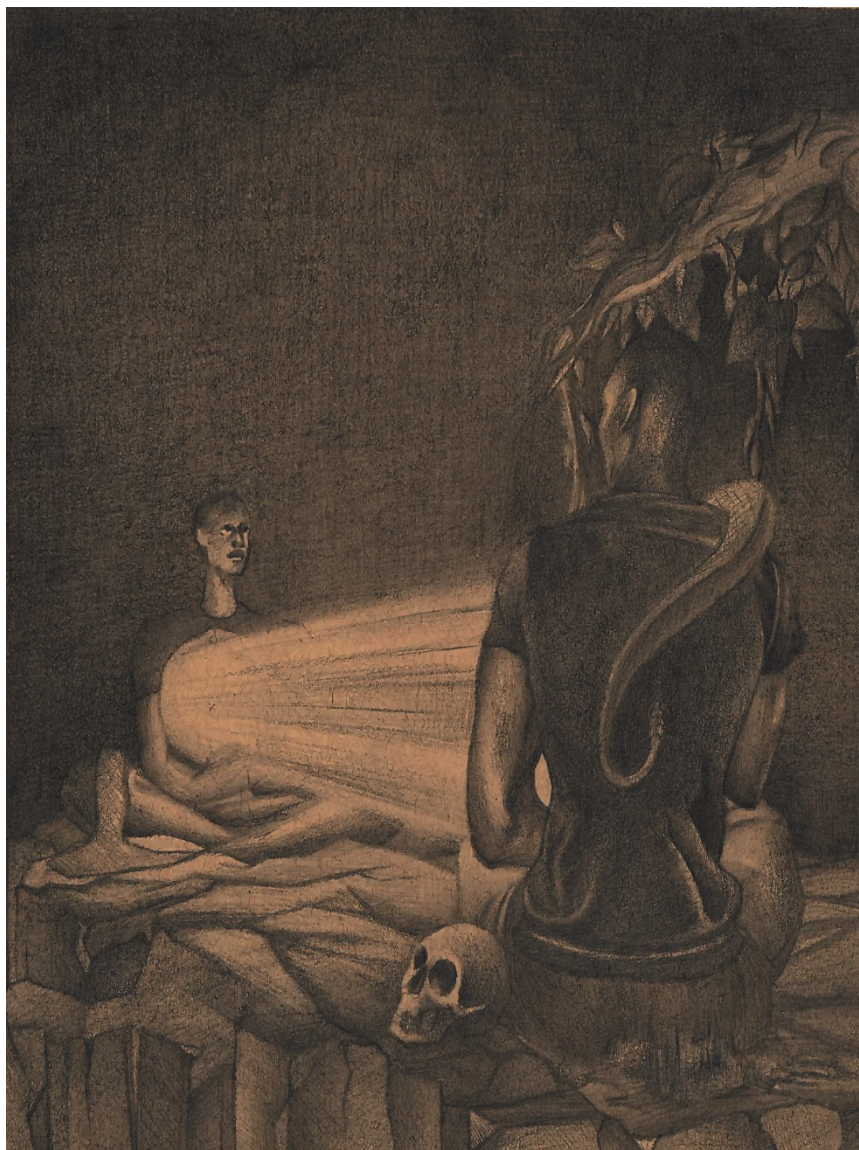
The window would whine
It would whine of the nails gingerly placed in its sill
Of the broken lock lovingly taken with a hammer
The cracks that strained from the light pulling

The door would lie
Lie about the peaceful laughing on the other side
About the strains on the lock from small tugging
The missing handle that sweetly rolled away

The floors would weep
They would weep from the small dents
From the hole that sat by the pretty rusted spoon
The dried releases from the beautiful body in the corner

The body that used to hate how it screamed
That used to detest its need to whine
Used to not want the need to lie
To wish for a place where it shouldn't weep

If this room could speak it would tell the story
But rooms do not speak
And neither do pretty girls



Courtesy of: **Austin G. Reynolds**, *Untitled*, *Front Cover of Second Place Art Cover Winner*



Courtesy of: **Austin G. Reynolds**, *Untitled*, Back Cover of
Second Place Art Cover Winner

Second Place Fiction Winner
Aleona K. McQueen

Peanut Butter and Honey Sandwiches

Sweetness should be moderated. Too much of anything is never good for you. However, once you get the taste of something sweet, savor it before letting it go. Never forget it. Remember to go back to it and let that sweetness back into your life. You shouldn't let yourself forget the taste of honey.

About four years ago, there was this girl. Brown skin beauty. Freshly twisted locs and impeccably dressed. She had a huge friend group, that put me in mind of a beehive, and shared a class with me. She didn't really pay me any mind. That was alright with me, I was too much of a child anyway. Hoodies, jeans, and sneakers were my go-to for clothes. Locs tied around themselves and stuffed through a snapback. Ripe old age of fresh out the gate 18. I hung out with friends, I saw relationship drama, I was living the college life.

So, enter this guy. A scrawny dude, but you would never know it because he held himself like he's constantly analyzing everyone and thing around him; like he was some king. He was a part of my circle of friends and I liked him well enough. He gave advice when you asked for it and he could help you get a job. It was never above table jobs, but it was well enough for the life that a kid my age would want to lead. So, I went to him. He would give me papers to write or ask me to go on runs with him and I'd get enough to eat off campus or go to cheap places.

Re-enter that girl. She was his girlfriend. Every now and then, because she lived down the hall from me, he'd give

me things to give to her. I'd make a knock on her door every once in a while, awkwardly give her whatever she needed, and she'd smile and apologize for him. I'd shrug it off and I'd leave. At some point, I would give her stuff without his request. Little stuff. Things that she'd ask for, like a few bucks or a broom. Stuff she didn't, like flowers and honey.

She started becoming someone that I'd notice more. Someone that I could hold a casual conversation with. Then came the end of the semester. I had asked her to retwist my locs because I can't do hair for the life of me. She agreed and then her boyfriend asked me to cancel that. That he had a surprise planned. I agreed and backed out.

Summer comes and goes you know. I was a sophomore in college, spring in my step ready to rumble! I'd seen less and less of both of them. Didn't matter to me. I had other things to worry about. Suddenly, she hit me up. She wanted my help making a gift for herself for joining a major organization. No big deal. I helped how I could and went about my time. Spring Break was coming, and I was excited to go spend some time with my family.

Spring break gets extended by a week.

Then another.

Oh. Oh no.

School was virtual now. That Corona thing is major. It's fine of course. I adjusted rather quickly. I get a job and start help paying bills in the house because I can now. Out of nowhere, there was a mass meeting for the Honors students. That was kind of a big deal. So, there I was and so were a few of my friends. None of us were really paying attention because we were college kids and this thing was over the computer. We heard the Honors Director say that in order to get community service (because that was still happening) we could have a pen pal, boost morale and all

that. That girl, who I hadn't really thought was paying attention to me, texted me and asked if I'd want to be pen pals with her. I didn't really think anything of it other than that it was kind of nice of her, it was cool that someone that I noticed was noticing me.

Over the course of weeks, we're emailing back and forth. We talk about our lives, the philosophies we live by, and what music we listen to. I can admit now that sometimes I go over those emails. Just to see where it all began.

At some point, she tells me she had a rather messy break up with the guy I met her through. Ashamed to say that I felt over the moon when she told me. You see at this point; I had come to terms that I liked this girl. Like I really liked this girl. I was gushing about her to my friends in the group chat, I was getting told I was in over my head. It was a mess. She was all I was thinking about.

Winter break had come and gone, and we started emailing again. She asked me for a playlist of songs that I had liked. Now, a little something about me is that music is important to me. It's how I communicate. If I'm playing a song around someone, there's going to be a reason for it, whether I tell them or not. I say that if someone made me a playlist, I'd ask them for marriage on the spot.

So, I created this list of albums and songs and I sent them to her. A few days later, she asked if I had time for a phone call. She wanted to talk about the music I sent her. I was freaking out about it, but I said why not and gave her a schedule of when I was free. She said she would call in a few days' time.

The phone rang and I was more than a little anxious. "Hey, how are you?"

That was it. That was the moment, you know. This velvet honey voice was pouring through my phone, a shiver

ran up my spine and I was but a humble puddle on my bed. My face was split in half by this stupid ear to ear grin. I'd never felt so much heat gather in my face before. We were talking for what seemed like eternity but was truly only 18 minutes and 10 seconds. Her best friend was in the background giving input and we talked about music. We talked about our internships and we suddenly didn't have anything to talk about. The words that spilled in emails are harder to come by when you were trying to not look like an idiot. She said that she would email me again soon and I soaked it in, and the phone call ended.

I had a stupid smile on my face for a few hours after that.

We kept doing that for a while, emails forgotten in favor of periodic phone calls. Each time my grin split my face further, my neck and ears got hotter than I was used to. I never really said much. I just wanted to hear the honey pour straight from the source. Listen to the voice that could make the bees jealous for its sweetness. Even now, that honey still sticks to my ears when it pours in passing and it still heats up my neck.

The group chat called me lover boy when I made the mistake of telling them about my temperature change and one of them pointed out that these feelings of mine are a lot heavier than a simple crush.

I don't care too much to say how far that sent me reeling.

I asked a mutual friend of ours if it would be a good idea of telling her about these feelings, if I had a shot. She told me that I'd missed my chance, that she was in a relationship. There was a sting in my smile when we called each other on the phone. I don't think that she ever heard it. I always wished that I had said something sooner. But the

past is set in stone. She was just a friend that I hadn't even seen in person in a year and a half. I believed the feelings would fade, they always had before.

Soon, it was summer again and the news that all students were allowed back on campus with the appropriate precautions made its way to my email. I was going back to school to have my senior year and I was beyond thrilled. I missed my friends more than anything. I also wondered if the honey would be sweeter in person. I texted her and told her what dorm I was staying in. The response that she gave was she would live a floor below me. I was grinning again. My friends gave me advice over the last weeks of summer. They all ranged from cutting her off cold turkey to blatantly ruining her relationship. My friends are a little crazy, but I love them all the same. In the end, I decided to not say anything and let the unfortunate feelings fester out.

Move in day comes and goes and it was the first weekend back. I was lugging bags with one of my best friends in front of his dorm, helping him move in late when a car pulled up. I moved to the side and picked up a large bin that my friend pulled out of my car.

"Hey! How are you?"

The honey dripped down my spine and my face split in two again as I turned around. There she was. Her locs were twisted out of her face and she was in an old pride tee shirt, leggings, and running shoes. Impeccably dressed as always. She wrapped around me and we exchanged greetings. After a request to visit my room later, she continued to move in. I kept helping the guy I considered to be a younger brother move in. He swears to this day I smiled the entire time I helped him move.

Soon, after a quick text to see if I was in my room, there was knocking on my door. It was her and her best

friend. I suddenly forgot everything except the taste of honey. We just kind of stared at each other, taking each other in, before she left with the promise of returning later.

It took all of two weeks before I caved. She had been crossing my path a lot and I was completely losing my mind. My “brother” let me in on the secret that it was eating me alive and I should do something about it. He reminded me about the rejection theory that we shared, which I had done before and it had worked before. I knew it would feel like hell, but it needed to be done. I was gonna ask her out with the fullest intention of getting brutally rejected and then I could move on.

I ran into her in a hallway. She had a laundry basket in her hands and a wrap around her hair. With a boldness that I can only come by when I stress to a point of feeling apathy about a situation, I asked her to come by my room later. She shrugged, nodded hesitantly and walked through a door behind her. I promptly started to freak out. I was not ready in any form or fashion. I couldn’t even remember how to talk in front of her, rejection therapy? Out of the question. So, I did what I did best. I wrote it down.

Now, the last time anyone gotten a handwritten confession was like, what? Grade 6? So, imagine how stupid I looked writing down this dumb confession that ended in, wanna see a movie with me?

Imagine my surprise when that honey like voice agreed.

Now, yes. She had a girlfriend already. I knew this. She knew this. You know this. In that moment, I was acutely aware of that fact. I was also acutely aware that as she was reading that dumb little confession, I was rambling about not having a shot in hell and getting told:

“Now, I don’t know about all that.”

I was pretty sure my heart stopped. She confirmed this girlfriend fact for me again and said that we could still go see that movie because she wanted to see it anyway. She told me to pick a time and that she would see me then before closing my room door.

I stood there for all of 30 seconds before promptly shutting off the movie that I had been watching when she knocked on my door and calling my brother. We met up and he told me I was an idiot for letting her say yes but would be more of an idiot if I had shot it down. We called up my closest friend, who'd been one of the first friends I had made in college and asked for her advice and wisdom. She took a breath, called me a moron, helped me pick out an outfit, and paid to get my car cleaned up.

The day came where we would go to the movies and I was a nervous wreck. I'm pretty sure she could tell but she was kind enough not to say anything. I had let her pick the music for the drive ahead of us and she chose the playlist that I had created just for her. She had no idea how hard I was trying to keep myself from cheesing.

The movie was honestly fantastic. It was a remake of an old horror movie that funnily enough was known for its bees. The very creatures that I had come to associate with the girl that was sat beside me. The girl who at one point, told me that it was her favorite animal.

On the drive back to campus, I couldn't shut up for the life of me. I was analyzing this film so hard because what else was a wannabe film major going to do about the remake of their favorite horror movie. She listened and asked me questions. I asked her opinions and the topic changed. We started talking about our futures, where we wanted to go after school. How stressful friendships can be and where we thought we fit in it all.

We pulled into campus and I had texted my brother about hanging out so I could tell him everything. She asked if she could stay a little longer, if she could come to the store with us. I was so flabbergasted that I agreed. He ran up to the car and paused at her sitting in the front. He climbed into the back and I could feel him staring at me in his conversations with her.

We get to the store and I grabbed random things, a pack of cards and drinks for my room. She grabbed flowers and goes on about a new vase she had just gotten. At the register, I told her that I was chill with paying for everything. I asked her to place the flowers on the belt. She complained a little but otherwise let me do it.

We get back to campus and I walked her to the second-floor landing. She got to the door and turned to me. She said she had a good time, thanked me for the flowers and said that we should catch a movie again. One of the ones from a trailer we had seen that night. I smiled up at her from two steps below her and said of course. She went through the door and I was somehow transported to my room. I texted her good night and got a call from my brother.

I told him about the rest of the night. The parts he missed out on. He told me to go to bed and that we'd have all Saturday to freak out about it.

Our paths would cross multiple times. I'd meet her girlfriend. We hung out late at night. She came to my room; I would go to hers. Every time I would be reminded of her girlfriend and I would remember to calm down. That we were just friends. That this was supposed to be rejection. Every time I gotten a sting in my smile.

Stings in my smile that were suddenly flooded with honey when one night I was getting dinner with my brother. We were chatting it up about school and how I should calm

down about this girl, when my phone rang. There was that honeyed voice asking if I wanted to get dinner with that movie. I quickly said yes. She said she'd look for places to go. The phone hung up. I looked at my brother and I said for the first time out loud:

"I think I might have a problem. I might love this girl."

"Yeah, you might have a problem."

From there, she and I would do more things. We'd get slushies, we'd go see that movie and make fun of it for being so bad, she'd come with me to clean my car, we'd have late night talks in her room about nothing and drink tea. Of course, there was honey. So much honey that I was starting to drown in how thick it was. How sweet it made my life. How ridiculous it was because she knew that I prefer savory things, like peanut butter.

I remembered that as a kid, I liked peanut butter and honey sandwiches.

We had reached homecoming season. There was so much going on, on and off campus, that I didn't know what to do with myself. I began doing things just so I could experience them. This was what college was for, having fun and making mistakes. I started preparing to go to parties and was prepped to celebrate my last year.

A school email went out and on it was the information about the yearly presidential gala and SWV would be performing. In my years prior, we would work the gala in attempts of gain community service hours. I loved going and seeing the concerts after. Music is my love language and SWV had been a part of that since I was a kid.

I shot her a text. I asked if she would go with me, that I'd pay for half her ticket. I got an enthusiastic response.

I spent two weeks looking for the right outfit. Shoes, pants, a vest. I asked my art friends about color coordination when I found out what color her dress would be, so we could compliment without matching. Matching would mean we were together. That was too much for me to handle.

Homecoming week arrived swiftly. The gala was near the end of the week. We spent that week circling in each other's gravitational pull, but never talking. The night of the gala, I called up my brother. I was ready a full hour early and I wanted him to do a last-minute check with me.

He straightened my tie, tightened my vest and said that he'd see me there.

I considered that night to be one of the best nights of my life. We talked and took pictures. She said that if she had the option of being immortal and could gift it to one other person, she would spend immortality with me. The only regrets I have was not bringing a jacket for her and being too much of a chicken to dance with her when she asked. That night was drenched in honey.

I had gotten used to my sweet tooth.

She invited me to her birthday dinner a few weeks later. We had a week or two before Thanksgiving came and school would go virtual for the winter. She didn't know that I had bought her birthday gift a little before homecoming. That it was sitting in a box in my room. A box that she had seen multiple times.

Midnight of her birthday comes, and I placed it at her door. In the box was a bear. It shared her birthday according to its certificate. It had two outfit choices because she once said she never wore the same combination of clothes twice. One outfit had her star sign on it, because she has a thing for astrology. The other a bee, that said "have a happy bee-day."

It was dumb how much I cared about it and its design. She told me she loved it.

At her birthday dinner that night, she sat at the opposite end of the table from me. We texted under the table about the bear. She asked if it had a name. I had named it Bumble. She later told me that the bear lived on her bed. Sure enough, when I went to her room a week later, to drink in honey sweetened tea, there it was. There were also flowers in her vase from when I noticed the original red roses had decayed.

Thanksgiving came, I texted her that I wanted to ask her a question every week so we could keep in contact. I didn't get a response, but that wasn't new. She had been slowing up on texting and responding to me. It never stopped the amount of flips my heart did when I saw her. It, however, did slow the amount of honey that was drowning me.

Throughout break, I would consistently text her. Every week a new question. Every time a response that would lead to a short conversation. Then there was another week of silence. Silence that lasted just enough to drain a little of the honey every week.

I had been going through a rough patch with my friends. The final semester of my senior year was rapidly approaching. I was getting worried that I would lose contact with my friends after graduation. That fear drained the honey a little faster.

I don't know when it happened, but I was able to breathe again. Even with the lingering taste of honey on my tongue.

She texted one day randomly, toward the end of break. It was the first time in a while that she texted first. She asked if I wanted to see a movie when we got back. My face did not split in two, but I smiled. My heart didn't flip

anymore. I instantly remember that she has a girlfriend. I said that we should catch a remake of an old horror movie. She agreed.

We get back to school and it was our last semester as seniors. I get there before she does and I'm at the store, putting groceries in my car when I hear a honeyed voice in front of me. I look up and there she was. She was with a new best friend. I smiled and she wrapped around me, asking if she can come to my room later. I wouldn't know it when I said yes, but when she would knock, I wouldn't be there. I would be down the street catching up with old friends.

I would keep asking her a question a week, reminding myself that she was there, but sweet things like honey, needed to be in moderation. I had got it in my head that this wasn't good. That she was just a friend and friends leave you. I started looking down and eventually our paths stop crossing. We would miss out on going to see the movie. I remembered that I liked savory things. They were familiar and easy on my teeth and heart. I started to focus in on the bubbling trouble that was happening in my life. Trouble that led to a mental break down. I was in the thralls with other things in my life and temporarily let balance fall. Let the honey go. I had forgotten to send a question. I had missed a week.

Just one week.

One week was enough.

I sent a question the next week. She had apparently noticed my lack of contact other than questions. I explained the major life shift and apologized.

She didn't respond.

I very quickly missed the taste of honey.

Second Place Nonfiction Winner
Essence H. Perkins

Living with Covid-19

“The virus will not have a chance against us. No nation is more prepared or more resilient than the United States.”

These are words from our previous intolerable President Donald Trump, on the topic of Covid-19. Although this was a statement that held little significance in the story that would soon be told about the coronavirus pandemic for years to come, this statement would become truer than I anticipated, and the word resilient would soon become the best word to describe the next new chapter of my life.

August 11, 2018, was the day I moved into my college dorm room on the campus of Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. It was a 45-minute drive from my home in Columbia, SC, not too far but far enough in my eyes for me to start my new journey. The beautiful, small, family-oriented campus quickly became home for me. From the professors to the students, I felt welcomed.

At Claflin, freshmen attend an orientation week full of events, activities, and gatherings in an attempt to make our transition into college a little easier. During this week we are paired with orientation leaders, OL for short, who acted as our personal guides through our matriculation at Claflin.

“Claflin University is the oldest and boldest HBCU in South Carolina” says my OL Terin Tyson in her spunky high-pitched voice. She greets me standing about 5’5, effervescent and cheerful with a personality that made her at least 6feet tall.

“We are here on the Hilltop High love our illustrious university” she exclaimed. It was obvious this is what they prided themselves on, the confidence and pride radiated from not only Terin but from the entire group of OL’s.

At the beginning of the week, we did ice breakers and introductions which helped us learn who our new peers and classmates would be. By Wednesday, which would now and forever be known as Fried Chicken Wednesday, we gathered around the dinner table with our plates of Fried Chicken and held endless conversation as if we had known each other forever. Thursday, we took the fun to the classrooms so that we could become familiar with where our classes were and what to expect when classes started. Finally, Friday came and our entire freshman class of over 500 students gathered and fellowshiped in the gymnasium. There was food, music, games and more, it was truly a sight to behold, one room full of young men and women, all from different backgrounds, all with a common goal, to further our education on a higher level of learning.

As I stood back and watched the joy spread through the room, the feeling of overwhelming pride was contagious, and hard to ignore. That exact moment, accompanied by many more from that week, made me proud and confident that I made the right decision in choosing Claflin University to be my home for the next four years.

As I followed the scheduled path to graduation, the finish line seemed to get closer and closer. Before I knew it, I was a sophomore in college, in my second semester wondering where time had gone. I had decided on a major and a concentration by now.

“My name is Essence Perkins and I am a Mass Communications major with a concentration in Journalism, from Columbia, SC.”

This became a part of my everyday introduction. I was no longer pitied by my professors or given any more mercy and freshman fifteen was no longer an excuse I could use for why I was gaining a few pounds.

Nonetheless, attending college was still a decision I did not regret. The small changes over time never overshadowed the goal, as time passed, I just learned to roll with the punches, even if they were consistent and coming from each end of the spectrum.

Sophomore year was coming to an end, and I just began to feel like I was getting the hang of college life and beginning to make my mark. It was my second year on The Panther Dolls dance team, I joined NAACP, and I was a campus queen that year, Miss SRC North. Although it was just the queen of my dorm it still felt like a pretty big deal to me. I mean I did get to participate in coronation and everything. I couldn't believe I was finally molding myself into this 20-year-old, mature, determined, and outgoing young woman that I dreamt I would be. I knew that the next two years would be the most memorable years of my life, I knew I could only go up from here.

“Essence Henrietta Perkins,” called my mother from downstairs in our two-story city home.

It was spring break, so I was home for a while, counting down the days till I was able to go back to school.

“Have you heard about this Coronavirus going around, I'm sure they mentioned it to y'all at school.”

She said this in her ‘mother knows best’ voice, I could tell that tone of voice better than anyone.

“They mentioned it but told us not to worry so that’s what I’m doing, not worrying.”

She glanced at me with a face that said a thousand words, but, yet, she said nothing. I wondered what she wanted to say but didn’t truly want to know.

Although my mom continued to breathe down my neck the entire time I was home, it was tolerable considering in three more days I would be on a sunny, overcrowded beach. I would be holding one of those fruity frozen drinks in my hand with a tiny pink and green umbrella in it, while enjoying my last few days of spring break in Miami. Then immediately after my mini vacation, I would be back in my small, comfortable, homey dorm room. I wasn’t going to let this little Covid-19 stop my fun.

**US lockdown NOW, crisis till August:
Trump says there are '15 days to stop the
spread' and old must stay home,
gatherings over 10 people end, and
schools, offices bars and restaurants close
to beat coronavirus**

These words were plastered on every news station, newspaper, social media platform, everywhere. The Covid-19 situation escalated in a matter of moments.

In my 20 years of living, I had never experienced a pandemic or any state of emergency in our country. It felt like I was in a history book and that this was a lesson that would be taught right after the Black Plague.

A million emotions ran through my body all at once, I remembered feeling anger initially, but in the end one feeling overshadowed all of them, fear. Not fear that I would get the disease, or fear of losing a loved one from it but fear

that I wouldn't be able to go back and continue my journey at school that I worked so hard to establish so far.

As you likely are aware, the University has made the decision to begin the Fall 2020 semester fully online on Monday, August 10, 2020, due to the surge in COVID-19 cases in South Carolina and other states.

There were rumors going around that we would not be able to go back to school immediately after break, but this was one of those rumors I didn't want to believe. I wanted to believe that the CDC would come up with a rapid decision and fix this problem before it got any worse. Unfortunately, the opposite happened, the headlines got worse, the mortality rate grew and grew and an end to the pandemic did not seem in reach.

School had to go on nonetheless, class assignments were given strictly online so that we could close out the current semester. Over the summer, as the pandemic went on, schools got creative and instituted online classes via ZOOM.

I grew weary, depressed and lacked motivation as the days went by. How could I find any energy to complete five-page papers, group projects, and quizzes while in the comfort of my queen size bed? How could I now co-exist with my mother, father and six nieces and nephews after getting used to having the pleasure of living in solitude at school in my dorm room?

I felt as if someone hit the rewind button in my life. I couldn't fathom how one minute I was in college thriving and growing and the next I was back at home in Columbia stuck in the same day to day rotation, but now with the addition of a college workload.

On August 27, 2020, at 2:00pm, I moved back into Claflin University as a 22-year-old, senior Mass Communication Major with a concentration in Journalism, and a minor in Creative Writing scheduled to graduate May 7, 2022. It was now the first semester of my senior year; I didn't even realize two years had passed.

"Hey, Essence I haven't seen you in forever!" I faintly heard this from a girl passing by as I was walking to my next class.

"Hi..."

I couldn't make out exactly who was speaking to me. I wanted to give back the same enthusiasm in my voice as she did, but I couldn't, considering my confusion at the time.

"You remember me, Aniya, from Introduction to Mass Comm."

As she said this, she pulled down her mask hoping I would remember who she was.

This made returning to campus feel so unrealistic, every aspect that made the experience worth wild had changed. The same students that we made bonds with were now unrecognizable due to the mask mandate and because of the physical changes some made over the past two years. No more large gatherings and not even an opportunity to sit down and eat amongst each other.

The Claflin University I knew and loved was now a facility, simply just a facility for higher education. Covid-19 stripped away the family that I had away from home and enabled my opportunity to learn and grow outside of my original home.

Second Place Poetry Winner
Jerrell A. Alston

My Forgotten Caretakers

Past Lives:

She was bitter like Heaven's lonely iceberg.
And she was as indolent as a newborn sloth.
She was fierce like the Loch Ness Monster ravishing the
night's town.
Yet, she was as precious as the lips of white daffodils.

Past Memories:

He was black like the morning sun during an eclipse.
Thankfully, he was as powerful as the commander's bloody
baton.
He was as indifferent as a lion clawing a baby gazelle,
But he was misunderstood like a teal hornet nesting in a
golden pyramid.

Loving Nightmares:

It was as painful as the broken bone of a toddler.
Although, it traveled like a diamond down a ravine.
It's sanctuary was as ominous as the vile smell of the
underground.
Without haste, it ate like death wasn't its final temptation to
life.

Pure Declarations:

You were his son.
You were her grandson.
They were like what the world perceived.

They were as broken, loving, caring, and eternal as an ordinary human.



Courtesy of: **Breeze O. Smith**, *Untitled*, *Front Cover of Third Place Art Cover Winner*



Courtesy of: **Breeze O. Smith**, *Untitled*, Back Cover of
Third Place Art Cover Winner

Third Place Fiction Winner
Don 'Queese McCoy

A Woman Scorned

When it is just you and the four walls around yourself in jail, you have a lot of time to think about where it all went wrong and could've gone right. I always thought of myself as a good person because I stayed quiet throughout my life and strayed away from confrontation.

"RICHARDISOON, ALICIA RICHARDSON time to get up!" the guard yelled as I struggled to get out of this cold steel bed frame.

I walked over to the front of the cell when the officer slapped the handcuffs on my wrist, making them even tighter to ensure I'd be restrained. Walking down the prison hallways, I can hear the screaming from fellow inmates who people on the outside looking in would consider insane, dangerous, or mentally unstable. Still, then I thought, are we any different from them. Who are those to say that their actions are denser than our guilt; it just so happens that they have more time to reflect on their consequences while others shove their secrets away and cover up who they indeed are on the inside?

Entering the interrogation room to see a younger black man who was well dressed in a clean black suit who I can tell by the look on his face this was his first time on the defense for a client who has been accused of arson and murder in the first degree in the state of Virginia.

"How are you doing, Ms. Richardson? My name is Travon Sims," as he offered me a cigarette opening a notebook and a folder beside it.

I snatched the cigarette out of his hand because I never wanted to be attached to his existence ever since the night that led to me being here in jail. I asked him to please address me as Alicia; if anything, else, call me Ms. Wallace.

"Umm uh Yes ma'am," as he stuttered while clearing his throat.

He sat up straight and started reading a file that I figured had my current information of what led to my arrest. While reading off my file, he began to look at me and my eyes, and he told me that I could obtain a plea deal of 20 years with the intention of good behavior.

I responded calmly with an unresponsive look on my face.

"Alright, Mr. Sims."

He asked me if I wasn't certain about my decision and if I was sure that I wanted to accept the deal or have a chance to go on trial.

Travon made a puzzled look on his face and said, "I'm sorry, Ms. Wallace it's just that I am having a hard time believing a beautiful African American woman graduate from Howard University, top of her graduate class in Harvard Law School, makes an honest living as a successful attorney who your employees refer to as reserved, and who doesn't even have a speeding ticket on their record-" before he could finish I interrupted.

"Kill two people and burn down a house, having the cigarette hanging out my mouth while putting smoke in the air I said don't portray me as being wholesome women of non-reaction because even those type of women have a breaking point I expressed.

"Have you ever felt that you've been taking advantage of to the point of reacting without thought," I asked with an expressionless face.

I explained to him that it was no accident or mistake that I wanted to see my husband dead lifeless laying there with that whore together in their own blood-soaked in the sheets of the bed that he and I laid our heads, made love, and said I love you to each other.

"To than that have that violated by the presence of another woman that me and him both vowed on our wedding day before God to have no man or slut of his choice put asunder to jeopardize the love that he and I shared" I shouted out emotionally; my voice cracked through my words.

Witnessing this vocal emotions fall from my eyes into tears, Travon just simply began to stare at me. Unsure of how to respond, he held onto my hand tightly.

"Please tell me what happened?"

Reminiscing on that evening, all I can remember from the beginning was that I was excited for our anniversary that day, February 15th, 1990. I'll never forget that rainy wedding day, making 32 years of our marriage together. After having a stressful day at the office from dealing with different clients and a boss with an attitude that doesn't respect me and after working at my law firm all morning and evening, all I wanted to do was end the night with my husband, Matt. I loved Matt not because of his attractive smile that always made me want to forgive him in our arguments or his deep brown eyes. Still, it was that even though he might not have been the perfect person in our marriage and had his issues such as anger and staying faithful throughout our relationship, I always just remained quiet about his actions. I felt that he loved me unconditionally and that I was the only person who could see a part of him no one else could. Pulling into the driveway, I weirdly noticed his car parked, which took me off guard because I'm usually the first to come home. Ignoring the

possible obvious, I got out of the car, walking to open the door when suddenly, I had an urge not to make any certain noises because I would usually yell out for Matt's name and wait for his response. Call it women's intention, but I carefully laid my phone and purse down on the counter while I slowly crept around the corner of the living room hallway leading to our bedroom. I slowly walked over to our room to see our door cracked open to where you can only see a peek of what's going on in the bedroom. Not even opening the door all the way, I see him on top of another woman who seems to have been younger than me. I smelt the dirty, unforgiven sex coming from the room while looking at the man I loved as he laid in bed with another woman. Watching him give her all his energy is what, from that moment, caused my heart and mentality to snap.

I walked back down the hallway with my hand holding onto my chest so tight I could hardly breathe without crying and not trying to be so loud to get their attention while creeping towards the kitchen. I couldn't stand up without leaning on the edge of the corner in front of the drawer with all our kitchen utensils. Opening the dresser, I reached in and pulled out a long cutlery knife holding it up in front of my face. I looked back at the reflection of myself, the woman that my so-called husband had broken on the inside, and I didn't even recognize who I was for a second. As I walked back quietly to our bedroom, I gently snuck in, only to hear both of their moans gradually getting louder as I got closer to them. With the knife in my hand risen above me, and the random girl who he was still having sex with made eye contact with me, and before he could even turnaround from hearing her scream, I had already planted that long knife deep into his back as far as I could get it thinking maybe now, he knows how it feels to have someone who you

thought you could trust stab you in the back. As his bleeding body dropped on the side of our bed, his mistress just moved over to the corner of the room and flinched up, pleading and begging for me to have mercy on her pitiful soul. Without hesitation, I reached and got the lamp beside the bed and smashed it over her head, knocking her out completely.

Dragging the slut by her hair, I tossed her in the bed beside him and just went ballistic with the knife I still carried. I began just rigorously cutting, stabbing, and slicing all over the limbs of their body parts from arms, legs, hands, fingers anywhere that I thought they could feel from me while crying with no self-control.

Once I realized I might have overdone it, I just stood for almost five minutes looking at them with my entire body covered in their blood. The blood was splattered everywhere. It was on our pictures and walls, and now it was stinking up the room in disbelief from what I had done. I stood in amazement. For once in my life of existence, I've stood up for myself and done something about how I felt was bothering me for the first time together in our marriage. I was so surprised by the actions that I laughed so loud that it became honestly amusing from what I had done. I went into the kitchen under the sink and got the flammable liquid used for grilling. Pouring all the liquid gas onto their bodies, I took a match, and without another thought in my mind, I threw it on the pieces of what remained of their bodies, watching the flame burn their lying asses to a crisp. As I grabbed my jacket hanging up by the door, I walked out of the house, holding the same items I walked in with my phone and purse left out of the house before the fire could get any bigger. I pulled a cigarette out of the pack of Newports I had in my bag, lit it, and took in a deep inhale before blowing out the smoke.

I walked out of the house to my neighbors, seeing the smoke coming from them and them yelling at me to do something, but I just smiled at them with very non-worrisome eyes. I got back into my car and pulled across the street with my windows down. The radio blasted to my favorite classic throwback of Sade, "No ordinary love" as I waited for the fire department and police to come. Strangely enough, I wasn't scared of what I knew would happen next. Blue and red lights started surrounding my house as the neighbors watched firemen put out the fire.

"Do you know how the fire started," I was asked by the chief of police looking at me, annoyed by my carefree attitude,

All I could say back was the words my grandmother would always say, "Hell has no fury like a women scorn."

It's funny because when they walked me to the police car, and I sat in the back of the seat watching them straightening up the chaos I caused, it wasn't until that moment that I never understood what she meant until now.

Third Place Nonfiction Winner
Aleona K. McQueen

Summer of 2020

In March of 2020, Claflin University shut down on-ground campus learning. Students who had already been home for spring break returned to clear out their dorm rooms and go home to continue their schooling virtually. This included Kris McQueen, a sophomore that worked diligently to get a storage unit set up in Orangeburg, South Carolina near the university before driving back down to the large city of Jacksonville, Florida.

Becoming a virtual student was fairly different than being on ground. Classes could cut out due to bad internet connection. Assignments became looser in nature and the entire nation felt something on the rise from being trapped in their homes.

None of this prohibited Kris from finishing out his school year. They stayed glued to their computer after making their mother breakfast, only coming up for air to help his younger sister with her schoolwork. Once finals came and went, he moved to his phone to find any source of contact with friends in different states.

The coronavirus had caused deaths over and over. So many people were trapped inside homes with a fear that they might bring it home to their families. Although vocally skeptical to do anything outside, Kris was the only one allowed in his home to leave to get groceries for his family. His car was full of masks in the glove compartment and a large bottle of hand sanitizer in the cup holder.

The streets of their neighborhood, once so full of life were almost barren streets with a few people walking the

streets alone, masks covering a majority of their faces. The sense of community was lost to fear of the virus and the unknown time of when or even if they would catch the deadly disease.

May 25, 2020, saw the death of George Floyd.

George Floyd was a black man who was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest after a store clerk suspected Floyd may have used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. A police officer by the name of Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck and back for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. Floyd's dying words were "I can't breathe." After his murder, protests against police brutality, especially towards black people, quickly spread across the United States and globally.

Already connected to various devices, Kris saw his death over and over again. All over social media, people talked about police brutality. The conversation of abolishing the police came into play. There were many arguments about what had happened and the resurface of the Black Lives Matter movement became all anyone could talk about from the safety of their screens.

There were protests in the streets starting May 26th, by the 28th, Kris got a phone call. When he picked up the phone, there wasn't even a hello.

"Downtown, there's gonna be a march for Floyd on Monday. Are you in?"

Nathaniel "Nate" Lesser was a young Filipino man who attended Florida State University and was home for Covid and the summer. Kris had met him when they were both freshmen in high school. Nate had a penchant for curiosity and rebellion that Kris would tag along for to pull him out of trouble. They hadn't spoken much since

graduating high school. Only a few times in a dying group chat with other friends from that time.

“Of course. I’ll text you my address.”

Dressed in a black skull cap, black shirt and jeans, Kris pulled a mask over his face and climbed in Nate’s car. The car had posters taped all over it saying:

Black Lives Matter

Abolish the Police

Say His Name

Justice

In the back seat sat Nate’s younger brother Sam, with his twin Samantha next to him with a skateboard and picket sign across their laps.

No one in the car was thinking about the virus that had been plaguing them since the beginning of the year. No one minded that there was a chance that they could get sick. All that mattered in the heavy atmosphere and heat of the white car covered with black signs was that a life was lost and many more before and after were finally getting the recognition that they deserved.

The downtown streets of Jacksonville were filled with hundreds of people ready to march. As the group of protesters stood in-front of the precinct, across from the river, ready to move down several blocked off streets to the courthouse, many news vans and police officers circled around.

Nate took a step toward them brows scrunched up and fist gripped around the picket sign that said Justice. Though no one could see his full face, it was obvious what he was thinking. Kris pulled him back in line.

“Don’t give them a reason to come for us because they’ll slide right past you.”

With a group leading the front, yelling into blow horns, the group began to move. Various chants were being called. Those without masks, were given some and those who need to take it off stood to the side and allowed the rest to walk through. A man started to spray paint a building and was ushered away by a few protesters who chastised him for starting trouble.

Towards the end of the march, the police force began to become more prevalent. The crowd began to slow to a shuffle as the officers in riot gear began to crowd around. Kris and Nate spare a glance at the space around them before giving his sister the car keys and sending the two high schoolers back to the car.

Nate’s brows scrunched up once more, fists empty and shaking. He stepped forward and turned back to Kris, whispering, “Are you sure you want to stay for this? We can just go back now.”

Kris took a step to match him. It was clear to both of them that he was not going to stop whatever trouble that Nate wanted to be a member of this time.

As the sun set and the officers began yelling at the protesters to stop and go home, they stood together, letting pepper spray and rubber bullets fly at them.

Sitting on the staircase in front of his home, bruised and with a bag of chicken nuggets between them, Kris and Nate sat in silence. The moon was creeping its way higher into the sky, and the only other glow was a phone screen lighting under Nate’s chin. Its chime breaks the silence

before Nate speaks up, asking about another protest the next day.

“I’m down, but we gotta stop to the store for masks first.”

Third Place Poetry Winner
Leilani Warters

What Alice Forgot

The girl fell down the rabbit hole
Free falling for forever,
Landing flat on her face,
Cheshire was first to greet her

The cat welcomed her back to Wonderland
And called her by the name “Alice”
He invited the girl to a game of tag
A game the girl couldn’t resist

“But I’m not Alice,” she thought quietly
“The real Alice wouldn’t let herself fall
With all the grace of wet sand.
If he finds out, he’ll kick me out of this land.”

So the imposter played tag
With Cheshire and the White Rabbit
Who dared her to catch him
Like Alice had her last visit

The girl tried her best
To prove herself to them
And caught the White Rabbit
Earning a scraped knee in the end

And though the two praised her
The imposter couldn’t help it but think
“The real Alice would’ve been faster,

How long until they realize I'm a fake?"

But soon the girl was drafted
To help knights paint roses red
She was hoping for a distraction
From those dark thoughts in her head

Cheshire watched the girl paint
Fretting over her messy, red stains
And wondered how hard Alice fell
To make her forget her name

Honorable Mention

Oreoluwa J. Ala

JUST ALIVE ENOUGH

How can I fear the dangers without
When I can barely handle those within
It is dark in here
It is numb in here
It is warm in here
Things are buried in here
But it is not scary in here

Why do I feel guilty
When I am barely surviving
I might have gotten out
I might be considered alive
But am I truly?

I am just alive enough
To feel the throbbing pain
It has now become staple
This dull, lulling aching

I may not be drowning
But my lips are just above the surface
To make sure I am aware
Any misstep, I hit the bottom
Any misstep, I drown
Any misstep, I die.

Jerrell A. Alston

A Diamond in The Rain

We must tell our people,
diamonds still shine in the rain.
Even if the human eyes cannot see them.
The black rivers that we've embellished,
the artistry behind Black Fists flying in the air,
the pain, beauty, and the movements we've stood tall for.
Holds the fabric of which we all must wear to stay alive.

Tamir Rice,
The heavenly violins and soft melodies play in the thick
fog,
as I constantly repeat his name in my head.
A young kid that had a right to reach for the impossible.
A right to walk miles in any street, park, or building.
A 12-year-old kid, this is what the world considered to be a
threat.
Never opening their eyes, to see his light shine through the
rain.

Close your eyes and open your hearts.
Listen to the hollow laughter and feel the brotherly love
looming through the air.
The small mistakes, missteps, and words of advice.
Gave your kinship a true connection, under the stars.
Legos and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles created joy and
fulfillment.
The scary movies gave you one last motive.
To jump into mommy's arms and let the horror ease away.
For one night, for one day, for an eternity.

Ambition, you cut like a knife, yet you hold my hand.
Shooting hoops and holding confidence to any torch,
Lets us know that dreams can still be accomplished.
Stories and fates can still be changed.
And no one can say we are inferior.
No one can say that all our hard work was for nothing.

No words can describe the cultivating rage and disdain.
How can we as a people look up when the world continues
to look left and right.
Look anywhere else but up...
How can we tell our black kids and young adults,
that if you believe hard enough, your dreams can come
true.
When they have to work twice as hard just to compete in
this world.
How can we tell our neighbors, our sons and daughters, our
sisters, and brothers
Your life matters when the world tries to destroy you every
day?
How can we raise our black sisters and brothers,
without thinking this could be the last time we see them
alive and well.

When that person called, the description of the suspect
never mattered.
After the cops heard 'A Black Man', the story was already
written.
As if their minds suddenly molded into this unruly
gruesome monster.
And as they destroy and disrupt everything that we love.

We are always the one that has to pick up every small,
broken piece.

Tamir Rice,

The heavenly violins and melodies play through the thick
fog.

The plush white clouds and orange sunsets give us the fire
to keep going.

Your story will never be defined as a young kid who was
murdered.

It will be defined as a young kid who set ablaze a
revolution for all.

Who's sparkle never dimmed in the midst of the rain.

Jerrell A. Alston

The Mother of the Horizon

The morning is everchanging like the sun setting on her shaded skin.

An atmosphere so pure that the world tunes her strings with elegance.

Each evening that dawned made you question the existence of the horizon.

Dawn, her daughter walked through the valley, her mouth smelled of European gin.

She came to watch her mother climb out of the tomb, wreaking of a sweet fragrance.

The morning is everchanging, like the sun setting on her shaded skin.

The ripples in her daughter's face leaked blood, she carried switch blades like flower baskets.

They were placed in between her arms, the blade dangled with red pollen falling.

Each evening that dawned made you question the existence of the horizon.

She watched as mother's bones and tendons bloomed from bullet shells.

A song played within her mind; her legs crossed on the grass as the corpse began calling.

The morning is everchanging, like the sun setting on her shaded skin.

The body's construction was complete, but the skin was left in fragments.

The daughter fret as her mother's beauty stalled and she yelled for forgiveness, while balling.

Each evening that dawned made you question the existence of the horizon.

As her skin began to mold into a fine almond coat, her heart rang through a hollow bell.

The evening came, *suddenly*, and her body fell into the dirt and the shade covered her tomb.

The morning is everchanging, like the sun setting on her shaded skin.

Each evening that dawned made you question the existence of the horizon.

Camryn L. Brutus

Ask for Help

Must we lose our minds on the journey to self?
Most days I find myself asking how to ask for help

My soul has wandered this arduous path times before
It has searched for something that could mean more

Through all these years of playing with the hand that has
been dealt
I still often wonder, “How do I ask for help?”



Courtesy of: **Assiya Desoky**, *Free Uyghurs*

Melody S. Chestnut

The Smell of Home

Home Sweet Home. Read the door mat as you walked into the double wide trailer that I call home. One may say nothing is better than home. The memorable scents, the lifelong memories, and the loving and welcoming environment. I remember thinking how do you know a place is home? I pulled out my journal to write down my thoughts. I scribbled on the pink and black polka dotted paper. What is love? Am I loved? What is home?

My mom peeks her head in the room.

“What you doing in here,” she said.

I scramble to hide the journal under my pillow as I did not want her to see my deep thoughts. Me and my mom were always best friends. There is nothing that I felt I had to hide from her but this I wanted to figure out by myself.

“Oh nothing, I said, Just waking up.” “You look like I scared you, but anyway breakfast is ready come eat. I made grits, eggs, and bacon.”

She knew that this has been my favorite since I could chew. Instantly the smell of bacon grease took over my sense of smell. I chuckled a little to myself as I thought is bacon the smell of home. I rolled out of the bed, looked in the mirror and walked into the kitchen

I walked into the kitchen with my sister and niece standing there watching me drag myself out of the bedroom

“Good morning Mel”, they both said.

“Good morning Lyric and heyyyyyy Lydia,” I uttered.

Although Lydia was my niece since she grew up with me I always pictured her as a sister. My parents' door swings open and the smell of Selsun Blue comes rushing out the room. Right behind it came the sound of dragging feet as my dad walked out the room. I laughed to myself once again and thought "that's it Selsun Blue is the smell of home."

"What'd yall cook," he said.

"How about you come see," my mom snapped back as me and my sister chuckled behind her.

We all grabbed our plates and sat down at the kitchen table as it was a Sunday tradition to eat breakfast together. As we sat down and talked about our days amongst many other things, I pondered to myself about how special the moment meant. Just spending time with loved ones sharing how are days went being a family.

"Mel!" my dad yelled out "What's wrong with you?"

"Oh nothing" I said, "I was day dreaming."

My mom interrupted, "Can you help me clean up the kitchen?"

"Sure," I responded

As I cleaned of the table and loaded the dishwasher I watched as my mom lit about 5 Yankee candles and spread them throughout the house. Although her obsession with candles never quite made sense to me as I watched her the house slowly began to smell of fresh linen which was by no doubt her favorite scent. There was night a day that I walked into the house and didn't smell her candles burning or left the house and didn't smell the scent of fresh linen on myself.

"Turn to TLC Mel it's 8 o'clock, 90 Day Fiancé is on," my mom said enthusiastically as she walked down the stairs.

It had become a tradition for us to sit down every night and watch reality TV. It would be traumatizing to miss an episode of the seasons. We sat on the couch with the heater blowing directly on us arguing with the TV. During the whole duration of the show, we argued with the actions of the individuals on the TV and talked amongst ourselves about the actions they were taking. As soon as the show ended, we were startled by the creaking and whipping open of the back door. Prior to us panicking my dad walked into the door. The room filled with the smell of gas and oil. He spent most of his time during the day plundering in his shed. I've seen him building cars from scratch. His talents amazed me but the smell of gas that would come in the house was nothing short of a headache.

"I scared yall didn't I?", he chuckled as he walked into the door.

"Whatever," me and my mom said simultaneously.

We all sat and talked on the couch for a while about things that happened during the day and what we have planned for the week. This time was also very important for me. I love being able to just sit down and to be able to share what has happened to me during the day.

A yawn grew across my face. I grabbed my dog and headed up the stairs.

"Goodnight yall, I'm going to bed. Love yall," I said to my mom and dad.

They both said goodnight and that they loved me and I headed to bed. I crawled in the bed and laid there struggling to fall asleep. Then it dawned on me home is the place where I feel I belong. It's being with the people that I love and cherish. It's the smell of bacon grease early in the morning, the smell of soap and Selsun Blue, and the five Yankee

candles burning all day long. Home is where my heart resides.

Camryn L. Brutus

Tree, What Have You Seen?

Tree, what have you seen?

In the many years that you have stood tall,
What civilizations have you seen fall?
As you planted your roots in this wretched earth,
you had to see many wonders of a country's birth

Did you feel violated when the throes of racism defiled
your branches?
Filled with disgust as white hands coerced you to bare the
forbidden fruit of black bodies
If given the chance, would you have uprooted yourself and
continued life somewhere else?

Tree, what have you seen?
How could you have known the world would come this far?

The seeds of your forbidden fruit cast into the exiles of
poisonous pastures
Condemning the buds to a more burdensome journey of
growth hereafter

Fear not; though, those buds live differently than those in
greener grass
They are resilient and relentlessly take root deep in the
earth in the likeness of you

Tree, there are still conditions you must see
Do your roots struggle to bury as the soil dries beneath?

Do you miss the chill of winter winds through your limbs
as we speak?

The World is changing, Tree
Much different from the times when you sprouted your first
leaf

I am of the kind that wants to make a change
The kind that never wants to see you wither away

Tree, I am in a position where I can only say so much
Being the seed of a seed of your black fruit has proven
tough

But like you I will take deep root and not let the seeds of
seeds from greener pastures
Rob me of the sunlight that fuels my passions

The World is changing, Tree
And someday my seed will ask
“Tree, what have you seen?”

Josten D. Bryant

Growth

Time passes on

And we lose ourselves

We explore

Hope for more

And confuse ourselves

Our growth is that of a sapling

Stuck in a controlled burn

If we survive this climate

The world will surely learn

How deep our roots go

And how close to the heavens we can reach

But juxtaposed

To what we know, this is slow and each

Of our limbs

Have embers at their ends
We've been burned
By this life but we haven't earned this
And when
We can take a step back
Contemplate our position
We understand
We were raised on facts layered in fiction
Divided by our diction
So we could never connect
But computers
In our pockets
Show us rockets
From billionaires on the internet
This topic is complex
And as rich as our generation
Our livelihoods are in jeopardy

But this isn't our final destination

We have tools

We can use

To cultivate our development

And though we face distraction

It usually has little relevance

So guard your branches

And your buds

So flowers will bloom

And if your garden runs dry

The rain will come

Soon



Courtesy of: **Austin G. Reynolds**, *Untitled 2*

Melody S. Chestnut

Where I'm From

I'm from the big hairbows dangling in my hair, to the
broken crayons and empty boxes of candy on the floor.
I'm from ruffled socks on Sunday, and new dresses on
Easter morning.

I'm from the muscadine grapevine, pear tree and a
yard full of roses in the summertime.

I'm from Daddy's shed with lots of old car parts
around,
and Granma's house on the hill with all my cousins
racing there.

I'm from learning to ride bikes on a dirt road to hot
summers and homemade slip and slides.

I'm from a big loving family where everyone was
nearby,

Gramma cooked a big meal to make sure everyone
was fed.

Grandma spoiled me with all the toys and goodies
she could find.

I am from "Either you stay in or stay out." And "If
you can huh, you can hear."

I'm from Gramma's grits and eggs to Grandma's
fried chicken and mac cheese and Mom's
homemade

Oatmeal Cookies on Sunday nights.

I'm from the pictures hanging on the walls and all
the pictures stacked in the drawers.

Nia V. Curry

“The Language of the Unheard”

the polyester banner of freedom
raised and lowered
respected and protected
the people the flag preaches to
Of the promise
neglected
abused
Facing brutality
How does the symbol of freedom
Hold tight to their cruel hearts
More than the people?
why do you weep for something that
can be rebuilt
But when our people die there is
no remorse or guilt
Our chests ache
Our stomachs full of fear
We have kept the storm in our throats from escaping our
tired lips
we tried screaming and crying out
Lost our voices and regained it again
We have stained our clothing with
tears and sorrows
Only to see the same disappointment
tomorrow
and just when we think we have been heard
our salvation dangles in our faces
Only to be swept away by the same hand
That created our oppression

it's tiring
No more

in order to create a better tomorrow, we must denounce the
immoralities of yesterday

Rabbia Khalid

The Dead Artist

Putting his drawing pencils down he grabbed a pen, closed his sketch book and took his Grey's anatomy out of his bag.

He started writing his assignment for school instead of drawing. All he wanted was to be an artist, a painter, a designer. He loved fashion.

"Designing is for girls," his mother told him.

"You have to be a doctor to make family proud otherwise you are out of this house," his father told him.

"In our country this profession is not stable for earning. Don't bring shame to us. Guys designing girl's clothes are gays," his brother told him.

He had no other option than being a medical student. He couldn't live on his own.

These words always haunt him. Few words but the impact of a thousand swords.

Sighing he put his completed assignment on his nightstand and started turning the pages of his sketch book. He grabbed a pencil and started scratching it on the page.

"Finally! Its complete," He looked at his creation with shine in his eyes.

He loved every piece of his work like a mother loves her child.

He was about to turn out the lights when his mother barged in, stomping her feet on the floor she cried "still awake? Its 2 a.m. "

"I was doing my assignment, just going to sleep, alright" he said quietly.

"Oh..... Great. And here I thought you were wasting your time drawing" his mother said smiling.

The lights turned out, eyes shut close, the dreams of beautiful landscapes, with her lying in the middle with no worries, waiting to be canvassed, surrounded his mind, but only to be shattered by the buzz of the alarm.

He turned his alarm off lazily. And looked at work lying on the nightstand. It was a beautiful piece but couldn't justify her beauty.

"I am leaving" he yelled and stormed out in hurry.

"Wow this is amazing. I am in love with this sketch of mine. It's beautiful." He loved to see her eyes shine.

"And btw you got an F on your assignment. Seriously you can't fail this semester again" she said.

"Woah are these yours too? These are beautiful dresses. You are an amazing designer" she said.

"Nah they ain't that beautiful" he sighed.

"Are you freaking kidding me? These are amazing. You should pursue designing. You are going to design my wedding dress. In fact, all my dresses. Oh, I am rambling again." she rambled.

"Sure! Why not" he said.

"Then start working because my parents fixed my wedding. It's in 2 months." she said happily.

Something broke inside him at that moment.

The ray of sunshine he used to live for in the cave of darkness was now fading. He had nothing to live for now.

The brushes spoke his story, paints were his drugs. He locked himself in his room for weeks. His parents thought he was studying for the exams. He used colors to write his story in the form of art. He used his pencils to encapsulate his love in sheet of paper.

"It's beautiful. This is going to be a wonderful dress. Thank you so much". She squealed.

"Always a pleasure". He murmured.

"And what's this?". She asked unwrapping.

"It's a small gift for your wedding. To remember me by and our friendship". He answered.

"This a portrait of me. Its outstandingly marvellous. Thank you so much". She answered jumping up and down.

"But how did you manage it in exams". She asked frowning.

"Oh, it was no big work". He smiled.

Seeing her happy was the only thing that had the power to make him smile.

"You failed again".

"You are disgrace".

"You are a failure".

He stood silently in front of his parents and brother. With his head down looking at his feet he endured every word, every insult.

"You are nothing but scum".

"It's all fault of those paintings of his".

Tears now started to well up in his eyes. He blinked them away.

"I am going to burn all that rubbish". His father announced.

"No father please. I promise I will study hard".

He begged.

But to no avail. Hearts can be changed but stones don't budge.

Painting gathered, sketchbooks fetched, paints and pencils grabbed, petrol put, matchstick lit, here goes his life in flames in a pile in his own room.

"Let him sit here, mourn all night. So that he can start fresh tomorrow".

"Let's go sleep".

He was locked in his own room in front of his dying life. His tears couldn't put the flames out.

"His parents killed him."

"No, it was an accident."

"I heard he killed himself. "

"There was a fire."

"His parents set the fire."

"No! They burnt a few things, but the fire spread."

"No! They didn't knew about the fire."

Only whispers left. He was found dead charcoaled in his own work. Everything in his room burnt to ashes. They couldn't save a thing from his room. Everything turned black.

"Today we are here to exhibit the work of a dead artist who will always live in our hearts. We are proud to announce that he was a student at our university". The principal announced.

He was answered with a round of applause.

Every piece of his work he ever gifted to anyone was submitted to his friend. She arranged the exhibition. All his work was sold in high prices. The event was a success.

His parents saw the news about the exhibition. They weren't even invited. The last memory they had of their child was all black.

Their old-fashioned ways and their conservative thinking led them to their loss.

All they remember were "The dead Artist lying in his work."

Nia V. Curry

The Thief

Creators are thieves
Leeching off of inspiration and representation
Realism is a curse
An addiction that myself and too many of my friends know
The never-ending yearning to grasp and capture what we
see
Bottle a moment in a jar and keep this time capsule forever
And every day without fail we pick up our paintbrushes and
our cameras
Our pencils and our hopes and dreams
Trying
Scheming
Hoping we can come close to the beauty we know as this
world
the people and the life in it
But there's a reason why every breathtaking sunset cannot
be captured
Why our means of technology and artistry have limits
There is nothing that can replace the feeling you get when
you look up at the sky
And you realize just how small you are
How lucky you are
every second we spend struggling to steal that moment is a
moment lost
Sometimes we come extremely close, we create spectacular
things
But we forget that we can just embrace it
We can gaze at it in real time
We don't have to take it home

The next time you see something beautiful
before you take it with you,
Take it in. Breathe it in. Remember how it makes you feel.
You are a part of this beautiful world too.



Courtesy of: **Brooke S. Jacobs**, *Crystalline Emperor*

Nia V. Curry

Worship the Moon

in my little front yard, I laid a towel
A towel on the walkway that I dash across with my feet
Not nearly as much as I should
I had yearned for this moment
Teasing myself on the porch steps
The steps I never sit at
The porch I never welcome myself to...
I laid back and the earth shifted
As I look upon the night sky
The cool breeze brushed against me like silk
The clouds were so lucky
Way up in the sky
So close to the moon
So far away from my little front yard
The clouds were so so lucky
Getting the direct light from that beautiful full moon
They all swayed and took their journey past her
She was so generous
The moon
She made sure every cloud had their moment
The stars
Flickering like flames against the deep blue of the great
beyond
How lucky the moon, the stars, and the clouds are
Imagine the peace up there
It was so beautiful
I never look at the stars you know
Who has time to enjoy anything anymore
Time to just exist

To inhale and exhale
Maybe I should worship the moon
Instead of the many whims and purposes life has trapped
me in...

Kiasia R. Hayes

Is It Not Black History Month?

Black history month is more than just a month
It's our culture but it's also represented outside of
this month too.

History put in textbooks and sometimes
misconstrued by others
A culture that still has similar events from the past
taking place now.

A white principal banning graphic tees.
OK. But coincidentally on black history month how
suitable
An appropriate shirt worn by an African American teacher
Not a distraction to the students, considering how
they called it "beautiful"
Is It Not Black History Month?

A principal known for something like this in his
past
This incident rallied so many it sparked the media
The way the superintendent immediately agreed with him
It could be equivalent to me going and typing up "facts" on
Wikipedia
Is It Not Black History Month?

A teacher who still hasn't gotten notes from a
meeting
Stares and whispers from coworkers all over a shirt

Why can't she rep her culture, who's it going to
hurt?

Is It Not Black History Month?

But when Valentine's Day came
Teachers and students wore their graphic tees
I know it might go over some heads but

I just have one more question

Is It Not Black History Month?

Tamara A. Hudson

Imagine

Imagine having to watch the world that you've
grown to know and love,
turn upside down before your eyes.

Imagine watching store carts being overthrown with
simple toiletries,
buckets and trash bags filled with gasoline and humanity
being separated,
pulling apart every which way.

Imagine being isolated from your family all the
while in the same house.
Having to eat dinner alone in your room; having to speak to
everyone through a closed door.

Imagine watching people fade away as do the leaves
of a fig tree.
Imagine not knowing what's to come after.
Being too afraid to turn on the news, to afraid to spend time
with friends.

Now imagine this is all a dream.
Just a horrible nightmare. Have you awakened yet?
Because I haven't.

Rabbia Khalid

Grandma's Love

My Grandma possesses this peculiar likeness for plants. Ever since childhood, I have seen her grow Aloe Vera, different herbs, and other plants. I have always used her home grown Aloe Vera as a conditioner for my hair. If anybody needs any plants, my grandma is the place everyone goes to.

She doesn't have a backyard or a lawn. Yet, she manages to grow plants at her rooftop. The view of the roof is alluring and mesmerizing. This enchantment is due to the uniqueness of the containers in which plants are grown. There are some traditional plant pots, but mostly she uses old metal boxes, that were used to store clothes in the previous times. Some of the containers are paint buckets, which she recycled for planting. She is the most resourceful woman I have ever seen.

A lot of our relatives have backyards or front lawns. So, my grandma plants seeds of trees, grow them into saplings, and then she plants them at other people's houses, who have more spaces for trees to grow. Almost half of the plants in their backyard have been planted by her.

She planted a guava tree in our backyard. The guavas that come from that tree are extremely sweet and juicy. She also planted a plum tree. It just started producing fruits last year. We are always excited when it's fruit season. The lemon tree that she planted at my house produces so many lemons that we have to gift them to our neighbors. She planted mint and coriander too. She also taught us how to plant all these things.

Now, she is getting old and cannot climb stairs. It was heartbreaking for us to see her rooftop garden shrinking. But one of my cousins shared my grandma's love for plants and took the job. She is now taking care of that garden. She even decided to put a swing there so that she can read there, study or listen to music.

Even if only one person in the house loves nature, it is going to be transferred to others eventually.



Courtesy of: **Nia V. Curry**, *iTs jUst hAir*

Savannah Joyner

The Wind during a Spring Day

A brush as light as a feather with a scent as fresh as the first
winter's snow. As gentle as a
sun beam.

Twirling through the air like a dancing pro, carrying a train
of dreams and desires behind her. She spins around me.

I can feel the energies that she's brought to me.

The happiness, the sadness, loneliness, and joy.

A typhoon of emotions washes over me at an
overwhelming rate.

But this sensation doesn't last long.

Her dance carries her along only leaving this gift with me
for a split second. And so, I

leave a little bit of my happiness along with her.

So, as she continues to twirl, she can spread joy amongst
the trees and as the ocean breeze. Bless the land
with her dance.

A dance of give and take.

Savannah Joyner

Who I am?

I am a survivor.

A writer, whose dream is to burn brighter than a super nova.

Been told that I was nothing, less than human.

A fuse between my parents' mistakes and what the world would choose for me.

I thought that I would be the good girl,
the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher, the preacher,
but it wasn't speaking to
me.

I can't express who I am with,
words on a page, or
lights on a stage, or
a face on a screen.

I want to be seen by taking action.

Gaining the satisfaction by being better than what they
thought I could be.

They thought I would be nothing, but I am a creator.

A dreamer.

A daughter.

A

poet.

A writer.

And undeniably,
human.

Rabbia Khalid

Living in a Strange World

Living in a strange world with a strange pain
Pain caused by loneliness
Loneliness muddled with distant voices
Distant voices leaving scars

Walls walls murmuring around
Murmuring around about the roof
About the roof without any stars
Stars were friends, friends are gone

Gone are the birds, and the bugs
Bugs are gone from the winds
The winds have changed and the days
The days are chained and the nights

The nights are there without the moon
The moon is stolen from our sights
Our sights linger on the roof and the walls
Wall walls murmuring around

We are seized, we are seized

Hasante A. Kita

Heavy is the Head

My eyes were stung by the morning sun
The sound of birds chirping were loud through my window
Many paws trampled the ground and we would run
Trying to get away, following wherever the dry wind blows

My face was hit by the scorching heat
The smell of hen and Ugali cooking reached my nose
The burning sand pained me under my feet
Don't know when's the next time I'll get new shoes or clothes

Hearing growling behind me, trying to resist the creeping of fear
I stand still and slowly turn my head
In my left hand holds a machete, in my right hand a spear
Praying for victory and not to end up dead

I wonder if they know how much strength I needed to take to down this daunting beast
I have no time to think, I have no time to be afraid
His roar could be heard miles away from the east
But I have to stand ten toes if I want to walk away

A quick turn to the left and my spear left my hand
He attacks me and tackles me hard to the ground
The machete meets his neck and his blood spills on my land
Now back in my village my head bears the crown



Courtesy of: **Faithe A. Stallings**, *First Date*

Ronitra B. Wilson

On The Run

With the smell of nutmeg filling the air, Curtis Stuart had a normal life growing up in St. George's, Grenada. He had an older brother, Godfrey, who, if you asked him, was the closest definition of a best friend. During this time, the Grenadian revolution against the reigning dictator had just begun. Curtis was a 10-year-old boy whose aspiration was to make a change, but, in the year of 1936, he never would have known how much of a change he was going to make. One morning, the two siblings gathered around the kitchen table to eat when Godfrey decided to spark a conversation about the revolution.

"Have you heard the news of what's happening at the capitol building?" asked Godfrey. "Tante said we shouldn't be worrying ourselves with such foolishness because it'll die down soon," said Curtis.

"Well, I'm going down there to demonstrate with the rest of them. I believe they have every right to tell the government to shove it. I'm tired of Dictator Gary. He hasn't done anything for us, and I'm sure he never will," responded Godfrey.

Without hesitation, Godfrey rose from his chair and ran out the door before anyone could say another word. Morning turned into night, and no one had heard nor seen Godfrey. At 8 o'clock the next morning, Curtis sat at the table wondering where his brother could be. All of a sudden, the phone rang, and the room became too thick to even breathe. Curtis answered the phone with nervousness in her voice.

"Hello?" he asked.

The look on his face became cold. As he put the phone down, he didn't have the chance to utter any words before breaking down at the reality of what had happened. News finally came around of how Godfrey died. He was walking home from the demonstration when one of the dictator's men followed him and shot him without a cause. This infuriated Curtis. Not only did he want revenge for his brother, but now he knew that he had a country of people to save from what could be the destruction of this place he called home.

Curtis, now 25 years old, has successfully formed the Grenada Technical and Allied Workers' Union (GTAWU) to fight more directly against Dictator Gary. By now, the dictator has become stronger in manpower than he was 15 years ago, but that hasn't stopped Curtis and his followers from carrying out their mission. Since its founding in 1946, the GTAWU has burned down the dictator's training camps and headquarters spread across St. George's. With the blood of more than 10,000 men on his hands, Curtis is just at the beginning of what he plans to do to save Grenada. When Gary realized the damage done by Curtis, he sent a letter to GTAWU headquarters to request an audience with Curtis and his right-hand man, Julian. They walked in silence on their way to the Dictator's office.

Julian broke the silence and said, "I don't trust it. Why is he trying to make peace now when he knows he has more power than we do?"

"I believe we should give it a chance," said Curtis.

"Of course, we aren't going to go in that meeting blind-sided. We'll have our men on stand-by just in case things don't go well."

With a large sigh, Julian responded, “You know that I will always follow you into any situation.”

“I know you will,” said Curtis with a smile.

As Curtis and Julian walked into the office, the guards grabbed them and tied them up. Already knowing this would happen, Curtis signaled his men and bullets began flying. With the distraction of all of Gary’s guards, Curtis and Julian ran.

As they hid in a nearby ditch, a guard shouted, “Find Curtis and kill him! He’s the only one we’re worried about.”

After hearing this, Curtis knew that he had to separate from Julian.

While untying themselves from the ropes that bounded them, Curtis looked Julian in the eyes and said, “My dear friend, this is where we part. I would not be able to live with myself by willingly putting you in danger when my head is the one they want. Please take care of yourselves and remember to keep the fight alive. Fight for my brother, Godfrey.”

Before Julian had the chance to respond, Curtis gave him a hug and ran deeper into the woods.

Hiding for about five weeks, Curtis had developed a plan to get to Barbados as quietly as possible. After gathering the necessary materials to create a disguised he had hair as smooth as the purest silk and makeup so natural that it looked like his true skin, Curtis dressed as a woman, boarded a plane with his new identity, and left Grenada. After investigating Curtis’ whereabouts, Gary sent his men to Barbados. Unbeknown to Gary, Curtis had a man on the inside and stayed two-steps ahead of him at all times. By the time Gary’s men reached Barbados, Curtis fled to Trinidad and Tobago. Already with a game plan in mind of where he

will go next, a letter from Grenada found its way into his hands.

With haste Curtis opened it and it read, “Grenada has been liberated from the rule of Dictator Eric Gary. VICTORY IS OURS! We are free from the treachery. We are free from the pain and destruction. REJOICE! REJOICE! REJOICE!” tears filled his eyes.

The death of his brother is now not in vain. Now with the freedom to go home without a target on his back, Curtis flew back to his home. As he stepped of the plane, Grenada roared with excitement and praise for the dedication Curtis had to the movement. Because of him they are now free.

With every step down the stairs of the plane a chorus of people shouted, “Praise be to Curtis! Our liberator!” Curtis never thought this day would ever come.

He had saved his country and started a new foundation for the future of Grenada.

Don 'Queese J. McCoy

Black in America

Constantly being asked “*Can I touch your hair*”

Walking into a room with no welcome an uneasy stare

Being seen as threat rather than an individual

Understanding the bigger picture but not the visual

Learning to love hair that points up to the heavens

Brown skin that shines so bright makes other threaten

Words that flow from the cultured tongue

Pronunciation delivered abruptly like a bell rung

The colors we wear that blend in the darkest of skin

The Smiles from the biggest lips that covers hurt within

Music that tells the stories of what the daily life holds

Rhythm and blues that's dances in the soul

The clothes and style we wear that keeps us in a whole

The passion we give throughout our life in the years

We use our laughter to dry away the tears

Being made fun of for who we are
While they copy and cover who they are
Coming from a rich culture in our root
Tribes so powerful that the warriors salute
Art that was made with so much meaning
Inspiring many ideas without them dreaming
Raising young kings and queen in an unwelcoming
environment
While keeping them under a roof were some struggles to pay
rent
Teaching them the important morals of life
Showing love earlier so that they won't end in strife
Fearing for your safety and wanting greater
Praying day and night for something better
Because that's how it is being black in America-

Andrezius E. McKan

Long Distance

Your name died in an unread text message of mine.

Laid to rest by increase in time and a decrease in
effort

I read through our conversations from 2 years ago
when you said "I love you" like it was my name.

We were strangers – and that's what broke us.

You saw my skin in real life and tapped your
fingers on your jeans like a keyboard, but words never went
past your lips.

We were strangers ; living in the same town, but
wearing masks of different usernames and phone numbers.

Tell me you love me now, when there's no
backspace or misunderstanding of your tone.

We never loved each other and it's sad because
maybe we could've felt electricity at the touch of each
other's fingertips but we were too busy keeping our fingers
glued to our electronics.

An addiction so severe, eating away at real world
relationships

Our hearts cry out for each other yet our minds eye
still fixated on our screens

We look at each other as so unrecognizable but look
down at the safety of our screens and see a loving
relationship

Our hands ready to move onto the next step of
our relationship yet our eyes unable to recognize the person
across from us

Our thumbs did so much talking I forgot we had
voices

Aleona K. McQueen

Poison Ivy

I do not know where it came from
I was on a journey when this
green thing
came and wrapped itself
round my throat
I can't breathe
But I got used to the
Asphyxiation

Its tighter around my wrists
pulling my arms behind my back
I can't quite tell what it is
Fuzz hot like the streets
during a summer in Harlem

Its itchy
I might be allergic to the ivy
The ivy is big
it has a lot of sway although
there is only three leaves
it constricts tighter
trying to drag me to the tree branches
it came from
to hang me
over the Venus trap that
wants to eat me alive

but I am used to the asphyxiation
so i continue my journey with words

ignore the fuzz in the streets
locking metal against wrists
moving past the ivy leagues
that are allergic to my skin
and the three branches
that want to leave me hanging
that want to eat me alive

Cause soon this growth
this weed
will realize that the real poison
is me



Courtesy of: **Antonio Rutledge**, *Untitled 2*

Jameel K. Scott

Masked Emotions

My wardrobe always contained a mask even before the end
of the world came to pass.

As dark as the night and tough as stone to conceal the
cracks placed by the pressure of the past.

This vexing veil vanquished those whose attention was too
limited to envision the vision I will execute throughout my
lifespan

To be straightforward and show that the southern steam
wouldn't make me sweat

That my stature is a sturdy statute to stand for the chance
that wasn't a given but somehow made it into the plan.

Though the world came to an ending my life is finally
beginning to show me that the impending end is all the
reason for me to begin ascending.

I may sound condescending, but I've only seen people
descending from depending on a system of owing, renting,
and lending rather than just living.

This dark decaying disguise has made it easy to be defined
as annoyed, or someone to avoid, but I'm just trying to find
my voice and someone willing to listen through the noise.

This world has been in chaos ever since I was a boy, now this pandemic has unmasked a truth that can no longer be ignored.

Our lives function to be exploited by an existence spent in paradise or prison depending on what you can afford.

It seems my screen of solitude shall be my salvation serving as a sheet to shelter my sacred self and stay focused.

Preserving my passion and pain for those deserving of all the value that I obtain from my masked devotion.

Jameel K. Scott

Wings of Freedom

Driving has fascinated me for as long as I can recall, I quietly thought to myself as I patiently awaited the arrival of my aunt Jennifer. The cool fall wind was sharply snuffing out any warmth my clothes could provide to me as I nervously waited for my aunt to arrive. I thought of her grand promise to let me get behind the wheel and finally learn how to drive.

“Jameel, you and your brother need to learn how to drive. So, I’m going to start teaching y’all. Y’all are 14 and 15 and are too big to be waiting on someone to take y’all places all the time.”

“Yes ma’am”, I reluctantly responded. Internally taking offense to the prospect that me and my brother constantly wished to be waiting outside afterschool on hours end. Spending our afternoons watching the Andrews High School parking lot empty like a concert just finished, with students and teachers alike quickly leaving to resume the lives that they held outside of school. Seeing the warm and welcome sunlight gently and quietly fade like a friend who would love to stay and chat but had to leave only to be replaced by the cold and chilling absence. After a while, a car is pulls up in the parking lot and shines upon two tired and cold children, and now my aunt is rolling into the yard of my grandfather’s house. Her big brown truck was heard even before it was seen, like a bumbling thief in the night. I eagerly approached the truck with its loud engine and creaking hinges, my aunt looking excited as well to finally get a break from driving these long country roads.

“You ready to start driving nephew!?” my aunt eagerly says as she jumps out to sit in the passenger’s seat.

“Yes ma’am, I am.”

“Where’s your brother?”

“Oh, he walked to his friends since he isn’t old enough to try and get his license.”

“Oh well, at least he knows how to get around.”

“Yes, he does”, I grudgingly mutter as I get behind the wheel.

The constant murmur of the packed DMV along with the looming threat of my first attempt to obtain my license caused enough discomfort in me for my confidence to be flushed away like a deceased fish into a toilet. Trying to keep my composure, I remember what has brought me to this moment as a 19-year-old sophomore in college trying to earn his license. I recall the many heated lessons on the road, trying to not become another statistic reported on the news that people use when trying to convince others about the dangers of driving. Now I’m thinking of the possible humiliation of crashing the car from my driving school while trying to get my license. To add on to the anxiety comes the possible explanation to my license examiner, driving teacher, aunt, brother, and girlfriend that I was apparently not ready after crashing and failing my drivers’ test. I couldn’t continue my downfall into my rabbit hole of anxiety as the license examiner called me for my test. My legs automatically moving to the dismay of my troubled mind, as I prepared to take the test I have been studying for the longest. My mind wondering if my mother’s attempts to halt my foray into the world of driving was justified. Then as I entered the small car plastered with student driving signs, my mind reminded me of the many times I spent waiting.

Waiting to go to the movies, library, doctor, restaurant, school, dates, and explore. Always wanting to go places that were never in reach, constantly thinking my legs were all that I needed even if I wished to travel the world, like my imagination and willingness was all the fuel I needed to go anywhere. Always hearing that nobody had the time, and always watching time go by as I waited.

“Are you ready?” the examiner asked, eager to go along with her day.

“Yes,” I responded as I cranked the car up and began the test for my driver’s license.

My license reflected my relaxed but anxious face as I filled out forms to complete the acquisition of my first car. Looking back out of the window of the chilly Orangeburg auto sales place, was my silver Kia Spectra that shone like the shooting star that I used to conjure it. Cars continued to race by in the sweltering South Carolina heat on the nearby road as I wondered how many people have been in my position. How many people have been on the edge of freedom or have been deprived of the casual ability to travel and explore this wide world whenever they desire? Suddenly my mind travels back to the long days of sitting in my grandfather’s living room, finding a new thing to watch or do to temporarily escape my prison with no sentence, and only being visited by family when they were done with their adventures for the day or when they felt pity for me being marooned on the island of my grandfather’s house. Then I remember the calm moments where I would be staring out the door, looking at the bright sunshine on the wide-open field and my mind travels with the clouds, and I felt as free as a bird. A tap on my shoulder brings me back as my girlfriend gives me the keys after turning in my paperwork.

“Where are we going first?” she asks prepared.

“I don’t know.” I honestly respond.

“But we’ll go wherever the road takes us,” I smile as I respond.

Taighlor Solomon

Hold Me High

When you care for me on the level to never leave me out
To fully understand my mood changes, my attitude out of
no where

How you learn to handle my attitude and insecurities
The things that will be the key to my heart and glory
You will never need the key again



Courtesy of: **Trinity Z. Bird**, *Front Cover*

Taighlor Solomon

The bathroom is my favorite place

I clinch my teeth together to lessen my pain
I take a shower to be alone --- to gather my thoughts
I tell myself here that everything is okay until I can't
believe it
My tears follow the water to the drain
I open the bathroom door as if nothing took place

Leilani Warters

The First Experiment

The lightbulb shined like the sun.
I bolted to the bathroom like an arrow
The washcloth drank the water like a frog
I squeezed it like a constrictor
Then scurried back to my room like a mouse
And climbed my dresser like a squirrel.
Sitting on my knees like a nun,
I stared at the light like a moth
As I wrung the cloth over it like a neck-
The room went dark.
Glass fragments black as coal on the dresser
Hinted at an explosion as loud as a whisper.
The creaky stairs sounded like an alarm
I swept the fragments behind the dresser like a broom,
Spun the broken light loose like a twister,
Dove from the dresser like a gymnast,
Buried the bulb like a pirate in the trash bin,
And hid under the covers like a criminal.
Mom flung the door open like a cheated spouse,
Scanned the dark room like a sentinel,
Then left as quietly as a ghost.
I slept like a colicky baby that night,
With cuts like brands on my fingers.

Leilani Warters

Superstition

Find a penny, pick it up
Heads or tails, heed my advice
Or one day, you'll lose all luck

Put one hundred in a cup
If you see one in your sight
Find a penny, pick it up

If you find that lightning struck
Don't wait until it strikes twice
Or one day, you'll lose all luck

A black cat crosses by, but
She won't cause you any slight.
Find a penny, pick it up

13 pennies seem like junk
Count your blessings, that's the price
Or one day, you'll lose all luck

I don't believe old wives much
But some rituals are right:
Find a penny, pick it up
Or one day, you'll lose all luck

Bellrica Z. Williams

Society's Captive

She wishes she had a way to know the unknown,
Because then she would know what no one else knows.
She would finally claim a reality that is her own.

In a society filled with toxicity, she feels all alone.
She looks out her apartment window as humanity's doom
grows.
She wishes she had a way to know the unknown.

She tries to forget thoughts of gun violence, discrimination,
and people with hearts like stone.
Her heart aches as she packs up her clothes.
She would finally claim a reality that is her own.

She grabs her luggage and throws out her cellphone.
She is ready for something better so far away she goes.
She wishes she had a way to know the unknown.

Society's troubles are seemingly behind her in this new
time zone.
She is in complete awe, staring at the river as it flows.
She would finally claim a reality that is her own.

She tries to hum in a peaceful tone
But those terrible thoughts come back to impose.
She wishes she had a way to know the unknown.
She would finally claim a reality that is her own.



Courtesy of: **Breeze O. Smith**, *Brunson Love*

Ronitra Wilson

A Letter to Society

Dear Society,
You know who I am.
I'm that little girl sitting in the
corner crying,
Trying to understand.

Why am I treated differently?
When I walk like most.
I try to "talk white",
But I'm treated like I've been
diagnosed.

Is my disease my tight curled
hair?
Or is it because I have a natural
chocolate tan?
Please tell me,
I really need to understand.

The way you shun me hurts me,
It hurts me deep.
I didn't ask to be this way,
But it is mine to keep.

I'm forced to act like everything's
okay.
But deep down,

I'm so afraid.

I'm afraid of getting that last strike
against me,
I've already lost strike one and two.
When I was born,
Those two strikes were through.

A female and I'm Black,
Oh, what a combination.
If I was anything else,
Maybe I wouldn't be seen as an
abomination.

Now I'm on pins and needles,
Trying not to mess up,
But somehow me just being me,
That's already enough.

Enough for you to assume,
That every time I walk into a room,
I'm going to be loud,
With my "black crowd"

